

Honduras

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Bay Islands** Plunge into a magnificent underwater world, with marine life from seahorses to whale sharks (p406)
- **Copán Ruinas** Marvel at remarkable stone carvings and a fine museum, which bring to life an extraordinary Maya civilization (p367)
- **Gracias** Former capital of Central America, now a sleepy colonial town below stunning cloud forests (p378)
- **Lago de Yojoa** Binoculars at the ready: birdlife flourishes in this accessible beauty spot near the Pulhapanzak waterfalls (p359).
- **Best journey** Steel yourself for a bone-rattling ride along La Ruta Lenca, a series of little-visited highland communities with a proud indigenous heart (p357)
- **Off the beaten track** Discover one of Central America's last untamed wildernesses, the Reserva de la Biósfera del Río Plátano (p430)

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 112,090 sq km (about the size of England)
- **ATMs** Most accept debits cards using Plus systems; Unibanc machines accept all cards
- **Budget** US\$25 per day, more on the Bay Islands
- **Capital** Tegucigalpa
- **Costs** Budget hotel room US\$6-10, meal US\$2-7, open-water diving course on Utila or Roatán US\$250
- **Country Code** ☎ 504
- **Electricity** 110V AC, 60 Hz (same as the USA)
- **Famous for** Diving, Copán Ruinas
- **Head of State** President José Manuel Zelaya
- **Languages** Spanish on the mainland; Spanish and English on Bay Islands
- **Money** US\$1 = L18.80 (lempiras); US dollars accepted on Bay Islands
- **Phrases:** *Baleadas* (large flour tortillas)
- **Population** 7.3 million
- **Time** GMT plus 8 hours
- **Traveler's Checks** Accepted in larger towns; you must show passport and receipt
- **Visas** Residents of the USA, the EU, Australia, Canada, Japan and New Zealand receive a 90-day tourist card on entry



TRAVEL HINTS

Antimalarial medication is highly recommended if traveling on the north coast or Bay Islands. Chloroquine – sold as 'Aralen' in most pharmacies – is the drug of choice. See p747 for dosage.

OVERLAND ROUTES

Border crossings include Corintos and El Florido (Guatemala), El Amatillo and El Poy (El Salvador), and Guasaule (Nicaragua). There are twice-weekly ferries to Belize, and occasional hitchhiker possibilities to Nicaragua and Jamaica.

Ever since Columbus cast his eyes starboard and spotted the lush tropical shores near Trujillo, travelers have been awed by Honduras' natural charms. Visitors now fall under the country's spell in a dizzying number of ways. Many travel the well-worn path from Copán Ruinas to the Bay Islands – and no wonder. The Maya crafted stone sculptures, built awe-inspiring temples, created myths, understood space and time – and few places tell their story better than Copán Ruinas. A bus-hop and a ferry-skip away lies another glorious kingdom, the brilliant underwater world of the Bay Islands. White-sand beaches, a laid-back Caribbean vibe and pulsing nightlife are other fine reasons to go.

Away from these tried-and-tested destinations, there is a different Honduras. The roads get bumpier but the rewards are rich – and the warm *catracho* (Honduran) welcome becomes more extravagant the further away you wander. This is a country where you can glide down jungle rivers and surprise tapirs drinking on the banks, trek in cloud forests and glimpse quetzals in the canopy, and wander the forgotten colonial capitals of Gracias and Comayagua. And – here's the real winner – travelers often skip through Honduras, so chances are you'll have a lot to yourself.

CURRENT EVENTS

Honduras is a beautiful country with many natural riches; it also struggles with some of the biggest social inequalities in the western hemisphere (the country recently slipped to 117th in the world development rankings).

The man currently charged with moving the country forward is José Manuel Zelaya, the cowboy-hat-wearing Olancho native who came into the Honduran presidency in January 2006. His honeymoon period quickly ground to a halt with accusations of cronyism and incompetence. Zelaya, a member of the Liberal Party, also stands accused of taking too many trips abroad and not concentrating enough on problems at home.

Those problems include endemic corruption and a high level of violent crime that has marred Honduras for decades. Prisons are more crowded in Honduras than in any other Central American country, and gangs remain a major problem that no policy seems to cure.

Meanwhile, foreign investors have also had a few jitters lately. The current administration opened the country's petroleum industry to a bidding process, angering US diplomats, while police raids on private telecommunications companies in La Ceiba at the beginning of 2007 did very little to inspire overseas confidence.

HISTORY

Pre-Columbian History

More than 3000 years ago, pre-Columbian settlers made their homes and farms in the fertile Copán, Sula and Comayagua valleys – although humans are thought to have roamed these lands from about 10,000 BC. Recovered

pottery fragments suggest separate settlements and groups traded with each other.

At around the same time as the European Dark Ages, Copán Ruinas, the southeasterly outpost of the great Maya city-states, was basking in a golden era. Sculptors carved stone stelae unequalled in the Maya world and military men plotted successful campaigns, while mathematicians and astronomers calculated uncannily accurate calendars and planetary movements. For hundreds of years, a good slice of the Maya Classic Period (AD 250–900), the city dominated the region culturally, until its decline in the 9th century AD.

While the Maya came from the north, migrants from rain forest regions of South America, especially present-day Colombia, are also thought to have settled in the area. They are probably ancestors of indigenous peoples such as the Pech, Tawahka and Lenca who are still present in Honduras today.

Spanish Colonization

Columbus, on his fourth and final voyage, landed on the tropical shores near present-day Trujillo, Honduras. The day was August 14, 1502, and he named the place Honduras ('depths' in Spanish) for the deep waters off the north coast.

The town of Trujillo, founded in 1525 near where Columbus landed, was the first capital of the Spanish colony of Honduras, but the gleam of silver from the interior soon caught the conquistadors' eye. In 1537 Comayagua, in the center of Honduras, replaced Trujillo as the capital. It remained the political and religious center of Honduras until the capital was transferred to Tegucigalpa in 1880, where it remains today.

As elsewhere in the Americas, *indígenas* (indigenous people) put up fierce resistance to the invasion, although this was weakened by their vulnerability to European germs. Hundreds of thousands of native Hondurans fell victim to diseases introduced by the European intruders. But still they fought on, most famously under the leadership of Lempira, a chief of the Lenca tribe. In 1537 he led 30,000 *indígenas* against the Spanish, nearly driving the foreigners out. He was later assassinated, possibly at a peace talk arranged with the Spanish, and by 1539 the *indígena* resistance was largely crushed. Today, Lempira is seen as a hero – the national currency bears his name as does the state where he made his last stand.

Following the successful conquest, silver mining became a mainstay for the colony, although price crashes and excavation problems periodically devastated the Honduran economy. Cattle and tobacco enterprises were also important.

British Influence

By the beginning of the 17th century, Spanish colonists were coming under regular attack from rival imperial forces – especially the British. Merchants from Britain, attracted by the mahogany and hardwoods of the Honduran Caribbean coast, established settlements there and on the Bay Islands. They brought slaves from Jamaica and other West Indian islands to work the timber industry. Life on the north coast was made very difficult for the Spaniards – especially as the Miskito began aiming potshots at them with muskets supplied by the British.

In 1786 Britain eventually ceded control of the Caribbean coast to the Spanish, but continued to influence the region. In fact, British actions inadvertently gave rise to a whole new culture. In early 1797, slaves rebelled on the Caribbean island of St Vincent. The British shipped thousands of the survivors and dumped them at Port Royal on the island of Roatán. The group survived, mixed with indigenous people, and eventually crossed over to the mainland and fanned out in small fishing settlements along the coast. These are the Garifuna communities found today throughout northern Honduras, stretching into Guatemala and Belize.

Even in the mid-1860s, British moneybrokers were wielding power. This time it was

for railroad loans. Few were built, and most of the money ended up lining the pockets of interested parties in the UK and in Honduras, leaving the Central American nation's government precariously in debt.

Independence

After gaining its independence from Spain in 1821, Honduras was briefly part of independent Mexico and then a member of the Central American Federation. The Honduran liberal hero General Francisco Morazán was elected president in 1830. The union was short-lived, however, as liberals and conservatives kept bickering among themselves. Honduras declared itself a separate independent nation on November 5, 1838.

Liberal and conservative factions continued to wrestle for power in Honduras. Power alternated between them, and Honduras was ruled by a succession of civilian governments and military regimes. (The country's constitution would be rewritten 17 times between 1821 and 1982.) Government has officially been by popular election, but Honduras has experienced literally hundreds of coups, rebellions, power seizures, electoral 'irregularities' and other manipulations of power since achieving independence. One of the few things to unify the Central American nations and the political parties was the threat of William Walker, an American, who waged a military campaign to conquer Central America in the 1850s. In fact, he did gain control of Nicaragua for a time. He made his final ill-fated attack on Central America at Trujillo. His campaign ended in defeat, and he was captured and executed by firing squad.

The 'Banana Republic'

Right from the start, Honduras has been subject to foreign meddling to control business interests, particularly involving the banana industry – hence the phrase 'banana republic.' Around the end of the 19th century, US traders marveled at the rapid growth of bananas on the fertile north coast just a short sail from southern USA. With the development of refrigeration the banana industry boomed. US entrepreneurs bought land for growing bananas utilizing generous incentives by a succession of Honduran governments. The three major companies were the Vaccaro brothers (later to become Standard Fruit), which operated around La Ceiba; the Cuyamel Fruit

Company near the Río Cuyamel and Tela; and after 1912, United Fruit, to the east, which by 1929 had swallowed up Cuyamel. The three companies owned a large part of northern Honduras, and by 1918, 75% of all Honduran banana lands were held by US companies.

Bananas provided 11% of Honduras' exports in 1892, 42% in 1903 and 66% in 1913. The success of the industry made the banana companies extremely powerful within Honduras, with policy and politicians controlled by their interests. Cuyamel Fruit Company allied itself with the Liberal Party, United Fruit with the National Party, and the rivalries between banana companies shaped Honduran politics.

20th-Century Politics

The USA increasingly came to influence Honduran affairs. In 1911 and 1912, when it appeared that banana interests were threatened by Honduran political developments, US president William Howard Taft sent the US Marines into Honduras to 'protect US investments.'

During the worldwide economic depression of the 1930s, in the midst of civil unrest, General Tiburcio Carías Andino was elected president, establishing a virtual dictatorship that lasted from 1932 until 1949, when US pressure forced him to cede power.

A two-month strike in 1954 – which became known as 'the Banana Strike' in which as many as 25,000 banana workers and sympathizers participated – remains a seminal moment in Honduran labor history. Unions were recognized, and workers gained rights that were unheard of in neighboring Central American countries.

A military coup in 1956 marked an important shift in Honduran politics. Although civilian rule returned in 1957, a new constitution put the military officially out of the control of civilian government. The military now had a much more important role in the country's politics, the legacy of which continues to this day.

In 1963 Colonel Osvaldo López Arrellano led another military coup and ruled as president until 1975, apart from a brief return to democracy in 1971–2. He was forced to resign because of a scandal involving a US\$1.25 million bribe from a US company, United Brands. He was replaced in a military coup by Colonel Juan Alberto Melgar Castro, who slowed

agrarian reform. He in turn was ousted by yet another military coup in 1978. This was led by General Policarpo Paz García, who eventually instigated democratic presidential elections in 1981. Military rule was finally over.

The 1980s

During the 1980s Honduras was surrounded by revolutions and conflict. In July 1979 the revolutionary Sandinista movement in Nicaragua overthrew the Somoza dictatorship, and Somoza's national guardsmen fled into Honduras. Civil war broke out in El Salvador in 1980 and internal conflict worsened in Guatemala.

Although Honduras experienced some unrest, its politics were far more conservative. An overpowering US influence directed the course of Honduran politics and created a strong Honduran military. Honduran government land and labor reforms between 1962 and 1980 also helped blunt populist uprisings.

With revolutions erupting on every side, and especially with the success of the Nicaraguan revolution in 1979, Honduras became the focus of US policy and strategic operations in the region. After the USA pressured the government to hold elections, a civilian, Dr Roberto Suazo Córdova, was elected president. Real power arguably rested with the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, General Gustavo Álvarez, who supported an increasing US military presence in Central America. US military involvement in Central America had increased dramatically following Ronald Reagan's election as US president. The USA funneled huge sums of money and thousands of US troops into Honduras as it conducted provocative maneuvers clearly designed to threaten Nicaragua. Refugee camps of Nicaraguans in Honduras were used as bases for a US-sponsored covert war against the Nicaraguan Sandinista government, known as the Contra war. At the same time the USA was training the Salvadoran military at Salvadoran refugee camps inside Honduras.

General Gustavo Álvarez was also responsible for the formation of the notorious Battalion 3-16, which targeted and 'disappeared' hundreds of political enemies. Although the repression was small-scale when compared with El Salvador and Guatemala, public alarm grew. Local opposition to the US militarization of Honduras also increased, creating

problems for the Honduran government. In March 1984 General Álvarez was exiled by fellow officers, and General Walter López Reyes was appointed his successor. The Honduran government promptly announced it would re-examine US military presence in the country and in August suspended US training of the Salvadoran military within its borders.

The 1985 presidential election, beset by serious irregularities, was won by the Liberal Party candidate José Simeón Azcona del Hoyo, who had obtained only 27% of the votes. Rafael Leonardo Callejas Romero of the National Party, who had obtained 42% of the votes, lost.

In Washington, the Reagan administration was rocked by revelations it had illegally used money from arms sales to Iran to support anti-Sandinista Contras in Honduras. Large demonstrations followed in Tegucigalpa, and in November 1988 the Honduran government refused to sign a new military agreement with the USA. President Azcona Hoyo said the Contras would have to leave. With the election of Violeta Chamorro as president of Nicaragua in 1990, the Contra war ended and the Contras were finally out of Honduras.

Modern Currents

Elections in 1989 ushered in Rafael Leonardo Callejas Romero of the National Party (the loser of the 1985 election) as president; he won 51% of the votes and assumed office in January 1990. Early that year the new administration instituted a severe economic austerity program, which provoked widespread alarm and protest.

Callejas had promised to keep the lempira stable. Instead, during his four years in office, the lempira's value went from about two lempiras to the US dollar to eight. Prices in lempiras rose dramatically but salaries lagged behind. The average Honduran grew poorer and poorer, a trend that continues today.

In the elections of November 1993, Callejas was convincingly beaten by Carlos Roberto Reina Idiaquez of the center-right Liberal Party. Reina campaigned on a platform of moral reform, promising to attack government corruption and reform state institutions, including the judicial system and the military.

When Reina became president in January 1994, he assumed control of an economically suffering country and the lempira continued to devalue. By 1996 it had slid past 12 lempiras

to the US dollar and was heading for 13 (a dollar was worth around 19 lempiras at the time of research.)

On January 27, 1998, the Liberal Party's Carlos Roberto Flores Facusse took office as Honduras' fifth successive democratically elected president. He instigated a program of reform and modernization of the economy. These seemed to be moving in the right direction, but were tragically compromised by the devastating Hurricane Mitch in November 1998. The storms caused damage estimated at US\$3 billion. According to some analysts, it set the country's economic development back by decades.

Much of the infrastructure was rapidly rebuilt after massive loans flooded into the country, but the tourism crash following September 11, 2001 did little to help.

In 2001, Ricardo Maduro from the National Party was elected president, largely on the back of his promises to reduce crime. Maduro was no doubt committed to the cause – his son was kidnapped and murdered in 1997. Despite pouring huge resources into the problem, crime continued largely unabated. In January 2006 José Manuel Zelaya became president (see p329).

THE CULTURE The National Psyche

Generalizations don't – and shouldn't – come easily for a country with such wide-ranging cultures. The Ladino businessman will have a different outlook to the Garífuna fisherman, who may not have much in common with a Lenca subsistence farmer. However, Hondurans are less likely to reach a collective flashpoint than their neighbors, at least historically. While Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua all fought fierce civil wars in the 1980s, Honduras remained relatively conflict-free; US intervention certainly played a role, but so, perhaps, did the go-with-the-flow nature of the people. Most visitors find Hondurans intensely proud of their country and will be taken aback by their friendliness and hospitality – although some feel that masks a reserve that makes many Hondurans difficult to get to know.

Lifestyle

Lifestyles in Honduras vary as widely as the country's shockingly unequal social spectrum. The fortunate economic elite often lead an Americanized lifestyle, driving SUVs and

shopping at the latest air-conditioned malls. Far more commonly, Hondurans are forced to scratch a living. Poverty is perhaps at its most shocking in urban areas, where poor conditions are accompanied by the constant threat of violence.

In rural and coastal areas, the pressures are different but still intense. Many are being forced to give up their traditional lifestyles, and move to the city or look for seasonal work – on coffee plantations for example. Lack of opportunities at home have also forced many Hondurans to seek jobs in the USA. An estimated one million Hondurans are living and working in that country, at least half of them illegally.

Hondurans are hugely family-oriented, as is common in Central America. They often have a wider family network than many Europeans or North Americans are used to – aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins and even more distant relatives often play a significant role in family life.

Another attitude in Honduran society is machismo. Women are often still treated as second-class citizens. Wages are much lower (women can expect to earn a third of the average male wage, according to a UN Development Program report) and reported levels of domestic abuse are disturbing. Stories of men who do a runner when their partner becomes pregnant are commonplace. There is some evidence of change. A powerful government campaign against domestic violence was run-

ning at the time of research, and organized women's groups and cooperatives are on the increase – but there is a way to go.

The same macho tendencies mean that gay culture is very much in the closet.

People

Honduras is experiencing the most rapid urbanization in Central America: the urban population was 44% in 1990, but the percentage of the population in cities is expected to hit 59% in 2010. Up to 90% of Hondurans are mestizo, a mixture of Spanish and *indígena*.

The Tolupanes (also called Jicaque or Xicaque) live in small villages dotting the departments of Yoro and Francisco Morazán. They are thought to be one of the oldest indigenous communities in Honduras.

The Maya-Chorti people live near the Guatemalan border, in the department of Copán, while the Lenca live in southwestern Honduras. They are notable for their colorful traditional clothing and headscarves.

Arguably the most ethnically diverse region of Honduras is La Moskitia. It is home to the Miskito people and the Pech (who are generally less outgoing than the Miskitos). The Pech also live along the highway from San Esteban to Tocoa. In the interior of La Moskitia, the Tawahka inhabit the area around the Río Patuca – now designated as the Tawahka Asangni Biosphere Reserve. Numbering less than a thousand, they still have their own language. The Garífuna live on Honduras' north

THE FOOTBALL WAR

Legendary football manager Bill Shankly once said: 'Some people believe football is a matter of life and death...it is much more important than that.' Even Mr Shankly might have balked at Honduras' and El Salvador's sporting rivalry, which spilled off the pitch and onto the battlefield in the 1969 Guerra de Fútbol – the notorious Football (Soccer) War.

Tensions did not suddenly break out on the stadium terraces. In the 1950s and 1960s, a flagging economy forced 300,000 Salvadorans to seek better conditions in Honduras. However, the Honduran economy was itself ailing, and Salvadorans began to be targeted as scapegoats. In June 1969, Honduran authorities started throwing Salvadoran immigrants out of the country. A stream of Salvadoran refugees followed, alleging Honduran brutality.

In the same month, the two countries were playing World Cup qualifying matches against each other. At the San Salvador game, Salvadorans attacked Honduran fans, defiling the Honduran flag and mocking the anthem. Over the border, angry Hondurans then turned on Salvadoran immigrants. Tempers frayed further and the El Salvador army invaded Honduran territory on July 14, capturing Nueva Ocotepeque. Honduras retaliated with air strikes. A ceasefire was called after only six days, but around 2000 Hondurans lost their lives, while thousands of Salvadorans fled home.

For the record, El Salvador reached the Mexico World Cup finals, where it lost all three of its matches.

coast, from La Moskitia all the way across to Belize. Other people with African ancestry – descended from Caribbean immigrants who came to work on the banana plantations – live on the north coast and Bay Islands.

ARTS

Although not as well known for its art as Guatemala, Honduras does have some notable *artesanía*. Lenca pottery, with its black-and-white designs and glossy finish, can be of high quality and there are some skilful replica Maya carvings and glyphs in Copán Ruinas.

Honduras has a thriving visual arts scene. The 'primitivist' movement – often depicting scenes of mountain villages – is famous. José Antonio Velásquez (1906–83) is its most renowned exponent.

Musically, Honduran airwaves are usually filled with imported rhythms, but the country does have home-grown talent, including Guillermo Anderson, who combines folk with salsa, *punta* and rock. Karla Lara is another singer-songwriter whose folksy strumming is winning fans.

On the literary scene, Lucila Gamero de Medina (1873–1964), was one of the first Central American female writers. Rafael Heliodoro del Valle (1891–1959) was a respected journalist whose ideas had a lot of clout regionally. Ramón Amaya-Amador (1916–66), was a political writer who published *Prisión Verde* (1945) about life on a banana plantation. Juan Ramón Molina (1875–1908) is perhaps the country's best-loved poet while Roberto Quesada is one of Honduras' top living authors.

Dance is another popular art form – the Garífuna people of the north coast are known for their distinctive *punta* music and dance. If you get a chance to see a performance by the Ballet Folklórico Garífuna, don't miss it.

RELIGION

Honduras is nominally a Roman Catholic country, but that has changed rapidly in the last couple of decades with the rise of the evangelical movement. Just how many Roman Catholics have converted to evangelical Christianity is difficult to tell – figures are unreliable. The CIA World Factbook, at the start of 2007, claimed that 97% of Hondurans are Roman Catholic, yet Roman Catholic analysis concedes that at least 17% of Hondurans are now Protestant. Anecdotal evidence and

polls suggest that many more Hondurans have been swayed to evangelical religion than CIA sources realize – perhaps around a quarter of the population.

Unlike neighboring Guatemala, few indigenous customs or beliefs have been integrated into Christian worship. However, a belief in witchcraft and superstition is common in some parts of Hondurans.

ENVIRONMENT

Honduras is a country of breathtaking natural beauty, with a huge range of bird, mammal, reptile and plant species. However, illegal logging, under-resourced authorities and crass development projects are putting this under threat. While the environment has plenty of defenders, they face a tough struggle against developers, corruption and plain ignorance.

The Land

Countries don't come that big in Central America but, on the isthmus, Honduras weighs in as the second-largest (after Nicaragua), with an area of 112,090 sq km. It has coast on the Caribbean Sea (644km), and on the Pacific along the Golfo de Fonseca (124km). Guatemala is to the west, on the southwest is El Salvador and the Golfo de Fonseca, and to the southeast lies Nicaragua. The fertile north is by far the most developed – its banana plantations have long been a mainstay of the economy. Honduras' many islands include the Bay Islands and Hog Islands in the Caribbean and several in the Golfo de Fonseca.

Much of the Honduran interior is mountainous with peaks from 300m to 2849m high. There are many fertile highland valleys, but, unlike in Guatemala, there are no active volcanoes. Lowlands exist along both coasts and in several river valleys.

Wildlife

There is a dazzling array of flora and fauna in Honduras. Jaguars, tapirs, crocodiles and the mighty Ceiba tree are found in tropical zones; in the cloud forests are quetzals, rare butterflies, orchids and magnificent pine trees; while whale sharks, coral and seahorses thrive in the country's turquoise Caribbean waters. It is the sheer variety of habitats that allows so many different species to thrive. Honduras has mangrove swamps, freshwater lakes, oceans, lagoons, cloud forests, pine forests and tropical rain forests (considerably more than

Costa Rica, which somehow manages to hog the ecotourism limelight).

Much of the habitat is under threat from deforestation. Endangered species include the scarlet macaw (the national bird), Utilan iguana, manatee, quetzal, jaguar, whale shark and tapir. Their future depends on just how much protection Honduras' so-called protected areas can really offer.

National Parks & Protected Areas

Honduras has many ecologically protected areas, including *parques nacionales* (national parks), *refugios de vida* (wildlife refuges), biological reserves and biosphere reserves. More than one-fifth of Honduras qualifies as an existing or proposed protected area, but the effect of that is debatable. All too often the government lacks the resources – or the political will – to stop development and deforestation.

These are some of the more important protected areas, including marine reserves:

Lancetilla Botanical Gardens It has more than 700 plant species and 365 species of bird. See p390.

Parque Nacional Cusuco A cloud forest, with a large population of quetzals. See p366.

Parque Nacional Jeannette Kawas (Punta Sal)

Habitats include mangrove swamps, a small tropical forest, offshore reefs, several coves and a rocky point. The park has a large number of migratory and coastal birds. See p391.

Parque Nacional La Tigra Near Tegucigalpa, this protects a beautiful cloud forest set in former mining country. See p351.

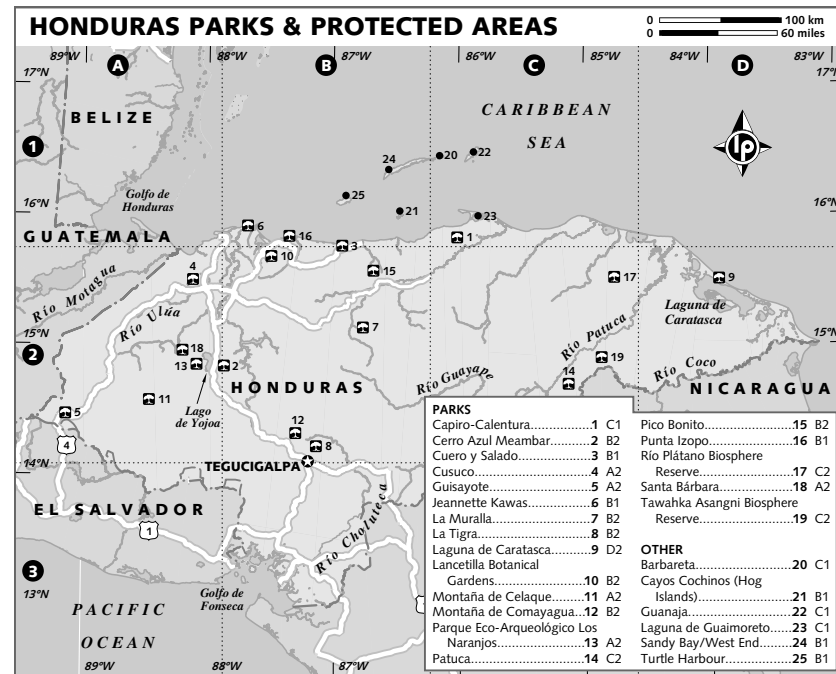
Parque Nacional Marítimo Cayos Cochinos The Cayos Cochinos (Hog Islands) are a protected reserve and proposed national marine park. Thirteen cays, two of them large, with beautiful coral reefs, well-preserved forests and fishing villages make up the reserve. See p399.

Parque Nacional Montaña de Celaque An elevated plateau, with four peaks more than 2800m above sea level, including Honduras' highest peak. See p381.

Parque Nacional Pico Bonito The park has high biodiversity and many waterfalls. Pico Bonito is the highest peak here, at 2436m. See p400.

Refugio de Vida Laguna de Guaimoreto Has mangrove forest and a great variety of wildlife, including birds, manatees and dolphins. See p405.

Refugio de Vida Punta Izopo Made up of tropical wet forest, mangrove forest and wetlands. It has many migratory birds, a beautiful rocky point and white-sand beaches. See p391.



Refugio de Vida Silvestre Cuero y Salado The largest manatee reserve in Central America (although that's no guarantee of seeing one). Monkeys and birdlife also abound. See p400.

Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve A World Heritage site and the first biosphere reserve in Central America, the Río Plátano is 5251 sq km of lowland tropical rain forest with remarkable natural, archaeological and cultural resources. See p430.

Sandy Bay/West End Marine Reserve On the northwestern end of Roatán in the Bay Islands, this marine reserve has some of the most colorful coral reefs around. See p417.

Tawahka Asangni Biosphere Reserve A tropical rain forest on the ancestral lands of the Tawahka people, a very threatened indigenous group. Access is by plane to Ahuas or Wampusirpi then by boat upstream to Krausirpe and Krautara, or by a multiday rafting trip down the Río Patuca from Juticalpa.

Turtle Harbor On the northwestern side of Utila in the Bay Islands, Turtle Harbor is another marine reserve and proposed national marine park visited frequently by divers.

Environmental Issues

Deforestation is the most pressing environmental issue facing Honduras today. Reliable reports suggest at least half of the pine timber coming from Honduras is illegal, and up to 80% of the mahogany harvest is illicit (sometimes reaching buyers in the US). Every year, around 2% of the country's forest cover is chopped to the ground – roughly four times the combined area of the Bay Islands.

Even Honduras' most treasured nature reserve, the Reserva de la Biósfera del Río Plátano, is under threat. Loggers and livestock landowners clear the land there with little resistance; in 1996, Unesco escalated the area into the 'at risk' category. Opposition to the logging is strong but faces huge challenges, from an underresourced national-parks agency to endemic corruption, not to mention the threat of violence from loggers keen to protect their interests.

Ill-considered tourist developments are another danger. A huge luxury complex near Tela is likely to put that area under strain. And a debate is raging about the wisdom of a proposed airport near the Copán archaeological site.

Meanwhile, overfishing (and illegal catches) in the Bay Islands are putting its magnificent reef ecosystem in danger. And the 1999 discovery of billions of tons of untapped oil reserves is likely to add to the concerns of those defending Honduras' beautiful but fragile natural resources.

TRANSPORTATION

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Frequent direct flights connect Honduras with other Central American capitals and many destinations in North America, the Caribbean, South America and Europe. Most international flights arrive and depart from the airports at San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa. By far the busiest and largest airport is at San Pedro Sula. There are also direct flights between the USA and Roatán, coming from Houston, Miami, and most recently from Newark in New Jersey state during high season.

Boat

The only regularly scheduled passenger boat service between Honduras and another country is the small boat that runs twice weekly from Puerto Cortés to Dangriga, Belize. Otherwise, it might be possible to arrange passage with cargo or fishing vessels if you pay your way. On the Caribbean coast, you can try to find a boat around Puerto Cortés, Tela, La Ceiba, Trujillo, Palacios or the Bay Islands. The most common international destinations for these boats are Puerto Barrios (Guatemala), Belize and Puerto Cabezas (Nicaragua).

On the Pacific side, you might be able to get a ride on boats sailing between countries. But the land crossings are so close it might not be worth the effort. San Lorenzo and Coyolito are the main Honduran port towns in the gulf.

If you arrive or depart from Honduras by sea, be sure to clear your paperwork (entry and exit stamps, if necessary) immediately with the nearest immigration office.

Bus

To Guatemala, the main crossings are at El Florido (Guatemala), Agua Caliente and Corinto. To El Salvador, the main crossings are El Poy and El Amatillo; there is also a crossing at Sabanetas, across the highlands from Marcala. Only Honduras has an immigration post here because of a border dispute, although this may

DEPARTURE TAX

If you fly out of Honduras, you must pay US\$35 departure tax at the airport.

change. The crossings to Nicaragua are at Las Manos (Honduras), El Espino and Guasaule (Nicaragua).

Frequent buses serve all of these border crossings. Most buses do not cross the border. You cross on foot and pick up another bus on the other side. The exceptions are international buses; the following provide services to San Salvador, Guatemala City, Antigua (Guatemala), Managua (Nicaragua), San José (Costa Rica) and Panama City:

El Rey Express (www.reyexpress.net)

Hedman Alas (www.hedmanalass.com)

King Quality (www.kingqualityca.com)

Tica Bus (www.ticabus.com)

GETTING AROUND

Air

Domestic air routes have proliferated in Honduras recently; it's now easy to fly to any of the Bay Islands from La Ceiba, Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, and to fly between these three major cities. (Flights to the Bay Islands from Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula connect through La Ceiba.) Air routes into the Moskitia are also making that remote area more accessible.

Airlines include the following:

Aerolíneas Sosa (☎ in San Pedro Sula 550 6545, in Tegucigalpa 233 5107, in La Ceiba 443 1894, in Roatán 445 1658; www.laceibaonline.net/aerososa/sosaingl.htm) Based in La Ceiba.

Atlantic Airlines (☎ in San Pedro Sula 557 8088, in Tegucigalpa 237 8597, in La Ceiba 440 2343, in Roatán 445 1179; www.atlanticairlines.com.ni) Based in Tegucigalpa.

SAMI (☎ Brus Laguna 433 8031, in La Ceiba 442 2565, in Puerto Lempira 433 6016)

TACA/Isleña (☎ in San Pedro Sula 516 1061, in Tegucigalpa 236 8222, in La Ceiba 441 3191, in Roatán 445 1088; www.taca.com)

Boat

Two passenger ferries, the luxury catamaran *Galaxy Wave* and the *Utila Princess II*, operate between La Ceiba and the Bay Islands. The *Galaxy Wave* goes to Roatán (1¼ hours), while the smaller, less fancy *Utila Princess II* goes to Utila. There is no service between the two islands – you have to go via La Ceiba. One (unreliable) scheduled service, the *Island Tour*, goes to and from Guanaja, leaving from Trujillo.

Cargo and fishing boats operate frequently between the coast and the Bay Islands. Boats leave Trujillo and La Ceiba for the Moskitia

every couple of days or so; you can also find cargo and fishing boats at the docks in Puerto Cortés, La Ceiba and Tela, as well as on all the Bay Islands.

In the Moskitia, almost all transportation is along the waterways. There are also water-taxis on Roatán from West End to West Bay, and from Coyolito on the Golfo de Fonseca over to the Isla del Tigre.

Bus

Buses are a cheap and easy way to get around in Honduras. The first buses of the day often start very early in the morning; the last bus usually departs in the late afternoon. Buses between Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula run until later.

On major bus routes, you'll often have a choice between taking a *directo* (direct) or *ordinario* (ordinary), which is also known as *parando* or *servicio a escala*. The *directo* is much faster and almost always worth the extra money, even on short trips.

Deluxe buses offer faster service between Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, Copán Ruinas, Tela and also La Ceiba, using modern air-conditioned buses (sometimes including movies and soft drinks). *Ejecutivo* (executive) or *servicio de lujo* (luxury service) buses are much more expensive than *directo* buses, often double the prices. They can be a worthwhile splurge for long trips.

Microbuses or *rapiditos* are smaller minivanlike buses that cover some routes, and tend to go faster and leave more frequently than regular buses.

Chicken buses operate between major towns and their satellite villages.

Car & Motorcycle

The main highways are paved roads, mostly in reasonable condition. Away from the highways, roads tend to be unpaved. Conditions can vary wildly according to rainfall and the time of year, ranging from acceptable to unpassable.

Rental cars are available in Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, La Ceiba and on Roatán. Prices start at around US\$35 a day for an economy car and US\$50 for a midsize one.

Taxi

Taxis are everywhere in Honduran towns. They don't have meters but most towns have a fixed about-town fare, starting at US\$0.60 in

smaller places and going up to US\$1. Taxis in San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa are more expensive. Expect to pay US\$1.50 and US\$2.20 respectively for a ride about town. Taxi fares increase at night. Expect longer journeys in a major city to cost around US\$4. In the major cities, colectivos (shared taxis) ply a number of prescribed routes, costing around US\$0.60 per passenger. Always confirm the fare before you leave. If it seems a rip-off, negotiate or wait for another.

Three-wheeled mototaxis have flooded into Honduras in the past few years. They are usually cheaper than taxis.

TEGUCIGALPA

pop 894,000

In many ways Tegucigalpa is a typical, sprawling Central American metropolis. The streets are often snarled with fume-belching traffic, while the crowds are thick and the pace is frenetic. However, the setting is spectacular – the city is nestled in a valley surrounded by a ring of mountains, and has a certain chaotic charm.

You may even feel a bit of affection for it when you glimpse a 16th-century church or the view across the precipitous city landscape, or perhaps after a fine meal at a restaurant. Expect this feeling to last until around the time you get stuck in the next traffic jam (not long).

At an altitude of 975m, Tegucigalpa has a fresher and milder climate than the country's coasts – although long-term residents report a steady temperature rise, as in many other areas of the world. The city is also struggling to cope with huge migration to its bright lights – you will see shantytowns clinging to the

mountainsides in the upper reaches of the urban sprawl.

The name Tegucigalpa (Teh-goos-ee-gal-pa) is a bit of a mouthful; Hondurans often call the city Tegus (*teh-goos*) for short. The name, meaning 'silver hill' in the original local Nahuatl dialect, was given when the Spanish founded the city as a silver and gold mining center in 1578, on the slopes of Picacho. Tegucigalpa became the capital of Honduras in 1880, when the government seat was moved from Comayagua, 82km to the northwest. In 1938 Comayagüela, on the opposite side of the river from Tegucigalpa, became part of the city.

ORIENTATION

The city is divided by the Río Choluteca. On the east side of the river is Tegucigalpa, including downtown and more affluent districts such as Colonia Palmira. Plaza Morazán, often still called Parque Central, with the city's cathedral, is in the heart of the city. West of this, Av Miguel Paz Barahona is a pedestrian shopping street, extending four blocks from the plaza to Calle El Telégrafo; this section has been renamed Calle Peatonal, and it's a busy thoroughfare with many shops, restaurants and banks.

Across the river from Tegucigalpa is Comayagüela, which is poorer and dirtier, with a sprawling market, long-distance bus stations, budget hotels and *comedores* (cheap eating places). The two areas are connected by several bridges.

Maps

Instituto Geográfico Nacional (3 Av Barrio La Balsa; ☎ 7:30am-noon & 12:30-3:30pm Mon-Fri) sells detailed Honduran road and topographical maps.

GETTING INTO TOWN FROM THE AIRPORT

Toncontín International Airport is 6.5 traffic-snarled kilometers south of the center of Tegucigalpa. To get into town, walk out the main doors and catch a 'Loarque' bus (US\$0.20, about 30 minutes) headed into town. The bus goes north on 4a Av; if you are planning to stay in **Comayagüela**, get off at the appropriate cross street and walk up. If you're staying in Tegucigalpa, stay on until the terminal at the end of the line (3a Av and 3a Calle in Comayagüela), where a cab to your hotel will cost a few dollars.

To get to the airport from Comayagüela, catch the Loarque bus (it will say 'Río Grande') at the terminal or anywhere on 2a Av north of 14a Calle (where it turns to cross the river). The airport, on your left, is hard to recognize – get off in front of a big Burger King and cross the street. A good option from the center is the colectivo (US\$0.60), a van which leaves when full from their stop on Calle Morelos, five blocks west of Parque Central.

A private taxi to the airport costs about US\$8.

INFORMATION

Bookstores
Metromedia Av San Carlos (☎ 221 0770; Av San Carlos; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat, noon-6pm Sun); Multiplaza Mall (☎ 231 2410; Blvd Juan Pablo II; ☎ 8am-8pm) Sells English-language books, magazines and more, including day-old *New York Times*.

Emergency & Medical Services

Ambulance (☎ 195; ☎ 24hr) Red Cross.
Honduras Medical Center (☎ 216 1201; Av Juan Lindo; ☎ 24hr) One of the best hospitals in the country.
Police (☎ 199, 222 8736; 5a Av; ☎ 24hr)

Immigration

Immigration office (☎ 220 6827; Av La Paz btwn 3a & 4a Avs; ☎ 7:30am-3:30pm Mon-Fri) For a fee of US\$20.50, you can arrange a month-long extension here. Come early for same-day service.

Internet Access

Hondutel (☎ 222 1120; cnr Av Cristóbal Colón & Calle El Telégrafo; per hr US\$0.80; ☎ 7:30am-9pm Mon-Sat) Has air-con and flatscreen Dells.
Multinet (Blvd Morazán; per hr US\$1.10; ☎ 8am-7:30pm Mon-Sat, 9:30am-7pm Sun) Reliable chain internet café.
Mundo Virtual (☎ 238 0043; Calle Salvador Mendieta; per hr US\$0.90; ☎ 7am-10pm Mon-Sat, 11am-8pm Sun) Professional staff, lots of flat screens; downloads and printing allowed.

Laundry

Dry Cleaning Lavandería Maya (☎ 232 3649; per 10lb US\$4; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat)
Su-perc Jet (☎ 237 4154; Av Máximo Jérez/Juan Gutemberg, Barrio Guanacaste; per 1lb US\$0.30; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat) Laundry washed, dried and folded. Drop it off in the morning, and it will be ready that afternoon.

Money

Unibanc ATMs are dotted about the city, including the airport, on the northeast corner of Parque Central, in the Hedman Alas bus terminal and in the shopping malls.
Banco Atlántida (Parque Central; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8:30-11:30am Sat) Changes traveler's checks and has a 24-hour ATM.
BAC Credomatic (Blvd Morazán; ☎ 9:30am-5:30pm Mon-Fri) Has an ATM.
Mundirama Travel (☎ 232 3909; cnr Avs República de Panamá & República de Chile; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Represents American Express; issues traveler's checks and holds mail for cardholders.

Post

There's a DHL office near Mailboxes, Etc.
Comayagüela post office (6a Av btwn 7a & 8a Calles; ☎ 7:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat) In the same building as the Hondutel office.
Downtown post office (cnr Av Miguel Paz Barahona & Calle El Telégrafo; ☎ 7am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat)
Mailboxes, Etc (☎ 232 3184; Blvd Morazán; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Has Federal Express for international deliveries and Viana for domestic.

Telephone

Most internet cafés have much cheaper rates for international calls than Hondutel.
Hondutel (☎ 222 1120; cnr Av Cristóbal Colón & Calle El Telégrafo; ☎ 7:30am-9pm Mon-Sat) Pricy state-run call center.

Tourist Information

Amitgra (☎ 238 6269; Edificio Italia, 4th fl, office No 6, Colonia Palmira; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Manages, and has information on, Parque Nacional La Tigra.
Corporación Hondureña de Desarrollo Forestal (Cohdefor; ☎ 223 4346; Colonia El Carrizal; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) The national office; you can get information on Honduras' national parks, wildlife refuges and other protected areas.
Instituto Hondureño de Turismo (☎ 222 2124, ext 510; www.letsghonduras.com; 2nd fl, Edificio Europa, cnr Av Ramon Ernesto Cruz & Calle República de México; ☎ 7:30am-3:30pm Mon-Fri) Has some information on national parks and wildlife refuges. Not well-gearred to handle walk-in travelers.

Travel Agencies

Several reliable travel agencies are clustered in front of and nearby Hotel Honduras Maya. There are others on Calle Peatonal, near Parque Central. Be aware that some agencies charge just for the *cotización* (pricing out an itinerary).
Mundirama Travel (☎ 232 3909; fax 232 0072; Edificio Ciics, Avs República de Panamá & República de Chile; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Can help with travel planning, and is the local American Express rep.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

If you believe the papers, thieves will watch your every step as soon as you step foot in Tegucigalpa. No doubt, the capital can be a dangerous place, like most developing-world cities. However, with common sense, you should be able to enjoy the city without putting yourself at undue risk. During the day, downtown Tegucigalpa and Colonia Palmira

TEGUCIGALPA

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are usually fine to walk around – although beware of pickpockets around Plaza Morazán (Parque Central). Be especially alert and careful in and around the bus terminals and markets of Comayagüela. San Isidro Market is a particular hot spot for petty theft. Take taxis at night.

As for dress code: shorts and sandals quickly give you away as a foreign traveler. This should go without saying, but here goes anyway: keep your cash and valuables well hidden. Finally, seek advice from your hotel or locals before hopping on a local city bus. Some are prone to theft and ‘taxing’ carried out by gang members.

SIGHTS Downtown

At the center of the city is the fine white-washed **cathedral** – although its faded exterior needs restoration – and, in front of it, the **Plaza Morazán**, often called Parque Central. The domed 18th-century cathedral (built between 1765 and 1782) has an intricate baroque altar of gold and silver. The *parque*, with its statue of former president Francisco Morazán on horseback, is the hub of the city.

Three blocks east of the cathedral is the **Parque Valle**, with the **Iglesia de San Francisco**, the first church in Tegucigalpa, founded in 1592 by the Franciscans. The building beside it was first a convent, then the Spanish mint; it now houses the lackluster **Museo Histórico Militar** (☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat), which has limited exhibits on Honduras’ military history.

The excellent **Galería Nacional de Arte** (☎ 237 9884; admission US\$1; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) displays the work of Honduras’ finest visual artists from the colonial era to the modern, along with some well-preserved religious artifacts. Just alongside is the 18th-century **Iglesia La Merced**. Both are housed in the Antiguo Paraninfo Universitario building, two blocks south of the cathedral and facing **Parque La Merced**. In 1847 the convent of La Merced was converted to house Honduras’ first university; the national gallery was established there in 1996. The well-restored building is itself a work of art. The unusual modern building on stilts next door is the **Palacio Legislativo**, where Congress meets.

The nearby **Casa Presidencial** (Presidential Palace; cnr Paseo Marco Aurelio Soto & Calle Salvador Mendieta) is a grand building that used to serve as a museum, but was boarded up when we passed by.

Tegucigalpa’s newest museum is the **Museo para la Identidad Nacional** (MIN; ☎ 222 2299; www.min-honduras.org in Spanish; Av Miguel Paz Barahona btwn Calles Morelos & El Telgrafo). After several delays, its doors were about to open to the public at the time of research but we were unable to check it out. It is reportedly a high-tech attempt to encapsulate the whole of Honduran history, from pre-Colombian civilization to the present. The museum is in the former Palace of Ministries, built in 1880.

The **Museo del Hombre** (☎ 220 1678; Av Miguel de Cervantes btwn Calles Salvador Corleto & Las Damas; admission free; ☎ 8:30am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) displays mostly contemporary Honduran art.

The **Museo Nacional de Historia y Antropología Villa Roy** (☎ 222 3470; admission US\$1.50; ☎ 8:30am-3:30pm Wed-Sat) is housed on a hill overlooking the city, in the opulent former home of ex-president Julio Lozano. The displays chronologically re-create Honduras’ colorful past, including archaeological and pre-Hispanic history, as well as the rise of the influential fruit companies. A block west is **Parque La Concordia**, a sedate park with carving reproductions from the Copán ruins.

Iglesia Los Dolores (1732), northwest of the cathedral, has a plaza out front and some attractive religious art inside. On the front of Los Dolores are figures representing the Passion of Christ – his unseamed cloak, the cock that crowed three times – all crowned by the more indigenous symbol of the sun. Further west is **Parque Herrera**, where you can pop into a peaceful 18th-century **Iglesia El Calvario**, and the striking **Teatro Nacional Manuel Bonilla**, dating from 1912, with an interior inspired by the Athens Theatre of Paris.

Chiminike (☎ 291 0339; www.chiminike.com; Blvd Fuerzas Armadas de Honduras; admission US\$2.75; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Sat & Sun) is Tegucigalpa’s popular new children’s museum. About 7km south of central Tegus, its exhibits (Spanish only), range from a display on the human body to an outline of Maya history. Kids should like the *casa de equilibrio* (equilibrium house) – a small tilted house designed to highlight your sense of balance (admission US\$1).

El Picacho

On this peak on the north side of Tegucigalpa is the **Parque de las Naciones Unidas** (United Nations Park), established to commemorate the UN’s 40th anniversary. It has excellent views of the city, as well as a run-down **zoo** (adult/child

US\$0.25/0.10; ☎ 9am-4:30pm Wed-Sun). On Sundays buses leaving from behind Iglesia Los Dolores go all the way to the park gates. Otherwise, take an El Hatillo bus (US\$0.35, every 25 minutes from 5am to 10pm, 20 minutes) from Av Juan Gutemberg or Parque Herrera and get off at the junction; the last return bus is at 9pm. A taxi from the center costs US\$5.

COURSES

Conversa Language School (☎ 231 1874; aerohond@cablecolor.hn; Paseo República de Argentina 257; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-12:30pm Sat) offers intensive courses (120 hours US\$930). Homestays can also be arranged (per month, including two meals per day US\$350).

SLEEPING

Downtown Tegucigalpa is safe during the day, although not at night. Comayagüela is a dodgy part of town but closer to the bus terminals. If you stay in Comayagüela, get taxis at night. Colonia Palmira is away from downtown, in a good neighborhood. Accommodations there are noticeably pricier.

Downtown

Hotel Iberia (☎ 237 9267; Calle Los Dolores, s with shared bathroom US\$5.40/8.10, d with/without bathroom US\$10.80/8.10) Easily the best cheapie downtown. Run by a nice family, it is an oasis of calm away from the hurly-burly of the street outside. Rooms are clean and the shared bathroom is fine (although hot water only runs from 6am to 8am). There is an upstairs common room with a TV – also good for an afternoon card game.

Nuevo Hotel Boston (☎ 237 9411, 238 0510; fax 237 0186; Av Máximo Jérez 321; s/tw US\$12.20/19.50) A very good budget downtown hotel, if you can get past the rules and regulations (shirt and shoes at all times, no alcohol in the communal rooms). There is good news for giants – spick-and-span rooms, all set around a leafy courtyard, have large doorways and high ceilings. Another perk is the free coffee and cookies. Rooms facing the street are large, but noisy and not worth the extra charge for a small balcony.

Hotel Granada No 2 (☎ 237 4004; fax 237 4438; Subida Casamata 1326; s/d US\$14.60/24.30; ☎ ☎ ☎) Comfortable bed: check. Secure: check. Clean: check. Free purified water and coffee: check. Just forget about any flourishes in this concrete block of a building. Rooms

have televisions and guests have 10 minutes’ free internet.

Hotel MacArthur (☎ 237 9839; homacart@datum.hn; Av Lempira 454; s/d/tr with fan US\$35/40/50, with air-con US\$45/50/60; ☎ ☎ ☎) Rooms vary somewhat here: some are sparsely decorated and lack charm; others are cozy with views over nearby Iglesia Los Dolores. All are comfortable and good value. Rooms at the front have more character but are noisier. There is an inexpensive cafeteria serving breakfast and dinner, as well as an attractive pool that nobody seems to use.

Colonia Palmira

Hotel Guadalupe 2 (☎ 238 5009; 1a Calle; s/d US\$17.30/20.55; ☎) Safe and comfortable, this has just one drawback: its Stalinist-style box-rooms let in little light and can make you feel you’re trapped in a Cold War spy movie. Many volunteers stay here for the security and the good neighborhood.

Hotel Linda Vista (☎ 238 2099; www.lindavistahotel.com; Calle Las Acacias 1438; s/d US\$40.60/58; ☎) This very well-run small hotel has six rooms with mahogany furnishings, big closets and spacious bathrooms. The front garden is well tended and pretty, while the rear garden has a truly lovely view of the Tegucigalpa sprawl. Continental breakfast is included.

Leslie’s Place (☎ 220 5325; www.dormir.com; Calzada San Martín 452; s/d with fan US\$69/85; ☎ ☎) Small and intimate enough to almost call itself a boutique hotel, this is not your average backpackers. But if you fancy treating yourself, you won’t find much better value than this charming hotel with Guillermo Yuscara landscape paintings on the walls, and tasteful, authentic Honduran décor.

Comayagüela

Hotel Plaza Real (☎ 237 0084; 6a Av btwn 8a & 9a Calles; s/d with shared bathroom US\$10.80/12.50, r with bathroom US\$13.50) Set back from the street, this hotel is defined by a lush green courtyard area, with palms and a gazebo. Rooms are not bad, although overdue for a paint job. Hot water is on tap, as is purified water and coffee. Scuzzy jeans beware – there’s a laundry station (hand-wash).

Hotel Hedman Alas (☎ 237 9333; 4a Av btwn 8a & 9a Calles; s/d US\$15/17.30) So there’s almost no natural light, but this is a good secure option in bus stations-ville. Neat rooms include brass-based lampshades and Impressionist prints. But the

reams of fake flowers in the central *comedor* (dining room) are a little disturbing. Breakfast (US\$2.20) is served between 7am and 9am.

Hotel Union (☎ 237 4213; fax 206 2477; 8a Av btwn 12a & 13a Calles; d/tr US\$19/20.25) Rooms here have beds and very little space for anything else. New in 2005, the place looks older now. But the service is friendly and it's fine if all you want is just to crash out before a morning bus.

Hotel Palace (☎ 237 6660; 12a Calle btwn 8a & 9a Aves; s with fan & bathroom US\$22.75; d with air-con US\$42; Ⓟ Ⓢ) A hefty grille door marks the inner entrance to the rooms here – enter the Fort Knox of Tegucigalpa hotels. Rooms are surprisingly pricey for what you get – a prison cell ambience right up to the barred windows, and curtains branded with the hotel name. But you do get cable TV and the beds are firm. There is also parking and a whole bunch of conveniently close bus stations.

EATING

Tegucigalpa's eating options range from street food to sophisticated candlelit restaurants serving refined global cuisine.

Downtown

La Terraza de Don Pepe (☎ 237 1084; Av Cristóbal Colón 2062; dishes US\$2-4; ☎ 8am-10pm) Down-at-heel charm abounds in this famous, good-value central restaurant. Its daily specials are a steal and sometimes there is live music in the evenings. What really makes this place unique is an upstairs alcove formerly known as the men's restroom. In 1986 a statue of the Virgin of Suyapa was stolen from the Basílica de Suyapa. After a nationwide hunt, it turned up here. Now the former gentlemen's bathroom area is a little shrine, complete with aging newspaper clippings and photos of the event. Only in Latin America!

Restaurante Amapala (☎ 238 4417; Av Miguel Paz Barahona at Calle Salvador Corleto; dishes US\$2-4; ☎ 11am-8pm) It is a bit rough-and-ready but this is a good place to stretch your lempira. Seafood is the specialty, closely followed by chicken platters which you get for a song. It looks onto tranquil Parque Valle. As in most Honduras restaurants, veg options are limited.

Cocina Creativa (☎ 222 4735; Av Miguel Paz Barahona; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) Cozy and low-key, this little place has hard-backed wooden chairs, paneled walls, an easy jazzy soundtrack and a friendly owner. *Licuada*s (fruit milkshake drinks) and sandwiches are

great, while *platos del día* (dishes of the day) go for US\$2.75.

Café Paradiso (☎ 237 0337; Av Miguel Paz Barahona 1351; mains US\$3-6; ☎ 10am-10pm Mon, Wed, Fri & Sat, until 9:30pm Tue & Thu) Bohemians gather here, arguably Tegus' most cultured hangout, where European and Latin American dishes are served on cute round tables draped in yellow tablecloths. The service can be a bit chaotic – on the night we were there, the waitress was also the chef. There are often temporary art exhibitions decorating the walls. English-language movies are shown at 7pm Tuesday; poetry readings at 7pm Thursday. It is near El Arbolito.

Pupusería El Patio (☎ 235 9384; Blvd Morazán; mains US\$4-7; ☎ 11am-1:30am) One of the most raucous, lively places in the city at the weekend, this beer-hall of a place heaves with people. Tables fill with bottles, and the karaoke gets more full-blooded as the night goes on. Dads, mums and kids join in the fun. Tacos and typical Honduran dishes are the main items on the menu.

Repostería Duncan Maya (☎ 237 2672; Av Cristóbal Colón; mains US\$5-8; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, 8am-9:30pm Sun) Head here if you want bustle and a buzzing atmosphere – this cavernous downtown restaurant and bar usually brims with people, running the sky-blue-clad waitresses off their feet (you may need to wait a while to get served). Don't expect a quiet evening, especially if the karaoke machine has been fired up.

Restaurante Mediterraneo (☎ 237 9618; Calle Salvador Mendieta; mains US\$4-8; ☎ 10:30am-8pm) Not quite the bastion of sophisticated Mediterranean cooking that the name would have you believe, this bright restaurant caters mostly to suits and retail workers. You won't be dazzled by the cuisine – the brown vinyl seats have more luster than the carbonara – but it is tasty enough and the service is friendly. Vegetarians have some options, including Greek salad and moussaka.

El Patio (☎ 221 4141; Blvd Morazán; mains US\$8-12; ☎ 10am-11pm Mon-Thu, 10am-1am Fri-Sun) The posh-restaurant branch of the city's two famous El Patio venues: waitresses dash between tables in traditional Honduran dress, while a mariachi band serenades diners in the vast open dining space. The meals are not cheap but the portions are enormous. The well-prepared meat is cooked on a large grill at one end of the dining area.

Some other options:

Rincón Mexicano (☎ 222 8368; cnr Av Cristóbal Colón & Calle El Telégrafo; mains US\$3-5; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Thu, to 11pm Fri & Sat) Surprisingly cool and quiet little oasis, away from the noisy street. There are a few salads and the burritos are a good value at US\$3.25.

Supermercado Más x Menos (cnr Avs La Paz & 4a; ☎ 7:30am-9pm Mon-Sat, 8am-8:30pm Sun) Large supermarket; good for day-trip supplies.

Food stands (mains US\$0.50-1.50) At the side of Iglesia Los Dolores, these stands offer a variety of tempting lunchtime street-food dishes from *pupusas* (cornmeal mass stuffed with cheese or refried beans) and *baleadas* (flour tortillas) to beef and chicken grills.

Colonia Palmira

Café la Milonga (☎ 232 2654; Paseo República de Argentina 1802; mains US\$5.50-8; ☎ noon-8:30pm Mon-Thu, to 9pm Fri, to 7pm Sat) Not your average stack-'em-high, sell-'em-cheap joint. In the well-heelled Colonia Palmira district, this is so good and excellent value. Unpretentious Argentine steaks are the choice dish in this low-key but sophisticated venue. Watch out for the events – including tango evenings and music recitals (including big names such as folk legend Guillermo Anderson).

Comayagüela

Centro Comercial Jerusalem (6a Av btwn 5a & 6a Calles; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, to noon Sun) There are a cluster of cheap, clean *comedores*, with typical Honduran dishes, sandwiches and snacks. **Delitortas** (mains US\$1-2), on the 3rd floor, has good daily specials (burger, fries and a soda for US\$1.50).

Todo de Pollo (6a Av near 8a Calle, Comayagüela; mains US\$2-3.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The name means 'everything of chicken' – can you guess what's on the menu? It's located next to Hotel Plaza Real.

DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

Colonia Palmira hogs the best of Tegucigalpa's nightlife. There are also several bars and nightclubs along Blvd Morazán. Note that you won't be able to party 'til dawn in this city. Ricardo Alvarez, who became mayor of Tegucigalpa in 2006, controversially imposed a 2am curfew on the city's clubs and bars in a bid to clamp down on the night-time violence.

Glenn's Pub (☎ 6pm-2am Mon-Sat) During the day you would not even know it was here,

but this small hole-in-the-wall bar has a young crowd spilling out onto the sidewalk on weekend nights. Cheap beers flow, as do the tunes: a funky mix of Britpop, Bob Marley and other classics.

Sabor Cubano (☎ 235 9947; Paseo República de Argentina 1933; ☎ 11am-2pm & 6-11pm Tue-Thu, 11am-2pm & 6pm-2am Fri & Sat) Head here if your hips don't lie – this is Tegucigalpa's dance hotspot. There's no cover charge. It's just a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere with couples, some more elegant than others, moving the night away to the *una-dos-tres* of a salsa beat. It doubles as a restaurant.

Bamboo (☎ 236 5391; Blvd Morazán; cover US\$6-8; ☎ 9pm-2am Wed-Sat) This is Tegucigalpa's most exclusive nightclub. Partygoers are mainly young twenty-somethings. Dress code: to the nines.

ENTERTAINMENT

Café Paradiso (Av Miguel Paz Barahona 1351; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, to 9:30pm Tue & Thu) Shows English-language movies every Tuesday night at 7pm and has poetry readings on Thursday at 7pm.

Teatro Nacional Manuel Bonilla (☎ 222 4366; Av Miguel Paz Barahona) This characterful place hosts a variety of performing arts.

Cinemark (☎ 231 2044; www.cinemark.com; Multi plaza Mall, Blvd Juan Pablo II; tickets US\$3) A modern multiscreen cineplex showing recent Hollywood fare.

Estadio Nacional Tiburcio Carías Andino (9a Calle at Blvd Suyapa) Across the river from Comayagüela, this stadium mainly holds soccer matches – things are never dull when soccer-mad fans take their seats on match day.

SHOPPING

Honduran handicrafts are sold at many places around town.

Mercado Mayoreo (☎ 8am-5pm Fri, 6am-3pm Sat) Every Friday and Saturday, this colorful cheap market sets up shop near the Estadio Nacional. There's a dazzling array of produce and stalls, hawking everything from birdcages to vegetables. It's an experience just to wander around, even if you don't want to buy anything. There are some great little *pupusa* cafés too – check out Pupusería Emanuel if you can – *que rico!*

Mercado San Isidro (☎ about 7am-5pm) Located in Comayagüela, you can find just about anything for sale in this sprawling market, from

vegetables to secondhand clothing to some excellent leatherwork and other crafts. Be aware that this is a favorite hunting ground of pickpockets.

Multiplaza Mall (Blvd Juan Pablo II; ☎ 8am-10pm) New malls frequently crop up in Tegucigalpa, but this one is probably the most convenient for travelers. It's southwest of Colonia Palmira, with ATMs, bookstores, internet and a cinema.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

The airport is 6.5km south of Tegucigalpa. See p340 for information on getting into town. Note that Honduras' main airport is in San Pedro Sula, not Tegucigalpa. Travelers looking for international flights should consider flying from there.

Aerolíneas Sosa (☎ 233 5107, airport 234 0137; www.aerolineas.com; Blvd Morazán; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

American Airlines (Edif Palmira; ☎ 800 220 1414 toll free, in Honduras 220 7585; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Across from Hotel Honduras Maya.

Atlantic Airlines (☎ 237 8597, airport 234 9701; www.atlanticairlines.com.ni; cnr Avs La Paz & Juan Lindo; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

Air France (☎ 236 0029; www.airfrance.com; cnr Avs La Paz & Juan Lindo; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

Continental Airlines (☎ 220 0999, airport 233 3676; www.continental.com; Av República de Chile; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat)

Copa Airlines (☎ 235 5610, airport 291 0099; Av República de Chile; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sun) In Hotel Clarion.

TACA (☎ 236 8222; www.taca.com; Blvd Morazán; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat, 9am-2pm Sun)

Destination	Fare
La Ceiba	US\$80
Roatán (via La Ceiba)	US\$120
San Pedro Sula	US\$70
Utila (via La Ceiba)	US\$120

Bus

Excellent bus services connect Tegucigalpa with other parts of Honduras; unfortunately, each bus line has its own station. Most are clustered in Comayagüela. See Map pp342-3 for locations. Keep a wary eye on your belongings in this part of town.

The free magazine *Honduras Tips* has a very useful bus routes section.

INTERNATIONAL & LONG-DISTANCE BUSES

Both **Tica Bus** (☎ 220 0579, www.ticabus.com; 16a Calle btwn 5a & 6a Avs, Comayagüela) and **King Quality** (www.kingqualityca.com; ☎ 225 5415; fax 225 2600; Blvd Comandante Economical European near 6a Av, Comayagüela) go to El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua and the Mexican border, and have connections to Costa Rica and Panama. King Quality has two classes: 'Quality' is 1st class and 'King' is even more deluxe. Make sure you arrive 45 minutes before taking any international departures.

For more information, see opposite.

GETTING AROUND

Bus

City buses are cheap (US\$0.20), loud, dirty and can be dangerous. Theft is common and buses are sometimes targeted by gangs. Unless you are confident about the areas you are going through, stick to the colectivos or taxis.

For getting to the airport, see p340.

Car & Motorcycle

Before hiring a vehicle be sure to ask about the deductible (the amount you pay before insurance kicks in) – it can be as high as US\$1600. Hire rates average around US\$50 per day.

Rental companies:

Avis (☎ 239 5712, airport 232 0088; www.avis.com; Blvd Suyapa, Edif Marina; ☎ 8am-6pm)

Budget (☎ 235 9528, 265 8000; www.budget.com)

Econo Rent-a-Car (☎ 235 8582, airport 291 0107; Blvd Morazán; ☎ 8am-6pm)

Hertz (☎ 238 3772, airport 234 3784; hertz.com/multivisionhn.net; Centro Comercio Villa Real; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat)

Taxi

Taxis cruise all over town and honk to advertise when they are available. A ride in town costs around US\$2.20.

A private taxi to the airport costs about US\$8.

There are a couple of useful downtown taxi colectivo stops, particularly helpful for the airport, and Mercado Jacaleapa terminal (where buses depart for El Paraíso and Danlí). They charge US\$0.60.

You will have to wait for them to fill up. Colectivos to the airport also leave from the stop on Calle Morelos, five blocks west of Parque Central.

BUSES FROM TEGUCIGALPA

International Buses

Destination	Bus line	Fare (one way)	Departures	Duration
Guatemala City (Guatemala)	Tica Bus	US\$26	12:30pm	22hr (with overnight in San Salvador)
	Transportes King Quality	US\$58/79 quality/king	6am	14hr (with 2hr layover in San Salvador)
Managua (Nicaragua)	Tica Bus	US\$20	9am	8hr (via Danlí)
	King Quality	US\$25/37 quality/king	6am & 2pm	7-8hr
Managua (Nicaragua)	Tica Bus	US\$20	9am	8hr (via Danlí)
	King Quality	US\$25/37 quality/king	6am & 2pm	7-8hr
San Salvador (El Salvador)	Tica Bus	US\$15	12:30pm	6½hr
	King Quality	US\$31/44 quality/king	6am & 2pm	6-7hr
Tapachula (Mexico)	Tica Bus	US\$41	1pm	40hr (overnight in San Salvador, transfer in Guatemala City)

Long-Distance Buses

Destination	Bus line	Phone	Fare	Type	Duration
Agua Caliente	Transportes Sultana de Occidente	237 8101	US\$11.10	direct	9hr
Catacamas	Transportes Discovery	237 4883	US\$4.60	direct	3½hr
	Transportes Mi Esperanza	225 1502	US\$2.50	direct	3hr
Comayagua	Transportes El Rey	237 1462	US\$2.30	normal	2hr
Copán Ruínas	Transportes Hedman Alas	237 7143	US\$22	<i>ejecutivo</i>	7hr
	Transportes Litena	230 0470	US\$2.80	direct	2hr
Juticalpa	Transportes Aurora	237 3647	US\$2.50	direct	3hr
La Ceiba	Transportes Hedman Alas	237 7143	US\$22	<i>ejecutivo</i>	7½hr
	Transportes Cristina	220 0117	US\$9.40	direct	7½hr
La Entrada	Transportes Sultana de Occidente	237 8101	US\$8.10	normal	6hr
	Transportes Flores	237 3032	US\$1.50	normal	2hr
Las Manos*	Transportes Discua Litena	230 0470	US\$3.25	normal	3hr
	Transportes Hedman Alas	237 7143	US\$15	<i>ejecutivo</i>	4hr
San Pedro Sula	Transportes El Rey	233 8561	US\$6	direct	4hr
	Transportes Sultana de Occidente	237 8101	US\$6.10	normal	7hr
Siguatepeque	Transportes Empresas Unidas & Maribel	222 2071	US\$2.20	normal	2½hr
Tela	Transportes Cristina	220 0117	US\$9.40	normal	6hr
Trujillo	Transportes Contraibal	237 1666	US\$11	normal	8hr

*Nicaraguan border; last bus from border to Ocotal (Nicaragua) at 4pm

AROUND TEGUCIGALPA

SUYAPA

The huge gothic **Basilica de Suyapa**, the most important church in Honduras, dominates the landscape on the Suyapa hillside, about 7km south of the center of Tegucigalpa.

The basilica is just up the hill from the **Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras** (UNAH). The construction of the basilica, which is famous for its large, brilliant stained-glass windows, was begun in 1954, and finishing touches are still being added.

La Virgen de Suyapa is the patron saint of Honduras; in 1982 a papal decree made her the patron saint of all Central America. She is represented by a tiny painted wooden statue, only 6cm tall. Many believe she has performed hundreds of miracles. The statue is brought to the large basilica on holidays, especially for the annual **Feria de Suyapa** beginning on the saint's day (February 3), and continuing for a week; the celebrations attract pilgrims from all over Central America. Most of the time, however, the little statue is kept on the altar of the very simple old **Iglesia de Suyapa**, built in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It's on the plaza a few hundred meters behind the newer basilica.

Buses for Suyapa (US\$0.20, 20 minutes) leave from the gas station at 6a Av and 7 Calle in Comayagüela; see Map pp342-3. Get off at the university and walk the short distance from there.

SANTA LUCÍA

pop 2300

Perched among pine-covered hills, Santa Lucía is a charming old colonial mining town with a spectacular vista over the Tegucigalpa sprawl in the valley below. It is less obviously touristy than nearby Valle de Ángeles, which is part of its appeal.

Within its enchanting 18th-century *iglesia* are old Spanish paintings and a **statue of Christ of Las Mercedes**, donated to Santa Lucía by King Philip II in 1572. If the high arched wooden doors of the church are closed, walk around to the office at the rear and ask to have them opened for you. Apart from a few hikes, and one or two restaurants, there is very little to do in the town, apart from meandering along its tranquil streets and getting a feel for a Honduras that time forgot.

Sleeping & Eating

La Posada de Doña Estefana (☎ 779 0441; Barrio El Centro; d/tr US\$25.75/31) This is a beautifully tranquil setting, with a fine panorama of the church. Its three rooms are pretty good too, done out in a colonial style with stained glass windows. When you consider the location, it is a bargain. Santa Lucía is such a low-key little place you may have to knock on the door or the garden gate a few times before anyone answers the door.

Restaurante & Bar Santa Lucía Colonial (🕒 noon-midnight Fri & Sat, 10am-8pm Sun) Cute as a button from the outside, this start-up bar and restaurant is right on the main street (or as main as you get in this town), where the buses arrive and leave. Tacos and *típica* (regional specialties) dominate the menu. If this is closed there are a few other *comedores* dotted nearby.

Getting There & Away

Santa Lucía is 14km east of Tegucigalpa, 2km uphill from the road leading to Valle de Ángeles and San Juancito. Buses leave every 45 to 60 minutes from an Esso station off Av la Paz, near Hospital San Felipe (see Map pp342-3). Buses leave Tegus every 45 to 60 minutes from 7:30am to 8pm (US\$0.40, 30 minutes). Return buses leave Santa Lucía from 7:30am to 8pm.

Another option is to take the Valle de Angeles bus from the same Hospital San Felipe stop, get off at the crossroads and walk the 2.5km into town.

VALLE DE ÁNGELES

pop 4600

Eight kilometers past Santa Lucía, Valle de Ángeles is another beautiful, former colonial mining town. An official tourist zone, the town has been restored to its original 16th-century appearance in parts, especially around the attractive parque central, where there is a handsome old church. The annual **fair** takes place on October 4.

Artisan souvenir shops line the streets, selling Honduran *artesanías*, including wood carvings, basketry, ceramics, leatherwork, paintings, dolls, wicker and wood furniture. Prices are usually less than in Tegucigalpa. One of the most distinctive artists' displays is one block south of the parque central in a flamboyantly pink building. **Galería Sixtina** (☎ 766 2375; 🕒 10am-6pm) is the brainchild of a classically trained artist who has gathered

artworks and contributed personally to this richly colorful collection. Angels, appropriately enough, are the central theme.

Valle de Ángeles is an easy day trip from Tegucigalpa, but it is also a quiet, relaxing place to stay. It gets busy on weekends and holidays; otherwise, the town is usually quiet.

Sleeping & Eating

Villas del Valle (☎ 766 2534; www.villasdelvalle.com; Carr a San Juancito; s/d US\$13.50/19; 🏠) These simple, neat brick-built cabins a short walk from the center are your best bet for lodging in Valle de Ángeles. The on-site restaurant is open until 6pm, and stays open later as a bar when the place is busier.

Posada del Ángel (☎ 766 2233; s/d US\$20/28; 🏠 📺 📶 🚰) This has a higher opinion of itself than it should. Rooms wrap around a large area, with a pool as the centerpiece. While rooms are perfectly acceptable, service is not particularly warm; you'd expect better for the price. It is two blocks north of the *iglesia*.

Restaurante Turístico (☎ 766 2148; Carr a San Juancito; US\$4-8; 🕒 9am-6pm) The most memorable eating option in town is a short walk above the main turnoff to Valle de Angeles. It is a classic colonial-style restaurant with an attractive terrace and an even better view over the town and valley below. Walk past the Posada del Ángel and keep walking uphill for a kilometer. It may extend its hours for groups in the evening.

On the central park:

Restaurante Jalapeño (mains US\$3-6; 🕒 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Has good veggie options.

El Anafre (☎ 766 2942; mains US\$5.50-12; 🕒 lunch & dinner) Serves up reasonable Italian fare.

Getting There & Away

Colectivo minibuses for Valle de Ángeles (US\$0.75, 30 minutes, 6:45am to 7pm, every 45 minutes) depart from the Esso gas station stop near the Hospital San Felipe in Tegucigalpa. There are also cheaper, slower buses from the same spot (US\$0.55, one hour, hourly). The last return minibus leaves from Valle de Ángeles at 5:45pm.

PARQUE NACIONAL LA TIGRA

A beautiful national park just a short hop from the capital city, **La Tigra** (adult/child US\$10/5; 🕒 8am-4pm Tue-Sun, last entrance 2pm) has a lush cloud forest in former mining country belonging to the American-owned Rosario Mining Company.

The mining scars can still be seen. In 1980 this became Honduras' first national park – it is an essential water supply for the city. It has a great abundance of (elusive) wildlife, from pumas to peccaries, and is a botanist's delight, with lush trees, vines, lichens and large ferns, colorful mushrooms, bromeliads and orchids.

The climate at La Tigra is fresh and brisk; in fact it's often quite cold – bring plenty of warm clothes with you. Long pants and long sleeves are best, as the forest has many mosquitoes.

Information

Amitigra (☎ 238 6269; Edificio Italia, 4th fl, office No 6, Colonia Palmira, Tegucigalpa; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) has information and manages overnight visits to the park. You can pay park/lodging fees here or at the park entrances. La Tigra has two entrances, Jutiapa and El Rosario. There are visitors centers at both entrances, where rangers are always on duty.

Hiking

There are eight trails, all well maintained and easy to follow. It is a rugged, mountainous area – people have been lost for days in the dense forest after they wandered off the trails. Both the Amitigra office and the visitors center have maps of the trails.

The **Sendero Principal** is the busiest and most direct route through the park. It is actually the old disused road leading from Tegucigalpa to the mines and runs 6km from Jutiapa to El Rosario. From Jutiapa, you descend past abandoned mines, small rivers and views over the San Juancito valley before reaching El Rosario. A more appealing trail is to **Sendero La Cascada**, which leads to a 40m waterfall. Coming from Jutiapa, follow the Sendero Principal over 1km to the Sendero La Cascada cut-off, located at a sharp bend in the trail. Descend the steep stone steps and continue another 2km past smaller falls and abandoned mines to a T-intersection: go straight to reach the falls (10 to 20 minutes), or left to reach El Rosario via Sendero La Mina. From El Rosario, **Sendero La Mina** leads you past abandoned mining buildings. Later, there is also a left turnoff to the falls (10 to 20 minutes).

Guides (not really needed) are available to take you along the trails. They are used especially for large groups (per group US\$5 to US\$20).

Sleeping & Eating

Cabaña Mirador El Rosario (☎ 987 5835; s/d US\$15.50/24.50) This has great views, lovely rooms and easy access to the national park. The catch: there are only two rooms, so call ahead. Breakfast and dinner are available (US\$2.25 to US\$3.75).

Eco-Albergue El Rosario (r per adult/child US\$15/10) This visitors center has nine simple rooms with fresh sheets. It is at the park entrance.

Cabañas & Eco-Albergue Jutiapa (per adult/child US\$15/10) This new Jutiapa visitors center was about to open at the time of research. There should be six basic rooms, with a queen-size bed and a twin. Hot water is due to be available.

Both visitors centers have basic **comedores** (mains US\$2.75-3.50; ☒ Jutiapa 7am-6pm Thu-Sun, El Rosario 7am-8pm daily).

Getting There & Away

The western entrance to the park, above Jutiapa, is the closest to Tegucigalpa, 22km away. In Tegus, take a bus (US\$0.70, direct at 9am and 2pm) from the Dippsa gas station on Av Máximo Jérez at Av la Plazuela, across from a Banco Atlántida branch. Other buses (every 45 minutes, from 6am) toward El Hatillo from the same place can usually drop you at Los Planes, a soccer field 2km before the visitors center. On the return trip, a few buses leave from the visitors center, but most leave from Los Planes; the first is at 6am, the last around 3pm. After that you'll need to walk 4km to the next town (Los Limones), where buses run later. A taxi to this entrance from Tegus costs about US\$20.

The eastern park entrance is at El Rosario, overlooking San Juancito, an atmospheric former mining town. From Tegucigalpa, buses to San Juancito (US\$0.75, 1½ hours) leave from Mercado San Pablo (3pm Monday to Friday; 8am, 12:40pm and 3pm Saturday; 8am and 12:40pm Sunday), Valle de Ángeles bus stop, opposite Hospital San Felipe (5pm Monday to Friday), and Supermercado Más x Menos (4:30pm Saturday). From San Juancito, waiting pickup trucks will ferry you the last 4km to the park entrance (US\$8.75, up to 10 people). Or you could walk, but it's very steep.

Buses to Tegus from San Juancito leave from the kiosk on the main road (6am and 6:50am Monday to Friday; 6am, 6:40am, 12:30pm and 2:30pm Saturday; 6:20am Sunday).

WESTERN HONDURAS

People have lived here for millennia, making their marks on the landscape in spectacular ways – most strikingly at the captivating Copán archaeological ruins. Travelers usually whizz from the ruins to the coast via San Pedro Sula, the underappreciated dynamo of the Honduran economy. Yet those who stay rarely regret it. The Montaña de Celaque cloud forests, dazzling Lago Yojoa birdlife, colonial charms of Comayagua and Gracias, and the slow-changing, colorful Ruta de Lenca communities, from Santa Rosa de Copán to Marcala, are all excellent reasons to linger.

The road between San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa is probably the most traveled in Honduras; it's 241km along Honduras' Carretera del Norte (Hwy 1), about a four-hour bus trip. The route passes Comayagua, Siguatepeque, the Lago de Yojoa and the beautiful Pulhapanzak waterfall (about 45 minutes west of the highway by bus).

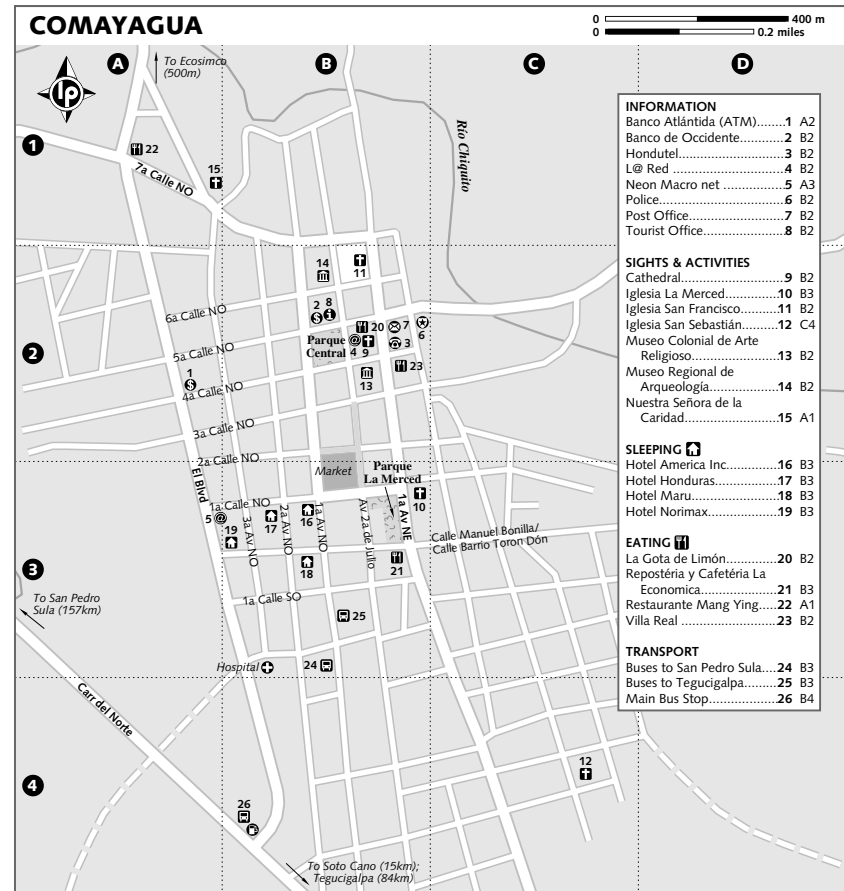
This region, called the Valle de Comayagua, was well settled in pre-Columbian times, and agriculture has been practiced here for at least 3000 years. Fourteen archaeological sites have been identified in the department of Comayagua, and ancient pottery, jewelry and stone carvings have all been unearthed.

COMAYAGUA

pop 61,500

The former religious and political capital of Honduras, Comayagua spent years in the doldrums, harking back to the days when it used to be boss. That's different now – the powers-that-be are finally making the most of the city's many colonial charms. When power shifted southeast to Tegucigalpa in 1880, a legacy of ornate churches, pretty plazas and a grand cathedral remained. Recent makeovers and restorations have breathed new life into these architectural and historical attractions while two good museums provide more reasons to visit.

The city was founded as the capital of Honduras in 1537 by Spanish Captain Alonso de Cáceres, fulfilling the orders of the Spanish governor of Honduras to establish a new settlement in the geographic center of the territory. The town was initially called Villa de



Santa María de Comayagua; in 1543 the name was changed to Villa de la Nueva Valladolid de Comayagua.

Comayagua was declared a city in 1557, and in 1561 the seat of the diocese of Honduras was moved from Trujillo to Comayagua because of its more favorable conditions, central position and closer proximity to the silver- and gold-mining regions. The religious history means it is an excellent place to witness **Semana Santa** celebrations. On the morning of Good Friday, religious images are carried in a street procession, over intricate carpets of colored sawdust.

An important source of income for the town is Soto Cano, an air base used by the US military. Better known as La Palmerola,

it formed a base for 2000 US soldiers during the 1980s when the Contra war was raging in Nicaragua. Since then, it's been converted to a Honduran base – or that's the official line – with about 550 American military personnel stationed there holding the Central American fort.

The base's strategic importance received a boost in 1999 when US bases were closed in Panama.

Orientation

Like most Honduran towns, life centers around the parque central, which has been tastefully refurbished with gardens, benches and piped-in music. Comayagua is walkable, though the area between the parque central

and the hotels can feel lonely after dark. Solo travelers should consider taking a cab home if it's late.

Streets are also defined according to the compass: ie: NO for *noroeste* (northwest), NE for *noreste* (northeast), SO for *suroeste* (southwest), SE for *sureste* (southeast).

Information

EMERGENCY

Police (☎ 772 0080)

Red Cross (☎ 195, 772 0290)

INTERNET ACCESS

L@ Red (☎ 772 5041; Parque Central; ☎ 8am-10pm)

Convenient internet access for US\$1.15 per hour. Also has calls to the US for US\$0.11 per minute.

Neon Macro.net (☎ 772 2418; 1a Calle NO; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, 8am-9pm Sun) Has slick flatscreens. Also does cheap phone calls (per minute to the USA US\$0.10).

MONEY

Most banks and other services are clustered around the parque central.

Banco Atlántida (Parque Central) Has a Visa/Plus ATM machine.

Banco de Occidente (Parque Central) Changes Visa and Amex traveler's checks.

POST & TELEPHONE

These are together behind the cathedral:

Hondutel (1a Av NE btwn 4a & 5a Calles NO;

☎ 7am-9pm)

Post office (1a Av NE btwn 4a & 5a Calles NO;

☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 11am Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Ecosimco (Ecosistema Montaña de Comayagua;

☎ 772 4681; ecosimco@hondutel.hn; Camara de Comercio; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri) Manages the Montaña de Comayagua National Park (opposite); 500m north of town. Look for the big green gates.

Tourist office (☎ 772 2028; www.comayagua.hn; Parque Central; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sat, 8am-noon Sun) Sporadically helpful; information on local attractions.

Sights

The **cathedral** (Parque Central; ☎ 7am-8pm) in the center of town is the largest colonial-era place of worship in Honduras. It was built from 1685 to 1715 and is adorned with intricate wooden carvings and gold-plated altars. The main altar is similar to that of the Teguci-

galpa cathedral; both were made by the same (unknown) artist. The clock in the cathedral tower is the oldest in the Americas and one of the oldest in the world. The Moors built it over 800 years ago for the palace of Alhambra in Granada. In 1620 it was donated to the town by King Phillip III of Spain. Look out for the older Roman-style IIII rather than IV on the clockface.

Other fine *iglesias* include **San Francisco** (founded 1560); **San Sebastián** (1580), on the south end of town; and the much remodeled **Nuestra Señora de la Caridad** (7a Calle NO at 3a Av NO; ☎ 7am-8pm), built at the end of the 16th century and used as a place of worship for the local indigenous community. Comayagua's first *iglesia* was **La Merced**. Building started in 1550 and it was consecrated as a cathedral in 1561; the plaza in front is very pretty. Another colonial *iglesia*, San Juan de Dios (1590), was destroyed by an earthquake in 1750, but samples of its artwork are on display in the Museo Colonial. If you read Spanish, look for a small book entitled *Las Iglesias Coloniales de la Ciudad de Comayagua*, which contains an interesting history of Comayagua and its churches. It's available at both museums.

Opened in 1962 the **Museo Colonial de Arte Religioso** (cnr Av 2a de Julio & 4a Calle NE; admission incl guide US\$1.85; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sun) was once the site of the first university in Central America, founded in 1632, and in operation for almost 200 years. Priests have occupied the building even longer, since 1558. Totally renovated in 2005, the museum contains artwork and religious paraphernalia from all five churches of Comayagua, spanning the 16th to the 18th centuries.

A block north of the cathedral, the **Museo Regional de Arqueología** (☎ 772 0386; admission US\$1; ☎ 8:30am-4pm) displays some fine ancient Lenca artifacts, including pottery, *metates* (stone on which grain is ground), stone carvings and petroglyphs. Descriptions are in English and Spanish. It is housed in a former presidential palace.

Sleeping

Hotel Maru (☎ 772 1311; cnr Calle Manuel Bonilla & 1a Av NO; r with/without bathroom US\$6.60/5.30) The rooms are very neat and face out onto a long courtyard here. Shared bathrooms are not pretty – shell out an extra dollar for a private one, but don't expect anything apart from an open pipe for your shower. Bring your own toilet paper.

Red-brick rooms provide some protection from the heat.

Hotel America Inc (☎ 772 0530; fax 772 0009; cnr 1a Av NO & 1a Calle NO; s/d US\$8.25/11.50, with air-con US\$12.25/18.25; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This hotel has delusions of grandeur, but the good-sized rooms are comfortable enough despite some unnecessary flourishes. They come equipped with cable TV; there's also a swimming pool and reasonable restaurant on site.

Hotel Honduras (☎ 772 1877; cnr 2a Av NO & 1a Calle NO; s/d with fan US\$10.80/12) Painted green and arranged along a narrow passageway, the rooms lack natural light, but the beds and the private bathrooms are clean enough.

Hotel Norimax (☎ 772 1210; cnr Calle Manuel Bonilla & El Blvd; s/d with fan US\$10.75/12.50, with air-con US\$13.50/16.30; ☎ ☎) Three floors of characterful, spotless rooms, with varnished doors and wooden bedsteads, are a very reasonable deal, though the bathrooms are cramped. All rooms have cable TV, and purified water is free.

Eating

La Gota de Limón (☎ 715 0627; tacos US\$2, fajitas US\$7; ☎ 11am-2am Mon-Sun) Fajitas and tacos are served on ruby tablecloths, there is colonial-style slate tiling, and a breezy outdoor patio above a mango tree – this Mexican restaurant has

plenty of charm. It is just around the corner from the parque central. It doubles as a lively bar in the evening.

Villa Real (☎ 715 0101; 1a Av NE btwn 4a & 3a Calles NO; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) This was closed when we passed through so we couldn't check it out. However, the restaurant has a handsome old colonial setting and a reputation for dishing up some of the finest Honduran cuisine around.

Repostería y Cafetería La Económica (☎ 772 2331; 1a Av NE, Parque la Merced; dishes US\$3-5; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Sat) Cakes and lovely slushes (cappuccino US\$0.60) are the order of the day at this café in an old colonial building. It's in a prize location overlooking the charming Plaza Merced.

Restaurante Mang Ying (☎ 772 0567; cnr 7a Calle NO & El Blvd; dishes US\$4-8; ☎ 9:30am-10:30pm) Popular among locals, this continues the Central American Chinese-restaurant tradition of serving way more than you could ever eat. If you haven't eaten for about two days, order the Chop Suey Mang Ying, a mound of noodles, veggies, chicken, beef and shrimp.

Getting There & Away

Comayagua is about 1km east of the highway. To and from Tegucigalpa, Transportes El Rey (US\$1.75, 1½ hours) stops at the Texaco gas

EXPLORE MORE AROUND COMAYAGUA

Visitors to Comayagua need not look far for cloud-forest escapes or ancient ruins.

- **Parque Nacional Montaña de Comayagua** (30,000 hectares) has two main trails leading through the cloud forest, from near the small village of Río Negro, 42km north of Comayagua, to waterfalls (no bathing). The park is managed by Ecosimco (opposite). Simple bunk-bed accommodation (☎ 990 0802) is available at the house of Don Avilio Velásquez in Río Negro. You can hire a guide (recommended) in Río Negro. Pickup trucks to Río Negro (US\$1.75, four hours) leave from the south side of the Comayagua market at 11am, noon and 1pm.
- **Yarumela**, on the Río Humuya, between Comayagua and La Paz, consists of two major, mostly unexcavated, archaeological mounds. There is one significant reconstruction revealing a step pyramid with several platforms. Lencans are believed to have lived here around 2000 years ago. To get there, take a bus to La Paz, off the Tegucigalpa-San Pedro Sula highway. Taxis from La Paz cost about US\$11 round-trip. If you have a vehicle, take the turnoff from the main CA-5 highway toward La Paz and go over the Río Humuya. Just before you come to a roundabout, follow a dirt road off to the right until you arrive at the site, a large mound on the right side of the road.
- **Tenampua**, constructed much later than Yarumela, around AD 1000 to 1100 at a time of war, is prime lookout territory, and a good defense stronghold. Its features include a ball court (possibly a sign of Maya influence), walls and more unexcavated mounds. The site is about 20km south of Comayagua. From there, take a Tegucigalpa-bound bus and ask the driver to let you off at the *sendero* (trail) for Tenampua; it's on the east side of the highway, just north of Restaurant Aquarios. The climb is steep and takes 1½ hours.

station at the highway turnoff, roughly 12 blocks from the *centro*. Transportes Catrachos (US\$1.60, two hours, every 30 minutes) has a downtown terminal, although its station in Tegucigalpa is away from the center in a sketchy area. Transportes Rivera runs to San Pedro Sula (US\$3.10, three hours, hourly 5am to 4pm). Buses to Marcala (US\$2, three hours) leave just outside the Rivera terminal, departing at 6am, 8am, 10am, noon and 2pm.

Any Tegucigalpa–San Pedro bus will pick you up or drop you off at the turnoff, although you may have to pay the full fare. Check beforehand.

SIGUATEPEQUE

pop 45,260

Siguatepeque is an unremarkable town about halfway between Tegucigalpa (117km) and San Pedro Sula (124km), roughly two hours from both. It is known for its pleasant climate. You may want to stop at Siguatepeque to break your journey, although Comayagua is more interesting.

Orientation & Information

There are two squares in town. From the main highway 2km away, the first one you get to is dusty Plaza San Pablo, with basketball courts and the market. Three blocks east is the much more attractive parque central.

Banco Atlántida (Plaza San Pablo) Changes American Express traveler's checks.

Banco del Occidente (Plaza San Pablo) Near the plaza's southeast corner and now has an ATM.

Plaz@net (Plaza San Pablo; per hr US\$0.80; ☎ 8am–9pm Mon–Sat, noon–7pm Sun) You can also make international calls.

Police (☎ 773 0042)

Sleeping

Hotel Boarding House Central (☎ 773 0108; Parque Central; s/d/tr with TV US\$11/13.50/16.25) It does not look much from the outside, but the rooms are nicely kept and the management is friendly. It is well located on the parque central and has an airy central area.

Hotel Gómez (☎ 773 0868; Calle 21 de Junio; s/d fan & TV US\$8.10/12.10; ♿) Simple rooms have wooden bed-frames with attractive headboards while the bathrooms boast real shower heads and hot water. There is also cable TV.

Hotel Sand River (☎ 773 3378; Parque Central; s/d US\$7.30/14.50) Its walls could do with a white-wash and the bathrooms are cramped, but the 2nd-floor rooms have a pretty location overlooking the attractive parque central. Rooms include cable TV.

Eating

Several cheap *comedores* are between the plaza and the central park.

Pollos Kike No 1 (☎ 773 1281; Calle 21 de Junio; mains US\$3; ☎ 9am–9pm) Next door to Pizzeria Venezia, this place serves simpler fare (you can choose between chicken and chips, and, er, chicken and chips). Plates are stacked high and the setting is pleasant.

Chicken's Friends (☎ 773 1122; Parque Central; dishes US\$3; ☎ 9am–9:30pm) Chicken could use some

new friends here – chopped up, fried and served for three bucks a plate.

Iguana Mía (☎ 773 4955; Calle 21 de Agosto; dishes US\$2–6; ☎ 7am–8:30pm) Popular with expats and volunteers, this vibrant Mexican restaurant has an eclectic menu with large portions.

Pizzeria Venezia (☎ 773 2999; Calle 21 de Junio; dishes US\$3.50–5.50; ☎ 9am–9pm) As well as excellent authentic pizzas, this venue dishes up good sandwiches with all the trimmings. It has outdoor seating and a simple interior with classic red-check tablecloths.

Getting There & Away

Most buses going between Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula will drop you on the main highway. A taxi into town costs US\$1.90 or you can walk the 2km to the center.

Buses depart from an open lot a block west of Plaza San Pablo. Frequent departures run to San Pedro Sula from 4:35am to 4pm (US\$2.50), while direct buses leave for Tegucigalpa every hour or even more often, from 4am to 5pm (US\$2.20, 2½ hours, 117km).

There are also buses to La Esperanza (US\$2) at 5:10am, 6:15am and 7am, which leave half a block west of the plaza in front of the Hospedaje Central (the owners operate the service).

LA ESPERANZA

pop 5480

Up in the highlands, slow-paced La Esperanza is known for its markets. The Lenca influence is strong here – you will see many women wearing the distinctive, colorful Lenca head dress. Don't forget your woolies – this is the highest town in Honduras and the cold can bite. In fact, the climate here allows a huge variety of fruits and vegetables to be grown, from strawberries to peaches and apples. La Esperanza is the capital of the Intibucá department, one of the poorest in Honduras, and attracts a large number of foreign volunteers, from Christian groups building latrines to general practitioners helping out in area clinics.

Orientation & Information

West is uphill in this town. There are few street names or numbers, but just about everything is on the main street or on the parallel street. The bus terminal is on the main road near the bottom of the hill, the parque central at the top. An old, slightly dilapidated church is on the east side. Check your email at **Brassa-**

vola.Net (Parque Central; per hr US\$0.85; ☎ 9am–8pm) on the south side of the parque central. Hondutel and the post office are on the west of the same block, side by side like an old married couple. On the hill at the far western end of town is **La Gruta**, a small cave now converted into a chapel. For more on the tourist possibilities in the area, ask for Margoth López at the Restaurant La Hacienda.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Mejía Batres (☎ 783 7086; s/d with fold-up bed & shared bathroom US\$4.30/7.60, tr with bathroom & TV US\$16.20) Very convenient (just one block west of the parque central), this hotel has simple, clean rooms, especially the triples. Think twice about sharing a bathroom – flip-flops may not be enough.

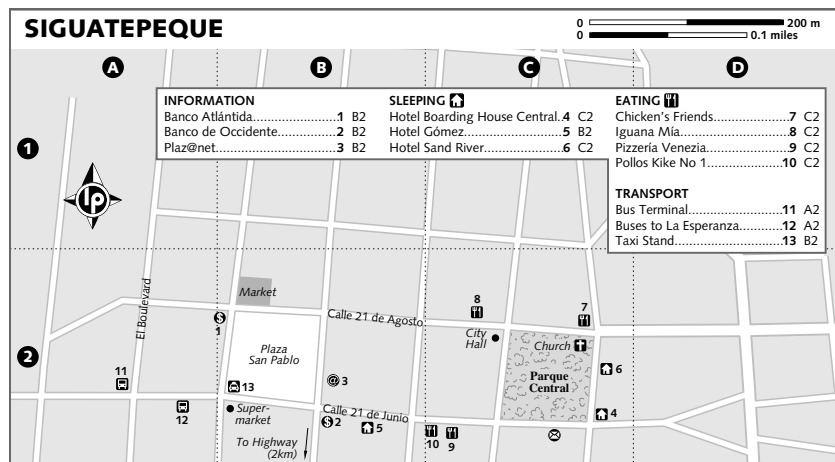
Casa Mia Hostal (☎ 783 3778; s/d/tr US\$9.75/18.40/22.70) Brand-new rooms without a hint of wear and tear also boast hot-water showers, enough space to swing a couple of cats (if you are so inclined) and a sweet little downstairs *comedor* (called Delis House) for those peckish moments. It is on the road that runs east to west, a block north of the parque central.

Restaurant La Hacienda (☎ 783 0244; mains US\$3–6; ☎ 9am–10pm) A block west of the square, this is the most atmospheric place in town. The tables indoors are in a cute little dining room, liberally decorated with Lenca ceramics and tapestries, while the outdoor seating area is just as sweet. La Esperanza is not a hotspot for inventive cuisine and this is no different – choose from standard grills and tortilla fare.

Opalaca's (☎ 783 0503; dishes US\$3–7; ☎ 10:30am–9:30pm) This place specializes in grills, which arrive sizzling in front of you. The colonial setting is handsome, although we wished they would turn some heating on and the terrible elevator-style piped music off. It is just west of the parque central.

Getting There & Away

Terminals are scattered in three different places, in the Honduran manner beloved of travelers and guidebook writers. For Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, head to the **Transportes Carolina** (☎ 783 0521) terminal at the eastern end of town beyond the bridge. Buses to Marcala, Gracias and San Juan leave from a dirt lot by the *estadio* (stadium). Other local buses leave from the *mercado quemado* (burned market), a couple of blocks down



DISCOVER LENCA TRADITIONS

La Ruta Lenca, a series of villages stretching from Santa Rosa de Copán to Marcala and into El Salvador with a colorful indigenous presence, offers visitors the chance to learn about an array of deities, spirits and animals. These figure in the traditional Lenca *cosmovisión*, which offers the culture's explanation of the universe.

Shamans and healers play important roles in Lenca communities, each performing specific rituals and ceremonies. Animal sacrifice is sometimes practiced. Many modern Lenca communities have municipal governments, as well as an Alcaldía Auxiliar de la Vara Alta – who acts as a liaison between Lencans and the 'official' city government.

Animals often represent different qualities. Some communities still sprinkle ash around the house where a child is born; the animal that leaves its prints there will be the child's *nahual* (companion and protector) for life.

A few Lenca towns still practice the *guancasco*, a fascinating annual ceremony that confirms peace and friendship between neighbors. *Guancascos* take many forms, but typically include traditional costumes, processions and an elaborate exchange of greetings, statues of saints and other symbolic rites, including some introduced from Catholicism. The towns of **Yamaranguila** and **La Campa**, both on the **Ruta Lenca**, host *guancascos*.

from the central park. A ride around town to the terminals costs US\$0.70.

Some destinations: Gracias (US\$3.30, four hours, departs at noon, but arrive early as the minibus leaves when full); Marcala (US\$1.75, 1½ hours, at 6:15am, 11:15am and 1pm); San Juan (US\$1.70, two hours, at 11:30am, 2:15pm and 4:30pm); San Pedro Sula (US\$4.35, 3½ hours, six departures between 4:30am and 1:30pm); take any San Pedro or Tegucigalpa bus to Siguatepeque (US\$2.25, 1½ hours); and Tegucigalpa (US\$4.40, 3½ hours, nine departures between 4:15am and 2pm).

Pickups to San Juan and Gracias are also an option.

MARCALA

pop 10,700

Marcala is a highland town with a strong indigenous heritage – it lies at the southern end of Honduras' Ruta Lenca. Although it looks unremarkable, the town is in prime coffee country – and there are several opportunities to see the world's favorite bean being harvested and prepared. Several hikes in the surrounding area take in picturesque waterfalls and caves.

Orientation & Information

There are no street names in Marcala. Orient yourself at the central park. The town hall is on the west side, while there is a small church to the north. One block northeast of the park are the post office and Hondutel. Just along from them is BanhCafé bank, which changes

small amounts of American cash. Several internet cafés are around town.

Cooperativa RAOS (☎ 764 5181) At this place, Miriam Elizabeth Pérez (Betty) is a mine of information on local sights.

Glob@l online (per hr US\$1.10; ☎ 9am-8pm) Internet access, near the buses to La Esperanza (one block east and two north of the parque central).

Police (☎ 764 5715)

Tourist office (☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Thu-Tue) With a slate-tiled roof, this office stands in the southeast corner of the parque central.

Activities

La Estanzuela is one of several hikes in the area, going to a pretty waterfall and a cavern, **La Cueva del Gigante**, which has prehistoric paintings. It is on the way to La Esperanza. Ask how to get there at the tourist office.

Cooperativa RAOS (☎ 764 5181; tours per person US\$5-13.50; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat), half a block north of the parque central, is Honduras' first organic farming cooperative. It sells its produce (excellent, as this author can personally vouch) and can arrange plantation tours.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel San Miguel (☎ 764 5793; r US\$8.10; (P)) A friendly, family-run guesthouse with bare rooms, electric showers and a cheap little *comedor* that uses a wood-fired oven for cooking. It also serves strong regional coffee. It's two blocks north then 2½ blocks east of the parque central, just beyond a whitewashed church.

Hotel Jerusalén Medina (☎ 764 5909; s/d US\$13.65/17;

(P)) Less personal but more upscale, this hotel has three floors facing a concrete car park. The rooms are well kept, with thick bedspreads and private bathrooms. It is one block north and two blocks east of the central park.

Casa Gloria (☎ 764 5869; dishes US\$2.50-4; ☎ 9am-9pm) At the southwestern corner of the park, this stately terracotta-colored spot offers buffet meals and service with a smile, in an old colonial-style house decorated with some fine Lenca ceramics.

Getting There & Away

Buses bound for San Miguel, El Salvador (US\$3.50, 5½ hours), via Perquín (US\$2.50, three hours), leave from a block west of the park at 5am and noon. There should be no fee to leave or enter Honduras, although other border posts do charge. The Honduran immigration office was closed when we crossed so it was free, but it might be different when open. There is no Salvadoran immigration post.

To get to Tegucigalpa, Transportes Lila, 1½ blocks east of the park, has departures at 8:45am, 10:30am and 2pm (US\$2.90, four hours). The 8:45am service is *ejecutivo* (luxury class) and costs US\$3.50. For San Pedro Sula, the same company has one service at 5:15am (US\$4, five hours).

Buses to La Esperanza (US\$1.60) leave at 6:45am, 11:15pm and 3pm from the basketball court across from BanhCafé, although this bus can be unreliable. Pickups from the Texaco gas station on the main highway turnoff outside of town are the alternative, and charge the same. Buses to Comayagua (US\$1.80, 2½ hours) leave from two blocks east and one block south of the park at 6:30am, 8am, 11am, 1pm and 3pm, or you can connect in La Paz.

CUEVAS DE TAULABÉ

On the highway about 25km north of Siguatepeque and 20km south of the Lago de Yojoa is the entrance to the **Cuevas de Taulabé** (CA-5 Hwy, Km 140; adult/child US\$2/0.55; ☎ 8am-5pm), a network of underground caves with unusual stalactite and stalagmite formations. The entrance fee includes a guide. A tip may get you to some of the less visited areas. So far, the caves have been explored to a depth of 12km with no end in sight.

The first section of the caves have lights and a cement pathway; the pathway can be slippery, so wear appropriate shoes.

LAGO DE YOJOA

This picturesque lake lies 157km north of Tegucigalpa and 84km south of San Pedro Sula. It is a popular beauty spot with abundant birdlife. There are some spectacular wildlife-spotting opportunities, especially on the less developed west side, where there is also an excellent place to stay with its own micro-brewery. More than 400 different bird species – over half the total in Honduras – have been spotted around the lake. One birder counted 37 different species in a single tree while sitting on his hotel terrace in the morning. Quetzals are also regularly sighted around here.

Fishing on the lake is good, especially black bass. Bring your own tackle, as it might not be available locally. Hotels around the lake can arrange boat trips.

The **Asociación de Municipios del Lago de Yojoa y su Área de Influencia** (Amuprolago; www.lagodeyojoa.info; ☎ 963 7335, 988 2300; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) may be a mouthful, but it is useful, with detailed current information about the lake and surrounding areas. It is just south of the town of Monte Verde.

Sleeping & Eating

D&D Bed & Breakfast and Micro Brewery (☎ 396 1279, 994 9719; www.dd-brewery.com; s/d US\$8.70/11.90; camping per person US\$2.20, cabins from US\$21.60; ☎ ☎) Oregonian brewmaster Robert Dale set up this highly original and attractive place to stay, 2km from Peña Blanca, where accommodations vary from camping to an upscale cabin with Jacuzzi. The lush gardens have 73 different orchid species, while the on-site microbrewery produces some of Honduras' best beers. The good outdoor restaurant has homemade coffee and sodas. Oh, and you don't have to close your mouth when you shower – the running water is purified here, a legacy of the brewing process. Bird-spotting tours (US\$20 to US\$25) – either to the lake or spectacular Parque Nacional Montaña Santa Bárbara – can also be organized. The Mochito bus from the main San Pedro Sula terminal drops you at the entrance.

Hotel Agua Azul (☎ 991 7244; hotelaquaazul@emv.hn; r with fan/air-con US\$20/29; (P) ☎) There is a fine restaurant and a pool with a lake panorama to go with the simple, clean wooden cabins at the Agua Azul. It's on the north side of the lake, 3km from the main highway.

El Cortijo del Lago (☎ 608 5527; johmacher@yahoo.com; dm US\$5.50, cabañas US\$11-16, r US\$22-27) In a

EXPLORE MORE AROUND LAGO DE YOJOA

Pulhapanzak is a short (17.5km) hop from Lago de Yojoa. With a little more effort, you can get to more remote but rewarding ruins and mountainous wildlife refuges.

- **Pulhapanzak**, a magnificent 43m waterfall on the Río Lindo, is an easy day trip from San Pedro (60km away), surrounded by some lush, well-preserved forest. It's a popular spot for swimming and can be crowded on weekends and holidays. You can camp here if you have your own gear. Entry to the area costs US\$1.65. From San Pedro, take a bus to Mochito (US\$1.65, one hour) and ask the driver to let you off at San Buenaventura. From there it is a well-marked 15-minute walk. The last bus back passes through San Buenaventura around 4pm.
- **Parque Eco-Arqueológico Los Naranjos** (☎ 650 0004; admission US\$5.40), northwest of the lake, was first occupied around 600 or 700 BC, and is thought to be the largest Lencan archaeological site. Excavation is still in its initial stages. The park includes trails for viewing semi-excavated ruins and to observe plants and wildlife, particularly birds. The D&D Bed & Breakfast (p359) is close to the park and can arrange guided tours.
- East of the lake (and across the highway), **Parque Nacional Cerro Azul Meambar** (☎ 608 5510, in Tegucigalpa 773 2027; www.paghonduras.org/pancam.html; admission US\$2) is a well-equipped and underexplored park with kilometers of trails leading to waterfalls, caves with ancient artifacts and untouched cloud forest. There is also a visitors center with dorm lodging, and camping gear is available for rent. The park entrance is down a turnoff from La Guama on the main CA-5 highway. Frequent pickups head to Santa Elena. From there, walking to the park's Los Pinos Lodge takes about one hour.
- West of the lake, isolated **Parque Nacional Santa Bárbara** contains Honduras' second-highest peak, **Montaña de Santa Bárbara** (2744m). You will need a guide to visit the park, which is only minimally developed. To visit head to the town of San Luis Planes; a bus to San Luis Planes leaves Peña Blanca at 10:30am daily. Once there, ask for **Adán Teruel** (☎ 674 3304), who is known as the best guide in the area (US\$8 to US\$10 per day). He can sort out lodging too. You can also arrange tours at D&D Bed & Breakfast (see p359).

lovely setting right on the lake, this new option has a restaurant with good vegetarian options, as well as canoes and sailboats for rent. The dorms are unflashy, but tidy and well kept. Make sure you check out the sun-room upstairs. El Cortijo is 2km from the La Guama turnoff.

Getting There & Away

The easiest access to the lake is from San Pedro Sula. Get a bus to El Mochito from the main terminal (US\$1.60, 1½ hours, every 45 minutes) to San Buenaventura (where the Pulhapanzak Falls are located; see above) and Los Naranjos.

The last bus back to San Pedro Sula leaves about 4pm. From the north side of the lake, change in Peña Blanca. From Tegucigalpa, get a San Pedro Sula-bound bus to La Guama. From there, take a bus or pickup from the left-hand turnoff toward Peña Blanca (US\$0.50, every 25 minutes) where you can make your connection.

SANTA BÁRBARA

pop 15,800

About 53km west of Lago de Yojoa, Santa Bárbara, capital of the department of the same name, is a medium-sized colonial-era town with a striking cathedral. The large **Boarding House Moderno** (☎ 643 2203; s/d with fan US\$8/12, with air-con US\$13.50/19) has spacious but slightly dated rooms. All have cable TV.

You will have your most memorable meal at **Mesón Casa Blanca** (☎ 643 2839; mains US\$2.50-3.50; ☎ 7am-8:30pm). It is like eating in a family home in a time warp, with stuffed deer heads and old photos on the wall. Typical Honduran dishes are served.

Roads connect Santa Bárbara with the Tegucigalpa-San Pedro Sula and the San Pedro Sula-Nueva Ocotepeque highways. You can get a bus directly to Tegucigalpa from Santa Bárbara (202km) with Los Junqueños bus company, which has its own terminal 1½ blocks north of the parque central. From the main terminal, one block west of the parque

central, buses run every half hour to San Pedro Sula until 5pm (US\$2.50, 1½ to two hours, 94km).

SAN PEDRO SULA

pop 516,700

San Pedro Sula might play second fiddle to Tegucigalpa in terms of population and political matters, but when it comes to business and industry, it calls the shots. Often simply called San Pedro, the city is Honduras' economic engine-room, generating almost two-thirds of the country's GDP. Its airport is the country's most modern. Its restaurants and nightlife arguably outstrip those of the capital. Unfortunately, its gangland crime is also on a par.

Part of San Pedro's economic success is geographical: Exports are handled easily with the port of Puerto Cortés under an hour away. San Pedro originally made its wealth from bananas or *oro verde* (green gold) as locals call it. However, in 1998 flooding caused by Hurricane Mitch wiped out many of the plantations. Currently San Pedro makes its readies from the *maquila* (clothes-weaving) factories. The industry is not without controversy – high-profile cases in the US have highlighted some dubious sweatshop practices. There is little doubt, however, that the business is a vital source of income for many *sanpedranos* (residents of San Pedro).

San Pedro is extremely hot and humid from around April to September. The rainy season runs from May to November.

Orientation

Downtown San Pedro is circled by a highway bypass, the Circunvalación, which is lined with shopping malls, restaurants and banks. Within that circle, central San Pedro is flat with *avenidas* (avenues) running north-south and *calles* running east-west. The numbering begins where Primera (1a) Av crosses 1a Calle. From there the numbered *avenidas* and *calles* extend out in every direction: northeast (noreste, or NE), northwest (noroeste, or NO), southeast (sureste, or SE) or southwest (suroeste, or SO).

Every address has a numbered *calle* or *avenida* and is further specified by its quadrant. As ever, the bustling parque central marks the hub of the city.

The spectacular Merendón mountain chain looms to the west.

GETTING INTO TOWN FROM THE AIRPORT

San Pedro's Villeda Morales Airport, the largest and most modern in the country, is about 15km east of town. Coming from the airport, there is no direct bus but you can get a taxi just to the airport turnoff (US\$3) and catch a bus into town. Otherwise, taxi cost about US\$8 from the airport to town (but US\$7 going the other way).

Information

BOOKSTORES

The **Pipas y Puros** (Parque Central) tobacco shop in the Gran Hotel Sula has a small selection of expensive magazines in English, and sometimes has day-old US newspapers.

EMERGENCY

Tourist police (☎ 550 3472; cnr 12a Av NO & 1a Calle O; ☎ 24hr)

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet y Más (5a Calle SO btwn 7a & 8a Av SO; per hr US\$0.80; ☎ 8:30am-7pm Mon-Sat)

Servicio Multiple (cnr 3a Calle SO & 5a Av SO; per hr US\$0.55; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat) Cheapest internet in town is up a narrow staircase.

MONEY

The city's malls have banks with ATMs, and there's one at the Hedman Alas bus station.

BAC/Credomatic (5a Av NO btwn 1a & 2a Calles NO; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat) Exchanges traveler's checks and has a Unibanc ATM. Also has a branch with ATM at the airport.

Banco Atlántida (Parque Central) This bank changes traveler's checks and has an ATM.

LAUNDRY

Lavandería Lavamatic (8a Av NO btwn 2a & 3a Calles NO; per lb US\$0.40; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat)

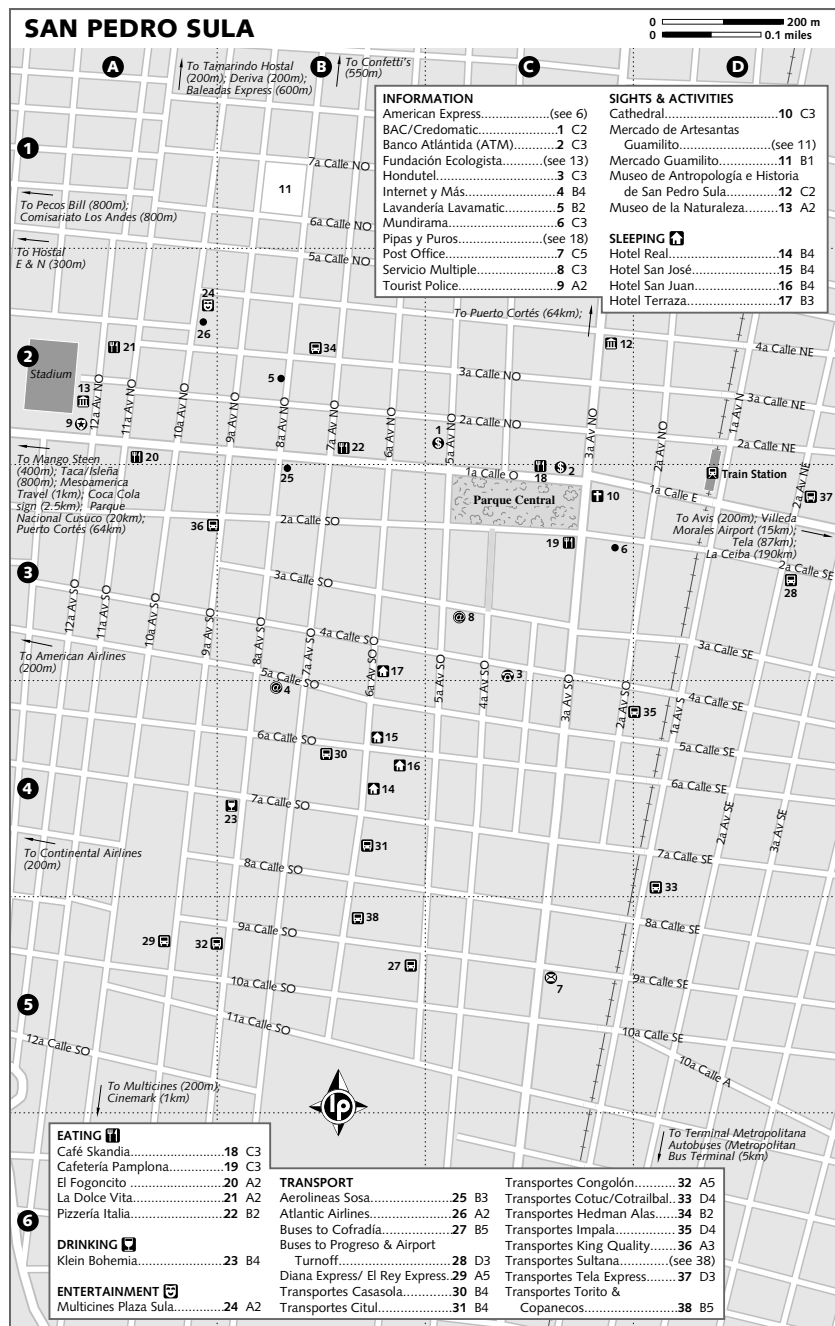
POST

Post office (9a Calle & 3a Av SO; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

TELEPHONE

Hondutel (4a Av SO & 4a Calle SO; ☎ 7am-8:30pm) Expensive local and international phone service.

Servicio Multiple (cnr 3a Calle SO & 5a Av SO; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat) Good-value internet-based phone calls (to Europe US\$0.20).



TOURIST INFORMATION

Fundación Ecologista (☎ 557 6598; 12a Av NO at 1a Calle NO; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Sat) Best place to go for information on Parque Nacional Cusuco.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Mesoamerica Travel (☎ 557 8447; www.mesoamerica-travel.com; 8a Calle & 32a Avenida NO) Helpful, professional and knowledgeable; does interesting upscale tours, including a trip to a banana plantation.

Mundirama (☎ 552 3400; Edificio Martínez Valenzuela, 2a Calle SE) Located south of the cathedral, this is a travel agency and American Express agent; will hold mail for six months for Amex card and check users.

Dangers & Annoyances

San Pedro Sula is a very dynamic city with a lot going for it. It also has a serious crime and gang problem. Mostly it is gang member on gang member and travelers rarely get caught up. However, do be cautious. Avoid being flashy with your belongings (save the iPod for the long-distance bus journey) and dress with restraint (save the shorts for the beach). Taxis are a good idea, especially after dark. Downtown is dodgy after nightfall, as is the area east and south of it (where many of the budget hotels are). If you are confronted by muggers, the safest thing to do is cooperate.

San Pedro also bears the unfortunate label of the AIDS capital of Central America. Practicing safe sex is always important, and nowhere more so than here.

Sights & Activities

San Pedro's **cathedral**, which overlooks the parque central, is quite an ugly, blocky building, built in 1949, with scuffed yellow paint within. It is unkept but a haven of peace away from the street noise. The fine **Museo de Antropología e Historia de San Pedro Sula** (☎ 557 1874; cnr 3a Av NO & 4a Calle NO; admission US\$2; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon & Wed-Sat, 9am-3pm Sun) walks visitors through the history of the Valle de Sula from its pre-Columbine days to the modern era. It exhibits hundreds of archaeological artifacts in excellent condition, from the surrounding valley. Signage is in English and Spanish. Its entrance is 'guarded' by two large obsolete cannons.

The **Museo de la Naturaleza** (☎ 557 6598; 1a Calle O near 12a Av NO; admission US\$1.10; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) has academic Spanish-language exhibits covering everything from paleontology to ecology.

Look west in San Pedro Sula, and your eyes will inevitably be drawn to the giant **Coca-Cola sign** up in the hills. Walking up there is a fine trek (three hours there and back at a leisurely pace). There is an excellent panorama of San Pedro and its green streets as a reward. To get there, simply follow 1a Calle west until it turns to the right and crosses a bridge. After the bridge, turn left at 2a Calle, go past an entrance barrier and carry on climbing. Your surroundings swiftly change from city to jungle. Amusingly, the **pulpería** (corner store) just beyond the giant letters only sells one type of cola drink: Pepsi.

In the last week of June, San Pedro celebrates a large **festival** in honor of its founding and the day of San Pedro.

Sleeping

San Pedro's budget options are mostly in a downtown area that gets dodgy after dark. There is now also an excellent hostel in a good part of town.

Hostal Tamarindo (☎ 557 0123; www.tamarindohostel.com; 9a Calle A btwn 10a & 11a Avs NO; dm US\$8, r with air-con US\$25; (P) (W) (A)) A very welcome addition to the San Pedro accommodation scene, this friendly, colorful, safe hostel is a bit of a trek from the center but is in one of the best neighborhoods. It has a fresh, funky feel with bright murals, draped international flags and wood carvings. There is a 2nd-floor deck with hammocks, a large common room and a well-equipped kitchen. Rooms come with clean linen and cable TV. The owners are a lively, fun and helpful Honduran couple, who play in an up-and-coming band. English, German and Spanish are spoken.

Hotel San Juan (☎ 553 1488; 6a Calle SO 35-A btwn 5a & 6a Avs SO; d with/without bathroom US\$9.80/5.10) A rabbit warren of a building in the packed, noisy core of town, this is an option if other, better places are full. Mattresses sag, but the basic rooms are kept reasonably clean. Some are windowless, others open onto a terrace.

Hotel San José (☎ 557 1208; 6a Av SO btwn 5a & 6a Calles SO; s/d US\$7.60/10.30) Spartan, charmless medium-sized rooms branch off a long wide corridor. There's not a trimming in sight – it's a bed for the night and nothing more.

Hotel Real (☎ 550 7929; 6a Av btwn 6a & 7a Calle SO; d US\$15.20, with air-con US\$21.60; (P) (W) (A)) Easily the best value, most comfortable and secure of the central options, this hotel has clean rooms with slightly faded décor, all with cable TV.

They look out onto an attractive covered courtyard complete with a thatched bar. Cold water only.

Hotel Terraza (☎ 550 3108; 6a Av SO btwn 4a & 5a Calles SO; s/d US\$13/21.75, r with air-con US\$30; 🏠) Its rooms are airy, although the bright green décor might not be to everyone's taste. Private bathrooms have hot water. There is also a highly recommended, lempira-friendly restaurant that does a mean seafood soup and an excellent breakfast. This is a good central option.

Hostal E & N (☎ 552 5731; www.hostaleyn.com; cnr 5a Calle & 15a Av NO; s/d/tr with breakfast US\$30/32/34; 🏠 🏠 🏠) This is a reasonable option if Hostal Tamarindo is full – it is a little further west in the same good part of town. Rooms can feel a bit small (they pack the beds in) but it includes air-con and hot water. It is a lot better value if you are in a group.

Eating

San Pedro Sula has a wide range of eating places catering to all budgets and a surprisingly broad range of cuisines. Many more upmarket places, as well as US fast-food franchises, are on Circunvalación. There is a whole bunch of cheap and cheerful *comedores* at Mercado Guimilito.

Baleadas Express (☎ 553 6208; 13a Calle NO btwn 11a & 12a Aves NO; meals US\$1-2.50; 🕒 7am-1pm & 4-10:30pm Mon-Sat, 7am-noon Sun) Addictive and exceptionally good-value Honduran fast-food joint – there are no beef burger staples here, just giant *baleadas* with the filling of your choice. And there is plenty to choose from, including good vegetarian options.

Cafetería Pamplona (☎ 550 2639; Parque Central; dishes US\$2-5; 🕒 7am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-8pm Sun) A bit of a San Pedro institution, this is a diner with a Honduran twist. It is good value although service can be offhand. Serves tasty, generously portioned *típica*.

Café Skandia (☎ 552 9999; Gran Hotel Sula, Parque Central; dishes US\$3-5; 🕒 24hr) There are several good reasons to come to this café. It is cheap, bright and central, service is fast and pleasant, and you can have a waffle by an outdoor pool lined with palm trees. And, as a café that never sleeps, you get all sorts of characters passing through, from tourists and businessmen to diplomats and sugar daddies with their 'companions.' It's a slice of life to go with your sandwich.

Pecos Bill (☎ 557 5744; 6a-7a Calles NO & 14 Av NO; mains US\$6-9; 🕒 11am-midnight Tue-Sun, 11am-3pm Mon) This is a strange, very Honduran combination –

a car wash alongside a massive open-air restaurant and bar. It does nothing by halves: from the huge trees that grow through the middle to the big grills that sizzle in front of you. It is run by an ex-professional soccer player and well worth a trek out – although beware the terrible karaoke.

Deriva (☎ 516 1012; 9a Calle btwn 10a & 11a Aves NO; mains US\$5-12; 🕒 noon-9:30pm Mon-Sat) One of the classiest restaurants in Honduras, all soft background music and candlelight, this is the place to come for a blow-out if you are flying home tomorrow. With a specialist wine shop next door, grape is definitely the way to wash down the excellent Peruvian cuisine, although there are (expensive) imported beers on offer too.

Also check out:

La Dolce Vita (☎ 516 1547; 12a Av btwn 2a & 3a Calles NO; cones US\$0.80; 🕒 1-9pm Tue-Sun) Craving proper ice-cream? This supercute little ice-cream parlor is the genuine article, run by a friendly Italian couple. The *gelateria* with myriad flavors is the best way to combat the tropical heat. There are also snacks and a delicatessen.

Pizzería Italia (☎ 550 7094; 1a Calle O & 7a Av NO; dishes US\$4.50-7.30; 🕒 10am-10pm) A garlic waft tempts you as soon as you pass between the two security guards into a cool air-con interior. Pizzas are a luxury in Honduras – these are reasonable, but not particularly cheap.

El Fogoncito (☎ 553 3000; 1a Calle O at 11a Av NO; mains US\$5-10; 🕒 lunch & dinner) Reliable Tex-Mex is dished up at this popular Mexican restaurant. Its cantina style includes all the usual suspects from tacos to fajitas, as well as some more adventurous options. The bar makes it a good drinking option too.

Comisariato Los Andes (Av Circunvalación; 6a Calle NO; 🕒 8am-8:30pm) A supermarket good for cheap supplies.

Drinking & Nightlife

Klein Bohemia (☎ 552 3172; www.kleinbohemia.com; 7a Calle SO at 8a Av SO; 🕒 4:30pm-midnight Wed-Sat) Set up by Swiss expats who have since moved on, this central boho oasis is still going strong. Its bleak downtown setting is not promising, but appearances are deceptive. Venture to the upstairs bar, and you will find a cultured, young crowd. There are regular live bands and showings of independent films.

Mango Steen (22a Av btwn 1a & 2a Calle NO; 🕒 lunch, 6pm-midnight Mon-Sat) Modern lounge bar meets tropical garden here in this sleek nightclub that doubles as a Thai food restaurant. It attracts an international crowd. It is just beyond the Circunvalación – look for the sign on 1a Calle.

Confetti's (Av Circunvalación, near 7a Av NO; cover US\$2-5; 🕒 9pm-3am Tue-Thu, to 5am Fri-Sun) This is one of

the most enduring nightclubs in San Pedro Sula. House and techno keep the dance floor shaking.

Entertainment

There are many places around town, including Klein Bohemia (opposite), that show films. **Multicines Plaza Sula** (10a Av NO btwn 3a & 4a Calles NO) shows fairly recent Hollywood flicks for US\$2.20.

Mall theaters include **Cinemark** (City Mall) and **Multicines** (Multiplaza Mall) with tickets for US\$2 to US\$3.

Shopping

Mercado Guamilito (8a & 9a Aves & 6a & 7a Calles NO; 🕒 7am-5pm Mon-Sat, 7am-noon Sun) is a huge market that runs the gamut of stalls from fruits and vegetables to household goods, tailors, and shoe-repairers. At the front, it also houses the **Mercado de Artesanías Guamilito**, with a wide selection of arts, handicrafts and gifts from all over Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Aeropuerto Internacional Ramón Villeda Morales is 15km east of San Pedro Sula (about a US\$12 taxi ride). It is a larger, busier airport than the one serving Tegucigalpa. It is served by daily direct flights to all major cities in Central America; and several to US cities. Domestically it has flights to Tegucigalpa, La Ceiba and the Bay Islands.

International airlines:

American Airlines (☎ 553 3508, at airport 668 3244; Edificio Banco Fichosa, Av Circunvalación at 5a Calle SO)

Continental (☎ 557 4141, airport 668 3208; Edificio Versailles, Av Circunvalación btwn 7a & 7a A Calles SO)

TACA (☎ 550 8222, airport 668 3292; fax 668 3333; Av Circunvalación 13 at 13a Av NO)

Domestic airlines:

Atlantic Airlines (☎ 557 2720, airport 668 7310; Plaza Monaco, 10a Av NO)

Aerolíneas Sosa (☎ /fax 550 6545 & 550 6548; 1a Calle O btwn 7a & 8a Av SO; 🕒 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

Isleña (☎ 516 1061, airport 668 3333; Av Circunvalación 13 at 13a Av NO)

BUS

San Pedro is a major land transportation hub; see p366 for details of major bus services. As in many Honduran cities, many bus companies operate from their own station –

although there is now a larger terminal, Terminal Metropolitana de Autobuses (Metropolitan Bus Terminal), 5km south of the center, built to gather all the companies together and relieve city congestion. Not all bus companies were operating from there at the time of research, although the number is growing. Of those, most still have services from their downtown terminals, but some companies do operate just from the terminal (most importantly those going to Pulhapanzak Falls). If you do need to get to the terminal, take any bus down 2a Av SE (US\$0.20) or take a taxi for around US\$2.50.

In San Pedro Sula, the terminals are clustered south of the parque central. Most are within walking distance of each other. The luxury lines, Transportes King Quality and Hedman Alas, have terminals west of the park; see the map for locations. The free magazine *Honduras Tips* has a useful bus routes section.

International Buses

International bus lines **Transportes Hedman Alas** (☎ 557 3477; 3a Calle NO btwn 7a & 8a Aves NO) is an expensive luxury line with services to Guatemala City and Antigua. **Transportes King Quality** (☎ 553 4547; cnr 2a Calle SO & 9a Av SO) has good service that is less harsh on the wallet. It departs to San Salvador at 1pm (US\$28, seven hours) with a connection to Guatemala City. **Transportes La Sultana** (☎ 553 4930) goes to San Salvador (US\$17.20, six hours, 6:15am); it's less expensive but less comfortable.

Getting Around BUS

The fare on local buses is US\$0.20, although limit your use where possible. They are subject to frequent robberies. There is no direct bus to the airport, but you can get on any El Progreso bus and ask the driver to let you off at the airport turnoff. From there, it's a long walk (25 minutes) with no shade; if you have bags, consider a taxi.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Car-rental agencies in San Pedro Sula: **Avis** (☎ 553 0888, airport 668 3164; fax 668 3167; 1a Calle btwn 6a & 7a Av NE)

Budget (🕒 airport 509 8000)

Econo rent a car (🕒 airport 668 1881)

Hertz (🕒 airport 668 3155)

Molinari Rent A Car (☎ 553 2639; Parque Central) At the Gran Hotel Sula.

BUS SERVICES FROM SAN PEDRO SULA

Destination	Bus Line	Phone	Fare	Type	Duration
Agua Caliente	Transportes Congolón	553 1174	US\$7.15	normal	5hr
*Comayagua	Transportes Diaz	no phone	US\$2.70	direct	2hr
Copán Ruinas	Transportes Casasola	558 1659	US\$5.50	direct	3hr
La Ceiba	Transportes Diana Express	550 8952	US\$4.30	direct	3hr
	Transportes Hedman Alas	553 1631	US\$8.30	ejecutivo	2½hr
Puerto Cortés	Transportes Impala	553 3111	US\$1.60	direct	1hr
*Pulhapanzak & Lago de Yojoa	Transportes La Tiga	no phone	US\$1.75	direct	1½hr
Santa Rosa de Copán	Transportes Torito	553 4930	US\$4.20	direct	3hr
*Siguatepeque	Transportes Etul	520 7177	US\$2.20	direct	3hr
Tegucigalpa	Transportes El Rey Express	550 8355	US\$6	direct	4hr
	Transportes Hedman Alas	553 1361	US\$8	ejecutivo	3½hr
Tela	Transportes Tela Express	551 8140	US\$3	direct	1½hr
Trujillo	Transportes Cotuc/Contraibal	557 8470	US\$7.15	direct	5-6hr

*leaves from Terminal Metropolitana de Autobuses

TAXI

Average fares in town are around US\$2. Taxis cost about US\$7 to the airport.

PARQUE NACIONAL CUSUCO

Parque Nacional Cusuco (admission US\$15; ☎ 8am-4:30pm), 45km west of San Pedro Sula in the impressive Merendón mountain range, is a cloud forest park. Its highest peak is **Cerro Jilincó** (2242m). Bird-watchers have spotted toucans and parrots, and quetzals are sometimes seen, mostly from April to June. There are also monkeys, reptiles and amphibians (a new species of toad was discovered here in 1981).

Five different trails are marked. The trails marked Quetzal and Las Minas lead up to **waterfalls and swimming holes**.

The **Fundación Ecologista** (☎ 557 6598; 12a Av N0 at 1a Calle N0, San Pedro Sula; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Sat) is the best place to go for information on the park. You can also go there to book overnight accommodation in simple cabins, which are just before the park entrance. You'll need to book in advance.

Getting there by public transportation is a challenge, but it can be done. In San Pedro, catch a bus to Cofradía at the corner of 5a Av SO and 9a Calle SO (US\$0.60, one hour, every 20 minutes); from Cofradía, pickups go up to the village of Buenos Aires (US\$1.50, one hour), a few kilometers short of the park entrance and visitors center. The pickup times are irregular but they are most frequent in the

morning. Making an early start is strongly recommended.

The park can be reached all year with 4WD vehicle; it is about two to three hours' drive from San Pedro Sula.

CARRETERA DE OCCIDENTE

From San Pedro Sula, the Carr de Occidente runs southwest to La Entrada, 124km away, where the road forks. One heads west to Copán Ruinas and the Guatemalan border, the other south to Santa Rosa de Copán, Nueva Ocotepeque and the two borders of Agua Caliente (Guatemala) and El Poy (El Salvador).

LA ENTRADA

La Entrada is an unattractive crossroads town with a reputation for narcotrucking. Lots of buses and traffic pass through on the way northeast to San Pedro Sula, south to Santa Rosa de Copán and Nueva Ocotepeque, and southwest to Copán Ruinas.

Something must have gone wrong for you to be stuck in La Entrada, so treat yourself at **Hotel y Restaurant El San Carlos** (☎ 661 2228; r with air-con US\$24; ☎ ☎ ☎). There's an inviting pool here, and all rooms have private hot-water bathroom, cable TV and phone. It also has the best restaurant in town. The hotel is at the turnoff to Copán Ruinas (Hwy CA-11).

Buses pass through La Entrada frequently in all directions, stopping at the crossroads and/or in front of the bus terminal.

Some destinations: Copán Ruinas (US\$2, two hours, 61km, hourly from 5am to 4:30pm), Nueva Ocotepeque (US\$2.20, 3½ hours, 123km, every 20 minutes from 6am to 4pm), San Pedro Sula (*ordinario* US\$1.80, 2½ hours, 124km, every 30 minutes; *directo* US\$2.20, 1½ hours, express buses at 8:10am, 10:10am and 3:10pm), Santa Rosa de Copán (US\$1.35, 1¼ hours, 44km, every 30 minutes from 6am to 6pm).

King Quality buses leave for San Salvador in El Salvador (at 8am daily); buses leave from Hotel y Restaurant El San Carlos.

COPÁN RUINAS

pop 6600

The beautiful, tranquil little town of Copán Ruinas, often simply called Copán, is about 1km from the famous Maya ruins of the same name. Sloping cobblestone streets, white adobe buildings with red-tile roofs and an attractive colonial church give it an aura of timeless peace. Although most travelers stop in Copán just for the ruins, the lovely surrounding countryside, good restaurants and nightlife are excellent reasons to stay longer.

Orientation

The renovated parque central, with the church on one side, is at the heart of town. The ruins are 1km outside of town, a pleasant 15-minute stroll along a footpath to one side of the highway to La Entrada. Las Sepulturas archaeological site is 2km further along.

Information

Banco Atlántida (☎ 8:30am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-11:30 Sat) On the parque central, changes US dollars and traveler's checks. It also has an ATM.

Banco BAC Credomatic (Parque Central) Has a Unibanc ATM that accepts Visa and MasterCard.

Hondutel (☎ 7am-9pm) Half a block south of the park.

La Casa de Todo (☎ 651 4185; ☎ 7:30am-9pm)

Food, internet (per hour US\$1) and laundry services (wash, dry and fold US\$0.50 per lb) are all provided at this aptly named place.

Maya Connections (per hr US\$1.40; ☎ 7:30am-6pm)

Post office (☎ 8am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Half a block west of the park.

Dangers & Annoyances

The trail to Santa Rita Waterfalls used to be a no-go zone after several attacks in the area. It has been much safer of late, although it is still best to go in an organized group.

Sights

The fascinating Copán archaeological site, 1km outside of town, is the area's big draw. It and other fine places to visit in the area are covered on p371.

Museo de Arqueología Maya (☎ 651 4437; admission US\$3; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sun), on parque central, is a little dated but still worth a visit. The exhibits include excavated ceramics, fragments from the altars and the supports of the Maya ruins, an insight into the Maya's sophisticated use of calendars and a recreation of a female shaman's tomb. Some descriptions have English translations.

Enchanted Wings Butterfly House (☎ 651 4133;

www.birdsofhonduras.com; adult/child US\$5.50/2; ☎ 8am-4:30pm) is the brainchild of Robert Gallardo, a former Peace Corps volunteer and a renowned nature expert. The butterfly house is in a beautiful setting. There's something hypnotic about the butterflies and the spectacular tropical flora with around 200 species of orchids (which bloom from February to June). It is on the outskirts of town, walkable in about 20 minutes – or a short hop on mototaxi. You can also organize bird-watching tours from here.

Casa K'inich (☎ 651 4105; admission free; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Sun) includes an interactive recreation of the ancient football game practiced by the Copán residents more than a millennia ago. Displays are in three languages – English, Spanish and Chorti. Kids might get a kick out of the stela with a cutout hole to poke their heads through. There is a library and book exchange next door.

Mirador El Cuartel is a lookout, from the atmospheric ruins of an old jail, with a fine view of the town and surrounding countryside. Worth the climb.

The **Copán Ruinas fair** is celebrated from March 15 to 20.

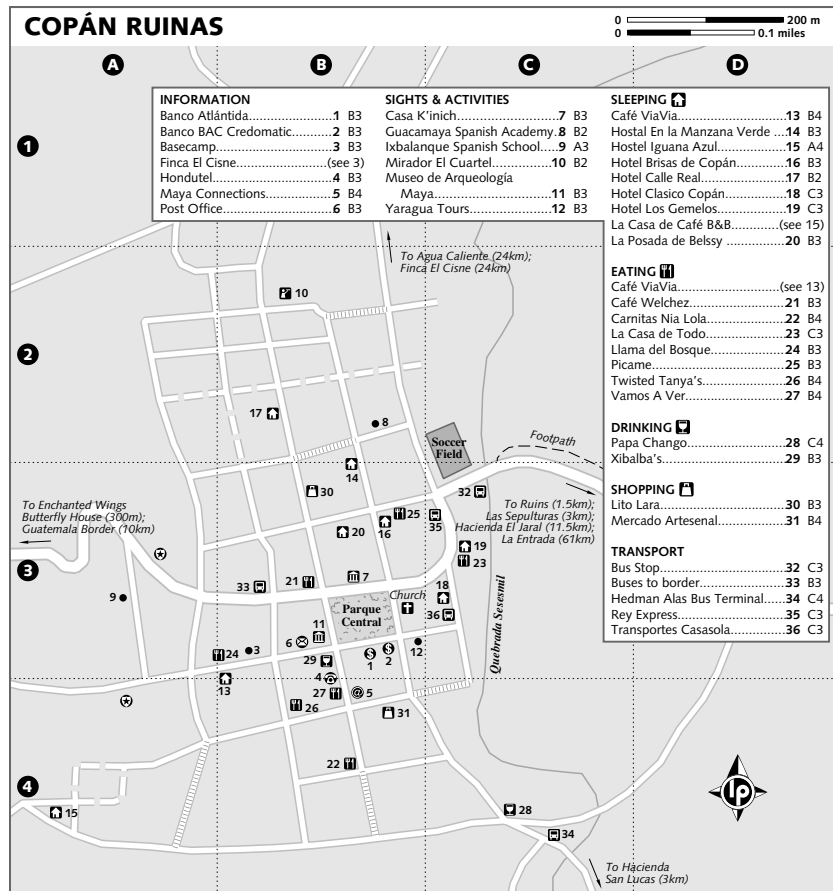
Activities

Tour companies will also organize activities for you; see p369.

HORSERIDING

There is some fine horse-riding country around Copán Ruinas. It should be obvious, but don't hire a horse from a random kid on the street.

Horror stories abound of sickly horses, and lost or drunk guides trotting along the highway (whoopee!).



Hacienda San Lucas (☎ 651 4495; www.haciendasanlucas.com) arranges excellent, hassle-free horse riding; see p372 for more on the hacienda. Your view from the saddle could take in Los Sapos, a local archaeological site. Three-hour rides cost around US\$20.

Scenic, professional horseback tours, usually part of a day-long or overnight trip (see p371) are run by **Finca El Cisne** (☎ 651 4695; www.fincaelcisne.com). See also Tours, opposite.

BIRD-WATCHING

Rugged countryside around town means plenty of chances to spot hundreds of species of birds. Former Peace Corps volunteer Robert Gallardo, at Enchanted Wings Butterfly House, is one of the country's foremost experts on

wildlife, and has personally added 13 species to the list of birds found in Honduras. He organizes tours locally (per person per day US\$25) and further afield. Also, see Tours, opposite.

Courses

Both the Spanish schools in Copán get very positive feedback. Prices listed here include a tour such as horseback riding or a trip to the Agua Caliente hot springs.

Guacamaya Spanish Academy (☎ 651 4360; www.guacamaya.com) Offers a package of 20 hours of one-on-one tuition for US\$130. For US\$70 more you can have full board and lodging with a local family. Its location is slightly more central than Ixbalanque's.

Ixbalanque Spanish School (☎ 651 4432; www.ixbalanque.com) In a swanky new location with terrific

views, at the west end of town. It offers 20 hours of one-on-one instruction in Spanish for US\$210 per week, including a homestay with a local family that provides three meals a day. Instruction only, for 20 hours per week, costs US\$125.

Tours

A huge number of tours can be organized from Copán Ruinas. You can cave, tube a river, visit a Maya village, make tortillas or manufacture ceramics, plunge into hot springs, visit a coffee plantation or head off into the wilds.

Basecamp (☎ 651 4695; copan.honduras@viaviacafe.com; ☎ 8am-6pm) Run by the sparky people from Café ViaVia and the office is just opposite the restaurant. It offers nature hikes, horseback rides and an engaging alternative hike that lifts the lid on what life is really like for local residents. Some of the profits go toward a local education project. The only place to offer motorbike tours around the neighboring mountains. You can hire pickups here for US\$30 a day. Shares an office with Finca El Cisne (p371), another excellent tour option.

Xukpi Tours (☎ 651 4435, 651 4503) Operated by the ebullient and extremely knowledgeable Jorge Barraza, who runs several ecological tours locally and further afield. His ruins and bird-watching tours are justly famous, and he'll do trips to all parts of Honduras and to Quirigua (Guatemala).

Yaragua Tours (☎ 651 4147; www.yaragua.com) Half a block east of the park, leads tubing trips, hikes, horseback-riding trips, excursions to Lago de Yojoa and even some outings to nearby caves. Ask for Samuel, a well-respected and trusted local guide.

Sleeping

Hostal En la Manzana Verde (☎ 651 4652; dm US\$4) This lovely 18-bed hostel is run by the same people at Café ViaVia. It's cheap as chips and a great place to meet people on the road. Neat, personalized kitchen shelves mean there's no need to argue about who raided whose supply – and there's even less reason to quibble with outdoor hammocks and beers for under a dollar. The hostel's rules are a riot. You can also wash your clothes in a *pila* (basin) out the back.

Hotel Los Gemelos (☎ 651 4077; fax 651 4185; r per person with shared bathroom US\$4; ☎) This long-time backpacker favorite is still a hit with the budget brigade. The management is friendly and the compact, clean rooms surround a well-tended courtyard flowerbed. No need for your flip-flops in the shared shower – and there's even hot water in both the girls' and the boys' bathrooms. There's an 11pm curfew although it is not always strictly enforced.

Hostel Iguana Azul (☎ 651 4620; fax 651 4623; www.iguanaazulcopan.com; dm/s/d US\$4/8/11) This characterful place keeps its standards just as high as when it set up a decade ago, with little flourishes even in the impeccably clean, tiled bathroom. It has two dormitories and three private rooms in a colonial-style ranch home. There's a small tropical garden, and the common area has books, magazines, travel guides and lots of handy travel tips.

Café ViaVia (☎ 651 4652; www.viaviacafe.com; s/d/tr US\$12/14/19) Run by a group of very smart, friendly Belgians, this hotel has spotless rooms with private bathroom, tiled floors and comfy beds. There are only five rooms – best to email a booking if you can. The covered patio, great bar – often with live DJ – and restaurant make this the best travelers' meeting point in town. English, French, German, Dutch and, of course, Spanish are spoken.

Hotel Clásico Copán (☎ 651 4040/4411; s & d with TV US\$15, d & tr with 2 double beds US\$20; ☎) Good-sized rooms are on two levels around a patio with gently waving palm trees. If your budget will stretch, go for the more expensive top-floor rooms at the front, which have a small terrace and a great view of the mountains. All have a private hot-water bathroom and some have cable TV and fans.

La Posada de Belsy (☎ 651 4680; s/d/tr US\$12/17/18) You get an excellent deal at this very friendly family-run place with a heap more character than average. Bedrooms are spick-and-span, but it is all about the upstairs terrace here. It has super views around Copán, hammocks and quaint wooden tables – perfect for while away a few lazy hours. The mom will whip up breakfasts and dinners on request (both US\$2.75) and you can use the kitchen if you ask nicely. Free drinking water is also available.

Hotel Calle Real (☎ 651 4230; s/d/tr US\$11/16/24; ☎) The target guest here is more middle-class Honduran than backpacker, although quite a few of the latter bed down at this spotless but unexciting hotel three blocks up the hill. The half-thatched, half-corrugated roof terrace has some hammocks and reasonable views. The price includes hot-water bathroom.

Hotel Brisas de Copán (☎ 651 4118; r US\$16; ☎) Readers enthusiastically recommend this family-run place with spotless rooms. All the rooms have TVs and en suites with hot water. The terrace has spectacular views of the town's valley setting and is a great place to sip a beer.

La Casa de Café B&B (☎ 651 4620; fax 651 4623; www.casadecafecopan.com, www.casajaguarcopan.com; s/d with breakfast US\$35/45) This impeccably decorated B&B has rooms with carved wooden doors and Guatemalan sculptures. It is four blocks from the parque central. The setting is stunning – the view over breakfast is of morning mists rising around the Guatemalan mountains. The American-Honduran owners also have an upscale house and apartment available (US\$60 to US\$80 a night, negotiable for longer stays).

Eating

Llama del Bosque (☎ 651 4431; breakfast US\$2-3.75, mains US\$3.25-5.50; ☎ 7am-9:30pm) This Copán institution is older than most of the backpackers coming through town. The chefs are well practiced at whipping up excellent Honduran specialties, soups, sandwiches and pastas, all served in an airy venue, which includes an attractive outdoor area.

Picame (☎ 651 3953; mains US\$2.50-4; ☎ 7am-9pm) There are only four little tables in this great-value hole-in-the-wall with the hardest working chefs in town (a Dutch-Belize partnership). Get there early to bag a seat or be prepared to have takeaway. The burgers are freshly prepared, and the *baleadas* are big and filling.

Café ViaVia (breakfast US\$1.50-2.50, mains US\$3-5, daily specials US\$5; ☎ 7am-9:30pm) This inventive restaurant specializes in fine, vegetarian-slanted global cuisine. The adjoining bar keeps the atmosphere lively, friendly and fun. Or, if you fancy a slower pace, take a seat on the outdoor terrace and watch Copán amble by. Try the excellent coffee or the homemade bread.

Carnitas Nia Lola (☎ 651 4196; main dishes US\$3.50-6.50; ☎ 7am-9pm) It's a bit of a theme bar, all saloon doors, *faux* antique clutter and paraphernalia, but this remains a bustling, open-air meeting and eating place two blocks south of the plaza. There's a fine view from the top floor, and waitresses show some impressive platter-balancing skills – on their heads. There are a couple of veggie options, but the staple here is grilled meat. The bar is open until 10pm.

Twisted Tanya's (☎ 651 4182; mains US\$6-10; ☎ 3-10pm) A fine addition to the Copán culinary scene, this upscale restaurant, specializing in seafood pastas and filet mignon, is regularly packed out. The owner, larger-than-life British expat Tanya, used to run the Twisted Toucan in Roatán and is a good source of info

on the Bay Islands. And she hasn't forgotten her traveler days – there's a backpacker special from 4pm to 6pm for US\$6, including soup, pasta and a desert. Two-for-one cocktails run at the same time.

Café Welchez (☎ 651 4070; cake US\$1.60; ☎ 6am-10pm) Part of the Hotel Marina Copán complex, but its prices are still reasonable. And its varnished chairs prove a fine perch for a caffeine fix – the café has a rare cappuccino machine. It also has slices of cake, in ample portions to ward off hunger. You can get breakfast here too, fairly cheaply.

Vamos A Ver (☎ 651 4627; sandwiches US\$2-3.50, fruit salad US\$3; mains US\$3.50-6; ☎ 7am-10pm) This vegetarian-friendly option close to the parque central has an attractive outdoor patio and a menu with the international traveler in mind. It includes homemade breads, Dutch cheeses, tasty soups, a range of salads, rich coffee, *licuados* (fresh-fruit drinks) and a wide variety of teas.

Tunkul Bar (mains US\$3-7; ☎ 7am-midnight) Not quite the buzzing watering hole it once was, this still offers generous portions of food (it's famed for its nachos) and music. Happy hour is in fact a happy two hours, running from 7pm to 9pm each night with two cocktails for the price of one. Two blocks east of the plaza.

La Casa de Todo (mains US\$3.50-5, salads US\$2-3; ☎ 7am-9pm) Homemade bread, yoghurt and organic coffee are dished up in this café's verdant garden; veggie options, including salads, are good. The service can be slow. Mainly light meals and snacks are served.

Drinking & Nightlife

Xibalba's (☎ 651 4182; ☎ 6am-11pm) The name is a Maya dialect word meaning underworld – but if this is hell, we'll take it. It's cozy, has swings, a spicy chicken curry (US\$6), a 'Full Monty' breakfast special (US\$5 for 'bacon, eggs, the works'), and happy hour from 3pm to 5pm each day with two-for-one cocktails. It's also known for its fine *mojitos*. Ah, for a little time in purgatory.

Nights out in Copán followed a definite pattern when we passed through. Of course, trends change fast, but cocktails at Xibalba's were the first stop, followed by a Port Royal or two at Café ViaVia and then a trip to **Papa Chango nightclub** (☎ 9pm-3am Wed-Sat), where a reggaeton beat keeps the night going. See also the eating listings (left) for more options.

GETTING TO ANTIGUA, GUATEMALA

Basecamp (☎ 651 4695; copan.honduras@viaviacafe.com; ☎ 8am-6pm) in Copán Ruinas runs a shuttle between these two towns (US\$16, minimum four passengers, six hours) at noon. Scheduled shuttles leave Copán (US\$16, minimum four passengers, six hours) and can drop you in Guatemala City (five hours) en route.

Moneychangers will approach you on both sides of the border anxious to change Guatemalan quetzals for Honduran lempiras, or either for US dollars. Usually they're offering a decent rate because there's a Guatemalan bank right there and the current exchange rate is posted in the Honduran immigration office – look for it. There's no bank on the Honduran side of the border. US dollars may be accepted at some establishments in Copán Ruinas, but it's best to change some money into lempiras.

Shopping

Items to look out for are leatherwear, woven baskets, textiles from Guatemala and tobacco. Check out La Casa de Todo east of the park, and the Mercado Artesenal, a block south of the park. Perhaps the most enticing souvenirs are replica Maya carvings made by a local man called **Lito Lara** (☎ 651 4138). He operates an informal shop out of his house – look for a plaque above his door. He'll be happy to show you his genuinely high-quality Maya carvings.

Getting There & Away BUS & MINIBUS

Minibuses and pickups to and from Copán Ruinas to the Guatemalan border depart every 30 minutes (or when full), 6am to 6pm, and charge around US\$1.10 – check the price beforehand. On the Guatemala side, buses to Esquipulas and Chiquimula leave the border regularly until about 4:30pm (see above).

Transportes Casasola (☎ 651 4078) is probably the best bet for getting to San Pedro Sula (US\$5.50, three hours, departs 6am, 7am and 2pm). Its luxury coaches run at a fraction of the Hedman Alas prices – although they do pack in the passengers. The office is next door to the Hotel Clásico Copán, east of the parque central. It has connections onto Tela and La Ceiba.

Rey Express (☎ 651 4021) is slightly cheaper (and slightly less reliable) with departures to San Pedro Sula (US\$4.50, three hours, 6am, 7am and 2pm).

Hedman Alas (☎ 651 4037) has its terminal just outside of town. It offers a luxury (and much more expensive) service to San Pedro Sula (US\$14, three hours), Tegucigalpa (US\$22, seven hours) and La Ceiba (US\$22, seven hours); departures at 5:15am, 10:30am and

2:30pm daily. It also goes to Antigua, Guatemala (US\$41, six hours) at 1:20pm each day.

If you want to leave at another time, you can easily take a bus to La Entrada (US\$2, 2¼ hours, 61km) and transfer there to San Pedro Sula, or to Santa Rosa de Copán. Buses to La Entrada depart every 40 minutes from 4am to 5pm.

Getting Around

TAXI

Little three-wheeled mototaxis whizz around the cobbled streets. The going rate for a ride around town is \$0.25 for locals. Most charge US\$0.50 for foreign tourists. You don't have to pay gringo rates – it just depends on negotiation skills (in Spanish) and persistence. For a trip to the ruins, expect to pay around US\$0.70.

AROUND COPÁN RUINAS

Macaw Mountain (☎ 651 4245, www.macawmountain.com; adult/child US\$10/5; ☎ 9am-5pm) is a beautifully landscaped bird sanctuary about 2.5km outside of the town center. It is the brainchild of a former Roatán resident whose flock of rescued abandoned and endangered birds just kept on growing. The birds, which include macaws, parrots, toucans and some raptors, are treated with real care. Some are allowed out of their cages at feeding time, squawking and interacting with visitors. The entrance fee is high, but valid for three days – and you may well be tempted to return and relax in the tranquil forest setting. A restaurant and café are on-site. A mototaxi costs around US\$1.10 each.

Visiting the **Finca El Cisne** (☎ 651 4695, www.fincaelcisne.com; r per person incl 3 meals, horseback tour & admission to thermal baths US\$65) highlands coffee and cardamom plantation, 24km from Copán

Ruinas, is more a privileged invitation into a traditional hacienda family home than a tour. Founded in the 1920s and still operating, the *finca* (plantation) raises cattle and grows coffee and cardamom, but also produces corn, avocado, breadfruit, plantain, beans, oranges, star fruit and even some wood trees. Day tours include guided horseback riding through the forests and pastures (sometimes with a stop to swim in the nearby Río Blanco) and tours of the coffee and cardamom fields and processing facilities. If you come during February or October, you can help out with the harvest. Carlos Castejón, a friendly, English-speaking, US-trained agronomist whose family owns the *finca*, leads most tours. Lodging is in a homey cabin; meals (cooked in a traditional wood-fired stove) and a visit to nearby hot springs are included. There's an office in Copán Ruinas, shared with Basecamp tours.

Day tours (per person US\$50, minimum two people) include transportation to and from Copán Ruinas and lunch. The two-day-one-night packages (per person US\$65) also includes transport and three meals; three-day-two-night stays (per person US\$112) include five meals – at which point you might never want to leave.

Hacienda San Lucas (☎ 651 4495; www.haciendasanlucas.com; s/d with breakfast US\$80/100) is a beautifully restored traditional hacienda on the tranquil outskirts of Copán. You have to dig deep to stay here...but there are other ways to get the flavor of the place. There is a terrifically atmospheric typical restaurant, with skillfully prepared traditional Honduran dishes. Horseback riding (US\$20) and hiking (entrance US\$2.75) are popular here too, for the beautiful views of town. The grounds include *Los Sapos* (the Toads), a Maya archaeological site believed to be related to fertility rites.

The **Agua Caliente** (admission US\$1.10) hot springs 24km north of town are about an hour's drive along a beautiful mountain dirt road through lush, fertile mountains lined with coffee plantations. There are some dark and dingy changing rooms there, and a swing bridge across to a luxury spa that was in development when we visited.

There's no real need to go there though. Just head to the rocks arranged in the river, which mix the steaming hot springs with the cool river – and relax. Bring warm clothes if you come in the evening.

COPÁN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

One of the most important of all Maya civilizations lived, prospered then mysteriously crumbled around the **Copán archaeological site** (www.copan honduras.org; general admission US\$15, museum US\$7, tunnels US\$15; ☎ 8am–5pm, museum closes 4pm), now a Unesco World Heritage site. During the Classic period (AD 250–900), the city at Copán Ruinas culturally dominated the region for centuries. The architecture is not as grand as Tikal's but the city produced remarkable sculptures and hieroglyphics. Its culture was so developed, it is often labeled the 'Paris of the Maya world.' For a fuller understanding, be sure to visit the excellent Museum of Sculpture at the site.

The ruins are a pleasant 1km stroll outside of Copán (or a US\$0.80 mototaxi). A visitors center, the museum and a café-gift shop are at the main entrance. A larger gift shop and a good cheap *comedor* are nearby. Hiring a guide, though expensive (around US\$25 just for the ruins), is recommended, and many speak reasonable English. If you are alone, ask to share the costs with others. Las Sepulturas, a surprisingly undervisited site where you get a real sense of everyday life in the Classic Maya era, is just over 1km further out.

The booklet *History Carved in Stone: A Guide to the Archaeological Park of the Ruins of Copán*, by William L Fash and Ricardo Agurcia Fasquelle, is usually available for US\$2 from the visitors center. For further reading see *Copán: The History of an Ancient Kingdom*, by William L Fash and E Wyllys Andrews (2005), the most authoritative account.

History

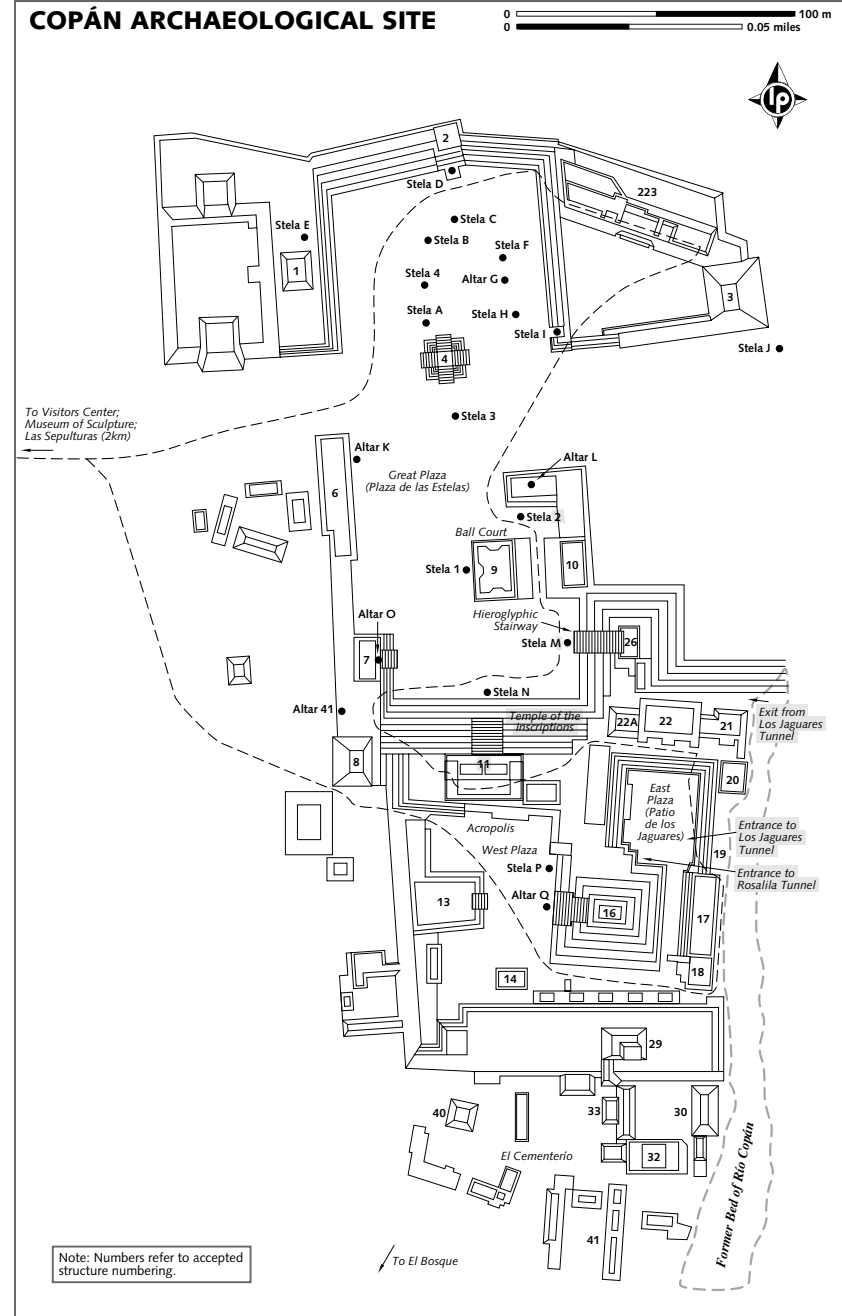
PRE-COLUMBIAN HISTORY

From dating ceramics discovered in the area, scientists believe people have lived in the Copán valley for more than three millennia – since at least 1200 BC. Craft and trade seemed to thrive early on – excavated artifacts show influences from as far afield as Mexico.

Around AD 426, one royal family came to rule Copán, led by a mysterious king named Mah K'iná Yax K'uk' Mo' (Great Sun Lord Quetzal Macaw). He ruled from 426 to 435. Archaeological evidence indicates that he was a great shaman; later kings revered him as the semidivine founder of the city. His dynasty ruled throughout Copán's golden age.

The early kings (from 435–628) remain shrouded in mystery – only a few names have

COPÁN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE



come to light: Mat Head, the second king; Cu IX, the fourth king; Waterlily Jaguar, the seventh; Moon Jaguar, the 10th; and Butz' Chan, the 11th.

Under the great Smoke Imix (Smoke Jaguar), the 12th king, Copán's military and trading might grew stronger. For more than half a century (628–695), Smoke Imix consolidated and expanded power. He might have even taken over the nearby principedom of Quiriguá, as one of the famous stelae there bears his name and image. During his rule, some of the city's most magnificent temples and monuments were built. By the time he died, many more people had come to live in thriving Copán.

The warlike 13th king, Uaxaclahun Ubak K'awil (18 Rabbit), began his rule in 695. Under him, the intricate, skilful craftsmen and sculptors for which the city became famed really began to flourish. 18 Rabbit also wasted no time seeking further military conquests – and little good it did him in the end. In a battle with the forces of neighboring King Cauac Sky, his life came to a grisly end when he was captured then beheaded in 738. Perhaps his gruesome demise marked the beginning of the end of Copán's heyday. Certainly, his successor, Smoke Monkey, the 14th king (738–749), left little mark on Copán.

Possibly in a bid to record or restore the city's former glories, Smoke Monkey's son, Smoke Shell (749–763), commissioned some of Copán's most famous buildings, including the city's most important monument, the great Hieroglyphic Stairway. This immortalizes the achievements of the dynasty from its establishment until 755, when the stairway was dedicated. It bears the longest such inscription ever discovered in the Maya kingdom.

Yax Pac (Sunrise or First Dawn, 763–820), Smoke Shell's successor and the 16th king of Copán, continued to beautify Copán throughout his long reign. However, the dynasty's power was now clearly declining and its subjects had fallen on hard times. The final ruler of the dynasty, U Cit Tok', came to power in 822. His reign was mysteriously cut short, indicating that one single event – perhaps a military defeat – caused the end of a dynasty that spanned four centuries.

Until recently, the collapse of the civilization at Copán was a mystery. Now, archaeologists are beginning to understand what

happened. Near the end of Copán's heyday, the bulging population (more than 20,000 at its peak) put an immense strain on the valley's agricultural resources. Copán could not now feed itself on its own and had to import food. As the urban core expanded along the fertile lowlands in the central valley, agriculture and residential areas rose further up onto the steep surrounding slopes. Deforestation and massive erosion is thought to have further decimated agricultural production and caused flooding during rainy seasons. People were prone to more diseases and died younger, according to evidence gleaned from skeletal remains of residents who died during the final years of Copán's heyday.

The Copán valley was not abandoned overnight – farmers probably continued to live in the ecologically devastated valley for another 100 or 200 years. By the year AD 1200, however, very few people remained and the royal city of Copán was reclaimed by the jungle.

EUROPEAN DISCOVERY

The first known European to see the ruins was Diego García de Palacios, a representative of Spanish King Philip II, who lived in Guatemala and traveled through the region. On March 8, 1576, he wrote to the king about the ruins he found here. Only about five families were living here then, and they knew nothing of the history of the ruins. The discovery was not pursued, and almost three centuries went by until another Spaniard, Colonel Juan Galindo, visited the ruins and made the first map of them.

Galindo's report stimulated Americans John L. Stephens and Frederick Catherwood to come to Copán on their Central American journey in 1839. When Stephens published the book *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatán* in 1841, illustrated by Catherwood, the ruins first became known to the world at large.

TODAY

The history of the ruins still unfolds today, as archaeologists continue to probe the site. The remains of 3450 structures have been found in the 24 sq km surrounding the Principal Group, most of them within about half a kilometer of the Principal Group. In a wider zone, 4509 structures have been detected in 1420 sites within 135 sq km of the ruins. These discoveries indicate that at the peak of Maya

civilization here, around the end of the 8th century, the valley of Copán had over 20,000 inhabitants – a population not reached again until the 1980s.

In addition to examining the area around the Principal Group, archaeologists are continuing to explore and make new discoveries at the Principal Group itself. Five separate phases of building on this site have been identified; the final phase, dating from AD 650 to 820, is what we see today. But buried underneath the visible ruins are layers of other ruins, which archaeologists are exploring by means of underground tunnels. This is how the Rosalila temple was found, a replica of which is now in the Museum of Sculpture; below Rosalila is yet another, earlier temple, Margarita.

Occasionally the ruins are a stage for more controversial, political actions. In September 2005, 1500 indigenous Maya Chorti, descendants of the original builders of Copán, occupied the ruins and barred visitors. Their five-day occupation of the site was in protest at stalled government land reforms, aimed at giving indigenous communities a way of lifting themselves out of poverty. Several Maya Chorti leaders have been killed over the last few decades. While the protests have quietened recently, the stark social conditions for many of the 8000 Maya Chorti in the area remains a major, unresolved issue.

Museum of Sculpture

While Tikal is celebrated for its tall temple pyramids and Palenque is renowned for its limestone relief panels, Copán is unique in the Maya world for its sculpture. Some of the finest examples are on display at this impressive museum, opened in August 1996. Entering the museum is an experience by itself: You go through the mouth of a serpent and wind through the entrails of the beast before suddenly emerging into a fantastic world of sculpture and light.

The highlight of the museum is a true-scale replica of the Rosalila temple, which was discovered in nearly perfect condition by archaeologists in 1989 by means of a tunnel dug into Structure 16, the central building of the Acropolis. Rosalila, dedicated in AD 571 by Copán's 10th ruler, Moon Jaguar, was apparently so sacred that when Structure 16 was built over it, Rosalila was not destroyed but was left completely intact.

The original Rosalila temple is still in the core of Structure 16. Under it is a still earlier temple, Margarita, built 150 years before, as well as other platforms and tombs.

The Principal Group

The Principal Group is a group of ruins about 400m beyond the visitors center, across well-kept lawns, through a gate in a strong fence and down shady avenues of trees.

STELAE OF THE GREAT PLAZA

The path leads to the Great Plaza and the huge, intricately carved stelae portraying the rulers of Copán. Most of Copán's best stelae date from AD 613 to 738, especially from the reigns of Smoke Imix (628–95) and 18 Rabbit (AD 695–738). All seem to have originally been painted; a few traces of red paint survive on Stela C. Many stelae had vaults beneath or beside them in which sacrifices and offerings could be placed.

Many of the stelae on the Great Plaza portray King 18 Rabbit, including Stelae A, B, C, D, F, H and 4. Perhaps the most beautiful stela in the Great Plaza is Stela A (731); the original has been moved inside the Museum of Sculpture, and the one outdoors is a reproduction. Nearby, and almost equal in beauty, are Stela 4 (731); Stela B (731), depicting 18 Rabbit upon his accession to the throne; and Stela C (AD 782), with a turtle-shaped altar in front. This last stela has figures on both sides. Stela E (614), erected on top of Structure 1 on the west side of the Great Plaza, is among the oldest stelae.

At the northern end of the Great Plaza, at the base of Structure 2, Stela D (736) also portrays King 18 Rabbit. On its back are two columns of hieroglyphs; at its base is an altar with fearsome representations of Chac, the rain god. In front of the altar is the burial place of Dr John Owen, an archaeologist with an expedition from Harvard's Peabody Museum, who died during work in 1893.

On the east side of the plaza is Stela F (721), arguably the most beautiful of 18 Rabbit's sculptures. It has a more lyrical design, with the robes of the main figure flowing around to the other side of the stone, where there are glyphs. Altar G (800), showing twin serpent heads, is among the last monuments carved at Copán. Stela H (730) might depict a queen or princess rather than a king. Stela I (692), on the structure that runs along the east side of

the plaza, is of a person wearing a mask. Stela J, further off to the east, resembles the stelae of Quiriguá in that it is covered in glyphs, not human figures.

BALL COURT & HIEROGLYPHIC STAIRWAY

South of the Great Plaza, across what is known as the Central Plaza, is the ball court (Juego de Pelota; AD 731), the second-largest in Central America. It is not exactly clear how this game was played, although participants probably kept a hard rubber ball in the air without using their hands; Casa K'inich (p367) has a video reconstruction. The one you see is the third ball-court built on this site; the other two smaller ones were buried by this construction. Note the macaw heads carved at the top of the sloping walls. The central marker in the court was the work of King 18 Rabbit.

South of the ball court is Copán's most famous monument, the Hieroglyphic Stairway, the work of King Smoke Shell. Today it's protected from the elements by a roof. This lessens the impact of its beauty, but you can still get an idea of how it looked. The flight of 63 steps bears a history – in several thousand glyphs – of the royal house of Copán; the steps are bordered by ramps inscribed with more reliefs and glyphs. The story inscribed on the steps is still not completely understood, because the stairway was partially ruined and the stones jumbled.

At the base of the Hieroglyphic Stairway is Stela M (AD 756), bearing a figure (probably King Smoke Shell) in a feathered cloak; glyphs tell of the solar eclipse in that year. The altar in front shows a plumed serpent with a human head emerging from its jaws.

Beside the stairway, a tunnel leads to the tomb of a nobleman, a royal scribe who might have been the son of King Smoke Imix. The tomb, discovered in 1989, held a treasure trove of painted pottery and beautiful carved jade objects that are now in Honduran museums.

ACROPOLIS

The lofty flight of steps to the south of the Hieroglyphic Stairway is called the **Temple of the Inscriptions**. On top of the stairway, the walls are carved with groups of hieroglyphs. On the south side of the Temple of the Inscriptions are the **East Plaza** and **West Plaza**. In the **West Plaza**, be sure to see Altar Q (AD 776), among the most famous sculptures here; the original is inside the Museum of Sculpture. Around its

sides, carved in superb relief, are the 16 great kings of Copán, ending with the altar's creator, Yax Pac. Behind the altar was a sacrificial vault in which archaeologists discovered the bones of 15 jaguars and several macaws that were probably sacrificed to the glory of Yax Pac and his ancestors.

TUNNELS

In 1999, archaeologists opened up to the public two tunnels that allow visitors to get a glimpse of pre-existing structures below the visible structures. The first, **Rosalilia tunnel**, is very short and takes only a few visitors at a time. The famous temple is only barely exposed, and behind thick glass. The other tunnel, **Los Jaguares**, was originally 700m in length, but a large section has been closed, reducing it to about 80m, running along the foundations of Temple 22. This tunnel exits on the outside of the main site, so you must walk around the main site to get back in again. While interesting, it's hard to justify the US\$15 extra you pay to get in.

Las Sepulturas

Often overlooked by visitors, Las Sepulturas is a tranquil escape from the crowds on the main ruins site. Although not as striking, the excavations here have shed light on the daily life of the Maya of Copán during its golden age.

Las Sepulturas, once connected to the Great Plaza by a causeway, was possibly the residential area of rich, powerful nobles. One huge, luxurious compound seems to have housed some 250 people in 40 or 50 buildings arranged around 11 courtyards. The principal structure, called the House of the Bacabs (officials), had outer walls carved with full-size figures of 10 males in fancy feathered headdresses; inside was a huge hieroglyphic bench.

To get to the site, you have to go back to the main road, turn right, then right again at the sign.

SANTA ROSA DE COPÁN

pop 28,700

Santa Rosa de Copán is a cool mountain town with cobbled streets and some lovely, restored colonial buildings. It doesn't have any world-class sights like Copán Ruinas, a few hours away. Consequently, it doesn't have as many tourists, which is part of its charm. It's just a quiet, beautiful little town with a fresh climate and friendly people. The annual **festival day** is

August 30. The town is also renowned for its colorful **Semana Santa** celebrations.

The town is up on a hill, 1.5km from the bus terminal on the highway. Most hotels are a short walk from the parque central, which has the police station to the north side, a lovely cathedral to the east and Hondutel to the west.

Information

EMERGENCY

Police (☎ 662 0091)

IMMIGRATION

The Immigration office is one block from the parque central.

INTERNET ACCESS

Tourist office (per hour US\$0.80; ☎ 8am-noon & 1:30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 1:30pm-6pm Sat) Good fast internet connection with new computers.

Zeus Cyber Café (per hr US\$0.55; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Fri, 9am-9pm Sat-Sun) Also has international phone service for US\$0.25 per minute.

MONEY

Banco Atlántida (Parque Central) Changes traveler's checks and gives cash advances on Visa cards. The ATM accepts Visa/Plu cards.

Banco del Occidente (Parque Central) In the same building as Western Union, it changes travelers' checks and gives cash advances on Visa cards.

Unibanc ATM (1a Calle) Just down from Banco del Occidente, takes Visa, Cirrus, MasterCard and American Express.

POST & TELEPHONE

These two are side by side on the west side of the parque central. Calling abroad is cheaper at Zeus Cyber Café.

Post office (☎ 8am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

Hondutel (☎ 7am-9pm)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist office (☎ 662 2234; ☎ 8am-noon & 1:30pm-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 1:30pm-6pm Sat) In a kiosk in the central park, it has plenty of suggestions for places to eat and stay within Santa Rosa, as well as details on the town's cultural significance and historical buildings.

Sights

La Flor de Copán Cigar Factory (☎ 662 0185; tours US\$3; ☎ 7am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 7am-noon Sat), 2km out of town, shows visitors the craft behind making hand-rolled cigars. A taxi from town costs US\$0.80. Tours are available in English.

Those who love a good cup of joe can see how their favorite bean is prepared at **Beneficio Maya** (☎ 662 1665; www.cafecopan.com; Colonia San Martín; ☎ 7am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 7am-noon Sat), a coffee-processing plant. Tours to nearby *fincas* run during the coffee harvest season (November to February).

Tours

Lenca Land Trails (☎ 662 1375/1374; max@Lenca-Honduras.com; Calle Real Centenario near 3a Av NO) is run by Max Elvir, a well-known local guide, who operates out of Hotel Elvir and offers highly recommended tours to nearby indigenous Lenca villages and Parque Nacional Montaña de Celaque. Max speaks English.

Sleeping

Hotel El Rosario (☎ 662 0211; 3a Av NE btwn 1a & 2a Calles; s/d US\$5.40/10.80, with bathroom US\$8.10/16.20) Two blocks east of the park, next door to a dodgy by-the-hour place, this hotel is impeccably kept (mops were out in full force when we were here) with rooms off a long corridor. Beds are a bit soft but skylights add some natural brightness. It is managed by the señora who runs the pharmacy next door.

Hotel Alondra's (☎ 662 1194; 3a Av SO between 1a & 2a Calles SE; s/d US\$13.50/21.60) One of the new options in town, this is a wholesome, family-run place, kept scrupulously tidy. The one drawback is the slightly gloomy rooms, but the private bathrooms all have hot water.

Hotel Santa Eduvigues (☎ 662 0380; 1a Calle NO, btwn 4a & 5a Av; s/d with cold-water bathroom US\$10.80/13.50, with hot water US\$13.50/19) Lanterns mark the front of this hotel. The darkened lobby may put some off, but the rooms have recently been refurbished and are clean and comfortable.

Hotel VIP Copán (☎ 662 0265; 1a Calle NE & 3a Av NE; s/d with fan US\$17.25/31.35, s/d with air-con US\$28.90/37.60; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This posh, central option has very comfortable rooms with increased bedspreads and shiny-tiled bathrooms. Some do not let much natural light in. Its adjoining Restaurante Mundo Maya (mains US\$3.25 to US\$5) has a good reputation locally and is open for all meals.

Eating

Pizza Pizza (☎ 662 1104; Calle Real Centenario near 6a Av NE; mains US\$2-5; ☎ 11:30am-2pm & 5-9pm Thu-Tue) This appealing pizzeria, run by an American-Honduran family, concentrates on delivering the finest brick-oven pizza in town as well

as hunger-killing doorstopper sandwiches. Warren Post, the friendly owner, has lived in Santa Rosa for many years and is a good person to talk to about the area's attractions. There's also an English-language book exchange here.

Comedor Villa los Llanos (☎ 662 1256; 2a Av nr 1a Calle; dishes US\$2-3; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Sat) A good, honest, no-nonsense little *comedor*, this serves up hearty portions of staple Honduran dishes, from beans, scrambled eggs and plantains for breakfast to *carne* (meat, usually beef) and fried chicken platters for lunch and dinner.

Restaurante Las Haciendas (☎ 662 3518; 1a Calle SE btwn 2a & 3a Avs; dishes US\$2-5; ☎ 10am-10pm) Big wagon wheels guard the entrance to this grill specialist that has a pleasant, shady outdoor eating area. Vegetarians will not find much choice.

Restaurante & Bar Zotz (☎ 662 0829; Calle Real Centenario btwn 2a & 3a Av; mains US\$3-4.50; ☎ noon-3am Wed-Sat, noon-11pm Sun-Tue) The bar is what counts here – it is the sort of place where you can order your burgers and platters when the munchies strike midbeers. Americana rules – walls are cluttered with US number plates and other paraphernalia. It is popular with middle-class twenty-something Hondurans.

Drinking & Entertainment

Hotel Elvir (☎ 662 1374; cnr 3a Av NE & 1a Calle SE; ☎ 3-10:30pm) Although the hotel is out of budget range, its rooftop bar is one of Santa Rosa's best spots for a drink. Sip your tippie of choice by a pool with fine views right over town.

Luna Jaguar Disco (3a Av SE near Calle Centenario; cover US\$5.50; ☎ 9pm-4am Wed-Sat) If you want to do a little dancing, this is virtually the only place in town to get down tonight. It is favored by the late-teen, early twenty-something crowd.

Cinema Don Quijote (☎ 662 2625; Plaza Saavedra; 1a Calle NE at 3a Av NE; US\$1.90) Shows late-release Hollywood films.

Getting There & Away

Most Santa Rosa de Copán buses come and go from the Terminal de Transporte on the main highway, 1.5km from town. A colectivo into town costs US\$0.75, the local bus costs US\$0.25.

Sultana de Occidente (☎ 662 0940) buses to Tegucigalpa, San Salvador and Agua Caliente (Guatemala) depart from a separate terminal next door. **Congolón** (☎ 662 3834) has a terminal further up the highway nearer town and is a

good option for San Pedro Sula, Nueva Ocotepeque and Tegucigalpa buses.

If you're going to San Pedro Sula, best catch a direct bus, which stops only once (at La Entrada). The regular buses are more frequent but slower.

Destinations from Santa Rosa:

Copán Ruinas (US\$2, four hours, 107km, 11:30am, 12:30pm & 2pm) Very slow service; best to go direct to La Entrada and transfer.

Gracias (US\$1.65, 1½ hours, 47km, every 45 minutes)

La Entrada (US\$1.35, 1¼ hours, 44km) Same buses as to San Pedro Sula.

Nueva Ocotepeque Congolón buses (US\$3, 2½ hours, 95km, five buses daily, first/last bus 8:30am/4:30pm)

San Pedro Sula Congolón (US\$3.50, 2½ hours, 152km, six buses daily from 7:30am-6pm); regular buses (US\$2.70, four hours, every 30 minutes until 5pm); express buses from the Terminal de Transporte (US\$4.30, 2½ hours, 8am, 9:30am & 2pm)

San Salvador Sultana buses via El Poy (US\$10, six hours, 8:30am)

Tegucigalpa Congolón (US\$8.10, 7½ hours, 393km, 8am)

GRACIAS

pop 8600

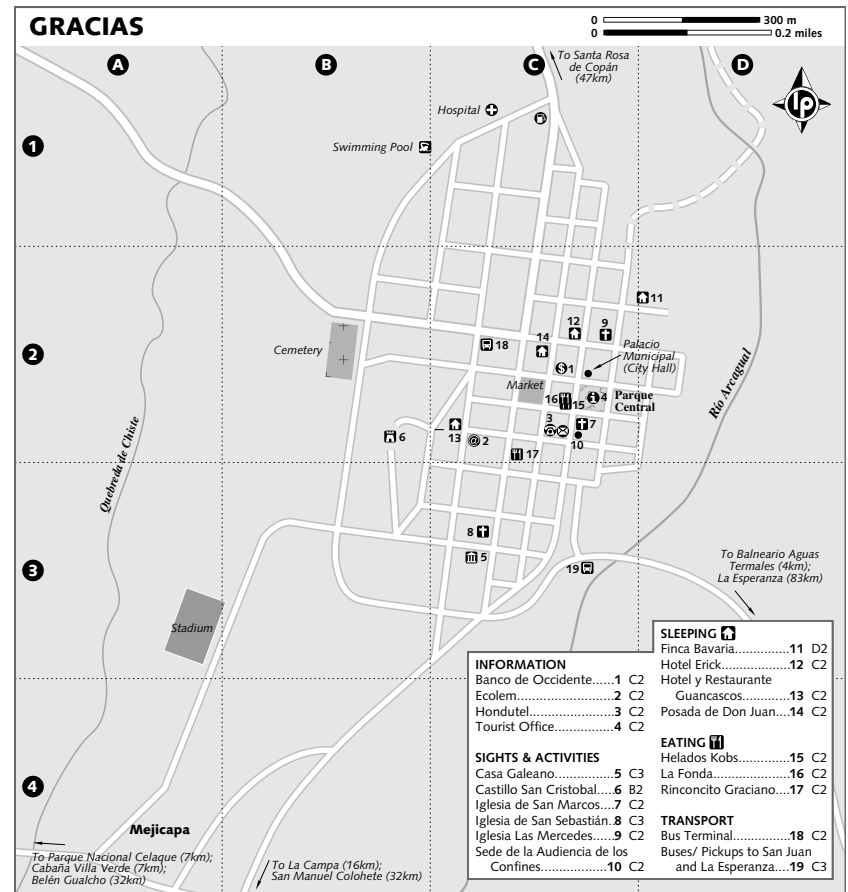
Gracias is a small, tranquil cobblestone town 47km southeast of Santa Rosa de Copán. For a brief time in the 16th century, it was the capital of all Spanish-conquered Central America. Traces of its former grandeur remain in its centuries-old buildings and various colonial churches. The pace of life along its cobblestone streets rarely moves much faster than walking.

Gracias was founded in 1526 by Spanish Captain Juan de Chavez; its original name was Gracias a Dios (Thanks to God). The Audiencia de los Confines, the governing council for Central America, was established here on April 16, 1544; the buildings that the council occupied are still here. Eventually the town's importance was eclipsed by Antigua (Guatemala) and Comayagua.

The area around Gracias is mountainous and beautiful. Much of it is forested. The town makes a good base for exploring Parque Nacional Celaque. While you're here, don't miss a trip to the hot springs.

Orientation & Information

Gracias is a small town and everything is within walking distance. The post office and Hondutel are side by side, a block south of the parque central.



Banco de Occidente (Parque Central) Exchanges traveler's checks and US dollars.

Ecolem (☎ 7:30am-9pm) Check email at this spot, near Guancascos.

Tourist office (Parque Central kiosk; ☎ 8am-noon & 1:30-4:30pm Mon-Fri) Has some useful information binders. You'll need to speak Spanish.

Sights & Activities

High on a hill west of the parque central, **Castillo San Cristóbal** (☎ 7am-5pm) is worth the walk for its excellent views of the town. Gracias has several colonial *iglesias*: **San Marcos**, **Las Mercedes** and **San Sebastián**. Next door to the Iglesia de San Marcos, the **Sede de la Audiencia de los Confines**, important in the town's history, is now the *casa parroquial*, the residence for the parish priest.

Casa Galeano (admission US\$1.60; ☎ 9am-6pm) is in a beautiful restored colonial house with extensive gardens; this new museum does not fulfill its potential. There is an interesting local history and summary of the Lenca culture but signage is in Spanish only. In the gardens most of the signs with details of a whole range of trees have been broken.

Most of the area's other attractions, including fine hot springs and the Parque Nacional Montaña de Celaque, are a few kilometers out of town (see p380).

Sleeping

Hotel Erick (☎ 656 1066; s/d US\$5.40/7; P) A perennial favorite among the budget traveler crowd, this is a clean, family-run hotel. Beds

are on the saggy side, but this is the best cheapie option in town, if you can cope with the lurid green exterior. All rooms have a cold-water bathroom. You can ask about tours and transport to the national park here, although you will need some Spanish. It's one block north of the park, two blocks east of the terminal.

Finca Bavaria (☎ 656 1372; s/d/tr with bathroom US\$5.40/9.75/13.50) Set on a peaceful 35,000-sq-m *finca de café* (coffee plantation), all eight rooms at Bavaria are large and basic with firm beds on a concrete base, hot-water bathroom and fan. Run by a German-Honduran couple (often away), there's also a bar, which is open sporadically. Camping is available too.

Hotel y Restaurante Guancascos (☎ 656 1219; www.guancascos.com; s/d/tw/tr US\$12/14.50/20/21.50; (P)) The comfortable rooms here are the most tastefully decorated in Gracias, while the terrace restaurant has fine views over town and is good for meeting fellow travelers. Shame the service is slow and hotel management unhelpful. Tour guides for the nearby national park drum up trade here although the hotel takes no responsibility for them.

Posada de Don Juan (☎ 656 1020; s/d with fan US\$15/21, with air-con US\$20/25; (P) (♿) (Q)) The motel-style rooms have recently been remodeled – each has a comfortable bed, fridge and private hot-water bathroom. There is also a good-value restaurant on site. This caters to a business clientele but is definitely worth a look if you want a bit of comfort.

Eating

Rincónito Graciano (☎ 656 1171; mains US\$1.50-3; ☞ 7am-9pm) This is one of the most original and authentic restaurants we found in all Honduras. It serves traditional Lencan dishes, prepared with organic ingredients, on lovely wooden tables in a bohemian setting. The place is run by a Gracias personality who is a big believer in slow foods and natural cooking. The menu is extremely good value. There are also some local ceramics and paintings for sale.

La Fonda (☎ 656 1244; Parque Central; mains US\$3.50-5; ☞ 10am-10pm) This inexpensive restaurant has polite old-school señores in red shirts serving up well-made typical dishes. It is good for hamburger and chips-style snacks too.

Helados Kobs (Parque Central; ☞ 9am-9pm) An ice-cream stop serving myriad flavors, perfect for strolling round on a sunny afternoon.

Getting There & Away

Little mototaxis zip around town, charging US\$0.70 for a ride.

The winding mountain road between Gracias and Santa Rosa de Copán is very scenic. Buses to Santa Rosa de Copán (US\$1.65, 1½ hours, 47km) leave the bus terminal hourly from 5am to 4:30pm. See p378 for details on buses coming from Santa Rosa to Gracias.

Four direct services go to San Pedro Sula (US\$4, four hours, 5am, 6am, 8:30am, 9:50am).

There is no direct service to Copán Ruinas. Catch a San Pedro-bound bus to La Entrada (or go to Santa Rosa de Copán, then change for La Entrada), and take another bus onto Copán Ruinas. It takes four to five hours, and costs about US\$5.

A bumpy road through some beautiful highland countryside connects to towns in the southeast, including San Juan (US\$1.60, one hour, 37km) and La Esperanza (US\$3.25, four hours, 83km, one minibus daily at 5am). There has been talk for a long time of paving the road, but only the stretch around San Juan is done so far. Catch buses to San Juan and La Esperanza from the last bridge out of town. Pickups are also a tried-and-tested option for these destinations. Catch them from the same place. From San Juan, pickups connect to La Esperanza until the early afternoon.

AROUND GRACIAS

Bathing in the **Balneario Aguas Termales** (admission US\$1.60; ☞ 6am-11:30pm) is a memorable experience. It is a rough-shod tourist attraction but the setting, practically within a forest, makes it special – where else can you watch wisps of steam rise from natural springs, as lush foliage sways above you? Four kilometers east of town, the hot springs have several pools at various temperatures. Go to the baths higher up where the water is warmer. There is a restaurant, bar and grubby changing rooms on site. You can walk it in about 90 minutes by road toward La Esperanza, or an hour if you take a shortcut off to the right after the last bridge out of town. A lot of people hitch rides there and back.

Several small towns near Gracias are also worth a visit. The Lenca people in this area produce some distinctive handicrafts. **La Campa**, a scenic little town 16km south of Gracias, is particularly known for its excellent pottery.

DETOUR TO BELÉN GUALCHO

Belén Gualcho is a picturesque colonial town clinging to the side of a mountain at 1600m above sea level, on the other side of Parque Nacional Montaña de Celaque. It is closer to Gracias, but road access is from Santa Rosa de Copán. Attractions include an interesting *iglesia* and a Lenca market on Sunday. There's an entrance to Parque Nacional Celaque here, but no checkpoint, no services, and only one trail, leading to San Manuel Colohete. Do not leave the trail, as even locals have become lost in this area.

A few buses go between here and Santa Rosa each day. There are a couple of basic places to stay and to eat, and there's even an internet café.

It has two hotels and workshops where you can see craftsmen and women shaping their art. **San Manuel Colohete**, 16km further, past La Campa, is another attractive little mountain town with a beautiful, recently restored, colonial church, famous for its 400-year-old fresco paintings. There is one hotel in town.

A once-daily bus leaves Gracias to San Manuel Colohete (US\$1, one hour) at approximately 11:30am. It passes La Campa (US\$0.75) at around 1pm. It departs San Manuel back to Gracias about 6am. Travel times can be considerably longer in the rainy season. Hitching is also possible around here.

PARQUE NACIONAL MONTAÑA DE CELAQUE

Celaque (which means, oddly, 'box of water' in the local Lenca dialect) is one of Honduras' most impressive national parks. It boasts **El Cerro de las Minas**, the country's highest peak at 2849m above sea level. Its slopes are covered by lush forest, which evolves in fascinating steps the higher you climb. The park contains the headwaters of several rivers, a majestic waterfall visible from the entire valley, and very steep slopes, including some vertical cliffs, totally inaccessible because of the dense forest.

The park is rich in plant and animal life. Pumas, ocelots and quetzals live here, but they are rarely seen. More common are beautiful butterflies, monkeys, black squirrels and reptiles, but you have to be very quiet and up very early to see much wildlife.

Information

The entrance fee (US\$2.65) is payable at a small house about a kilometer from the beginning of the trails. You will be issued with a ticket here. Information on hiking in the park is available from Hotel Guancascos or the tourist office in Gracias' central park.

A visitors center at 1400m above sea level marks the entrance to the park.

Hiking & Camping

At the visitors center, there are basic, rustic bunks for 18 people, as well as a kitchen, water, a shower and latrines. Bring your own bedding if you can. It costs US\$3 per person to stay overnight, whether camping or at the visitors center. Near the visitors center is a river, which is mighty tempting after a long grueling hike; however, the river provides drinking water, and so swimming here is strictly prohibited.

The next cabin, Campamento Don Tomás, is 2060m above sea level, and a four-hour uphill walk along a well-marked forest trail. You'll pass several small streams where you can collect water. Bring purification tablets or a filter. The camp has a tiny, dirty two-bunk shack. You'll be glad you carried a tent. There's a small latrine and no running water.

A second campground, El Narajo, is only a few kilometers away, but the trail is very steep (one to two hours). It's a pretty camp – just inside the cloud forest – but consider leaving your tent and bags at Don Tomás and climbing the summit as a day trip. From the second camp, it's another two or three hours on a beautiful rolling trail through the cloud forest to the summit. Because of clouds and tree cover, you might not see anything from the top, but there's a sign there all the same.

Many people misjudge the time they need for the climb. Some do the whole thing in a single day, but it's a very long haul. Even spreading it over two or three days, you should start hiking early. The trail is somewhat unclear in places – look for the colored ribbons. Do *not* wander off the trail; the forest is so dense it can be hard, or impossible, to find the trail again. A Dutch hiker disappeared here in 1998 and was never found; a Honduran hiker got lost and died in 2003.

Bring some warm clothes and adequate hiking boots – temperatures in the park are much chillier than in Gracias. It is also often damp and rainy.

For a guide, your cheapest option is to go to the visitors center and ask the guardian, Don Miguel, to guide you. He charges US\$16.50 per group, regardless of size. You will need some Spanish.

Another option is to organize a tour through the **Asociación de Guías** (☎ 656 0627).

Getting There & Away

The main entrance to the park is about 7km uphill from Gracias. Another entrance is at Belén Gualcho (p381), on the western side, but access is better from the Gracias side, which has more facilities and more pristine forest.

You can go on foot from Gracias to the park entrance – it takes about two hours. Look for the well-marked shortcut for those a *pie* (on foot). From the house where you pay your fees, it's about another half hour uphill to the park visitors center. However, we recommend saving your energy for hiking in the park. A bumpy mototaxi ride will take you there for about US\$4.30 per person.

Alternatively, you could cab it (US\$13.50) or arrange a lift through Hotel Erick or Hotel Guancascos in Gracias.

SAN JUAN

A slowly improving highway and the dogged efforts of Peace Corps volunteers have put this tiny, traditional mountain town on the tourist map. It is well worth a stop if you are looking for an opportunity to meet locals and learn about the lifestyle of this remote, undervisited part of the country.

Local guides and accommodation can be arranged through the local tourism cooperative. Ask for Gladys Nolasco, the president of the cooperative, whose house also doubles as the town's **visitors centre** (☎ 754 7150). Excursions include a trek to **la Cascada de los Duendes**, which goes through cloud forest and a series of waterfalls, ending with a coffee *finca* tour; and **el Cañon Encantado**, a tour of local beauty spots with the guide telling legends of the ghosts who inhabit it (Spanish only). Horseback riding, visits to traditional artisans, and coffee roasting and tasting tours can also be arranged.

Homestays cost around US\$4 per person and meals in participating *comedores* cost around US\$2. All buses and pickups going between Gracias (see p380) and La Esperanza (see p357) stop here.

NUEVA OCOTEPEQUE

pop 8900

In the southwest corner of Honduras, Nueva Ocotepeque is a crossroads town, with a lot of traffic to and from the nearby borders at Agua Caliente (Guatemala) and El Poy (El Salvador). There's not much to the town, but it's a surprisingly quiet place to stay overnight before or after crossing the border. To check emails, head to **Online World** (per hr US\$0.80; ☎ 8am–8pm) next to Hotel Maya Chortí.

The **Reserva del Guisayote** is a biological reserve that is the easiest to access of any cloud forest in Honduras. It is 16km north of Nueva Ocotepeque via a paved road.

Sleeping & Eating

All the places to stay and eat in Nueva Ocotepeque are on or near or near Calle Intermedio, which runs through town.

Hotel Turista (☎ 653 3639; Av General Francisco Morazán; s/d US\$3.25/5, with bathroom US\$4.30/6.60) A bunch of cheap accommodations are near the bus stops and this is the best of them. It's very basic, but there are signs of regular cleaning. It is near the Toritos & Copaneca bus stop.

Hotel Maya Chortí (☎ 653 3377; Av General Francisco Morazán; s/d US\$11/19, with air-con US\$14/24, incl breakfast; 📶) Border town hotels are not normally known for their accommodating staff, but this is a welcome exception. Rooms have hot-water bathrooms and cable TV and there is a restaurant on-site.

Servi Pollo (dishes US\$3–4; ☎ 9am–7pm) Well, you weren't expecting to get haute cuisine here, were you? This fast-food joint has fried and roast chicken, as well as hot dogs and hamburgers. From the bus stop go south, left at the Banco Occidente, then take the second right.

Getting There & Away

Two long-distance bus companies serve Nueva Ocotepeque: **Congolón** (☎ 653 3064) is half a block south of the parque central while **Toritos & Copaneca** (☎ 653 3405) is two blocks north of the park. Destinations:

Agua Caliente (US\$0.90, 30 minutes, 22km) Buses leave every half-hour from the Transporte San José terminal two blocks north of the park.

El Poy/Salvadoran border (US\$0.50, 15 minutes, 7km) Buses leave every 20 minutes from 6:30am to 7pm, departing from the same place as the Agua Caliente buses. Colectivo taxis also go to El Poy for US\$0.75.

CROSSING THE BORDER

Getting to Esquipulas, Guatemala

The Honduras–Guatemala border at **Agua Caliente** is open from 4am to 7pm; go through Honduran immigration first, then catch a ride (US\$0.80, 2km) up the hill to the Guatemalan post. From there buses go frequently to **Esquipulas** (10km, 30 minutes), where you can connect to **Guatemala City** or **Flores**. There are no accommodations in Agua Caliente; the last bus from Agua Caliente to Nueva Ocotepeque is at 6pm.

Getting to La Palma, El Salvador

The Honduras–El Salvador border at **El Poy** is open from 6am to 6pm. On both sides, the bus drops you about 100m from the border, where you can walk across and catch a bus onward.

There should be no fee to leave Honduras or to enter El Salvador, but Honduran immigration authorities may charge a small fee. Likewise, there should be no fee to leave El Salvador. On the Salvadoran side, buses leave frequently for **San Salvador** and **La Palma**. The last one to San Salvador leaves El Poy around 4:15pm. On the Honduran side, the last bus from El Poy to Nueva Ocotepeque leaves at 7pm.

For information on crossing the border from El Salvador see p322.

La Entrada (US\$4, 2½ hours, 123km) Take any San Pedro Sula bus.

San Pedro Sula (US\$6, 4½ hours, 247km) Toritos & Copaneca has regular departures from 3am to 5:30pm, while Congolón has eight departures daily: first at midnight, last at 3:30pm.

Santa Rosa de Copán (US\$2.40, 1½ hours, 95km) Take any San Pedro Sula bus.

Tegucigalpa (US\$11, nine to 10 hours) Take the San Pedro Sula bus and transfer. One Toritos & Copaneca direct bus leaves at 11pm (US\$13).

NORTHERN HONDURAS

The lush, tropical northern region of Honduras has seduced visitors for centuries – its natural wonders and easy Caribbean vibe make it difficult to resist.

Tangled among the beaches are mangrove swamps and tropical vegetation; beyond them lie virgin jungle, slopes and rivers that just scream out to adventure travelers. Whether it is the howler monkeys of Parque Nacional Jeannette Kawas, or the manatees of the wild-life refuge at Cuero y Salado, nature stands strong in this part of the country. All this despite the huge agricultural development on the fertile, narrow coastal plains, which have yielded enough bananas to float an entire economy.

La Ceiba is the region's party town, and a jumping-off point for the Bay Islands. Its *zona viva* (party zone) has kept many a good-time gringo under its spell for longer than

planned. Beyond its urban core are 1001 outdoor adventures: rafting down the Río Cangrejal, hiking in Pico Bonito or whizzing on a canopy tour in the coastal jungle. Stretching right along the coast are Garifuna villages, bastions of a culture rich with African and Carib heritage. The Garifuna are descendants of slaves abandoned by the British on Roatán at the end of the 18th century.

Most people (rightly) quickly skip through port town of Puerto Cortés, but the two other main towns, Tela and Trujillo, both have their charms – beaches, plentiful seafood and laid-back people to name but a few.

The coast fills up with tourists during **Semana Santa** (Easter) when Hondurans enjoy a week of holidaying and making merry. Book in advance at this time and beware the prices – they can double. Most places are quiet the rest of the time.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Travelers have been accosted and robbed on lonely stretches of beach outside La Ceiba, Tela and Trujillo, mostly by groups of youths. Some people have had belongings swiped from the beach while they were in the water. This was more of a concern a few years back and tourist police have helped address the problem.

However, do be vigilant. Do not walk along these beaches without company, and never after dark.

The north coast has a very high rate of HIV infection: plan accordingly.

DIG THAT BEAT: INSIDE GARÍFUNA DANCING

Shaking to live Garífuna music is a highlight of the north coast. Musicians create a throbbing pared-down sound using large drums, a turtle shell, maracas and a big conch shell. Words are chanted, the audience responds and dancers begin to move their hips in physics-defying loops to the *punta*, a traditional Garífuna dance.

During mid July every year, the **national Garífuna dance festival** takes place in the small town of Baja Mar, near Puerto Cortés. All towns and villages have annual fiestas, and cultural events and gatherings of one kind or another happen throughout the year. **Garífuna Day** (April 12), a big holiday for all the Garífuna communities, commemorates the day in 1797 when the Garífunas arrived in Honduras. Often you can arrange for dances if you ask around at Garífuna villages.

Near Trujillo, the towns of Santa Fe and Santa Rosa de Aguán have their festivals on July 15 to 30 and August 22 to 29, respectively. The last three days are usually the most frenetic.

The National Ballet Folklórico Garífuna, based in Tegucigalpa, is a first-rate dance troupe that has performed around the world; if you get a chance to attend a performance, don't miss it.

PUERTO CORTÉS

pop 50,100

Puerto Cortés, 64km north of San Pedro Sula, is the westernmost of Honduras' major Caribbean towns. It is one of Honduras' principal deepwater ports, and over half of the country's export shipping trade, mostly bananas, pineapples and other produce, passes through here. However, there's not a lot of interest to travelers.

Information

BAC Credomatic (Parque Central) This bank has a Unibanc ATM.

Banco de Occidente (2a Av at 4a Calle; ☎ 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat) On the corner of parque central; changes traveler's checks and gives cash advances on Visa cards.

Multinet Internet Café (Parque Central; per hr US\$0.65; ☎ 8:15am-8pm Mon-Sat, 9:15am-7:15pm Sun) The most convenient internet café in town. International calls to the USA cost US\$0.05 per minute.

Sights

Playa de Cieneguita, a few kilometers toward Omoa, is the most pleasant beach in the area and has a couple of beachside restaurants and upscale hotels. Other beaches at Travesía and Baja Mar (opposite) are accessible by local bus. The proximity to San Pedro Sula means the beaches here can get crowded on weekends and holidays.

Puerto Cortés' **annual fair** is held on August 15.

The main reason for coming to Puerto Cortés is its twice-weekly boat service to Belize, the only regularly scheduled boat transportation between the two countries.

Sleeping & Eating

There are plenty of places to stay in Puerto Cortés, although few nice ones. Below are two of the more acceptable options.

Hotel El Centro (☎ 665 1160; 3a Av btwn 2a & 3a Calles Este; s/d with fan US\$13.30/18.75, with air-con US\$18.15/23.50; (P) (☎)) Cramped but secure rooms are well kept and have clean bedding – there should be a small fashion warning: the walls are very orange. It is convenient to the bus stations.

Hotel Internacional Mr Ggeerr (☎ 665 4333; 9a Calle btwn 1a & 2a Aves; s/d/tr US\$21/21/27; (☎)) Despite a pretty unpromising, seedy-looking facade, this is not too bad within. Rooms are a bit dingy, but linen is well starched and all rooms are air-conditioned, a definite plus in this sweltering port town. Turn right a block further east after Sport Boy's.

Sport Boy's (☎ 665 1141; 2a Av btwn 8a & 9a Calles; dishes US\$2.50-5.75; ☎ 10am-10pm) Simple no-frills café serving filling, meat-heavy dishes, including hamburgers. There are a couple of basic salad options, and you can also choose from the 'sand wish' combos.

Getting There & Away BOAT

Two different companies run crossings to Belize. The crossings are not always on time, and the schedule has changed several times recently. The **Express** (☎ 9848 4198) leaves Barra la Laguna, 3km southeast of Puerto Cortés, at 11:30am Monday to Big Creek and Placencia (three hours). Another company, **Water Taxi Nesymein Neydy** (☎ 3396 1380), goes to Belize at noon on Monday and Tuesday, again calling at Big Creek and Placencia. Tickets to each destination cost US\$50, whichever boat you

take. You need to be there by 9am to sign up, with your passport, on the day of travel. To get to the ferries, take any San Pedro-Omoa bus and get off at La Laguna. The office is in the fish market, under a bridge about 200m from the highway. You can also change lempiras to Belizean dollars at the dock.

Note that it may be cheaper and easier for you to get to Belize via the Guatemalan port of Puerto Barrios (see p179).

BUS

The two bus companies that service San Pedro Sula have terminals side by side on 4a Av between 3a and 4a Calles, one block north and half a block west of the parque central. **Citul** (☎ 665 0466) has express minibuses that leave every 15 minutes from 4am to 6pm (US\$1.30) while **Impala** (☎ 665 0606) also runs every 15 minutes from 4am to 9pm (US\$1.60). Make sure you get on a smaller, faster *directo* minibus unless you're seriously watching the lempira, in which case get one of the slower buses (US\$1.10, every 10 minutes between both companies).

With its terminal half a block north, **Transportes Citral Costeños** (☎ 655 0888; 3a Calle Este) has buses to the Corinto border with Guatemala every 20 minutes (US\$2, two hours). The last bus leaves at 4pm.

See the Travesía & Baja Mar (right) and Omoa (right) sections for information on buses to those areas.

TRAIN

A passenger train that used to operate between Puerto Cortés and Tela has now stopped permanently.

TRAVESÍA & BAJA MAR

Just to the east of Puerto Cortés, Travesía and Baja Mar are two seaside Garífuna villages. The beach at Travesía is cleaner than the one at Baja Mar. The road from Puerto Cortés runs along the sea, first through Travesía and on to Baja Mar; the two villages form a continuous row of wooden houses beside the sea, with small fishing boats lining the shore.

There are one or two restaurants in each village. Baja Mar is best known as the home of the Garífuna national dance festival (see opposite), held here every year between July 9 and 24. Members of all three dozen or so Garífuna communities in Honduras attend, sometimes dancing right through the night.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Frontera del Caribe (☎ /fax 665 5001; r US\$13.25; (P)) Right on the beach in Travesía, this is the most pleasant place to stay near Puerto Cortés if you're on a budget. Seven upstairs rooms (sleeping up to three people), all with private bathroom and ceiling fan, are simple, clean and often have a pleasant sea breeze. Downstairs is an inexpensive beachside restaurant which serves breakfast, lunch and dinner.

The bus coming from Puerto Cortés stops just outside the door.

Getting There & Away

The bus to Travesía and Baja Mar departs from near the Citul terminal in Puerto Cortés at 7am, 10am, noon, 2pm, 3pm and 5pm; the last bus back leaves Baja Mar around 3:45pm, passing Travesía round 4pm. The bus runs less frequently on Sunday.

A taxi will take you between Puerto Cortés and Travesía in about 10 minutes for US\$4.

OMOA

pop 5300

The small, snail-paced village of Omoa lies 18km west of Puerto Cortés on a broad, curving bay that makes for great sunsets. A longtime weekend getaway for San Pedro Sula residents, Omoa used to attract a steady stream of backpackers, most heading to or coming from nearby Guatemala. Now the highway to the border is paved, not so many stop. Controversial liquid-gas spheres haven't helped improve the town's appeal. That said, it's still not a bad place to break up a journey, with one good hostel and a clutch of seafood restaurants along the seafront. Omoa's **annual festival** is held on May 30.

Information

Buses to and from Omoa leave from the beach. If you're in a hurry, walk the 1km to the highway for more regular buses. Banco de Occidente changes traveler's checks. There are a few small *pulperías* on the highway and some fruit stands on the road to the beach. Check your email at Saonet Internet on the main road near the highway.

Sights

Omoa's claim to historical fame is its Spanish fortress (now with a museum), the **Fortaleza de San Fernando de Omoa** (admission US\$2; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun). Built between 1759 and

CROSSING THE BORDER

Getting to Puerto Barrios, Guatemala

The Guatemalan border is 3km past the town of **Corinto**. For now, you take a bus from Omoa to Corinto (US\$2, every hour), where you go through Honduras immigration (exit stamp US\$2) and then catch a pickup to the border. The road is now paved and Honduras immigration – and the bus stop – should have moved to the actual border by the time you read this. From there, Guatemalan buses connect to **Puerto Barrios**. The whole trip takes around four hours and costs about US\$3.

There is no regular passenger boat service from Honduras to Guatemala.

See p179 for information on crossing the border from Guatemala.

Getting to Placencia, Belize

Boats to Belize leave from **Barra La Laguna** near Puerto Cortés every Monday and Tuesday to Dangriga and Placencia. Tickets (US\$50) need to be purchased several hours or, ideally, a day in advance. See p384.

1777 under orders from King Fernando VII of Spain to protect the coast from rampant piracy, in 1779 the fortress was captured by the British after only a four-day battle. Still in good shape, the fort is maintained by the Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia.

There are a couple of cool waterfalls and swimming holes in the area. They are a 45- and 60-minute walk respectively from Omoa; for safety, do not go alone.

Sleeping & Eating

Roli's Place (☎ 658 9082; rg@yaxpactours.com; campsite per person US\$2.70, hammock US\$2.70, dm US\$3.80, r with shared bathroom US\$8.60, r with bathroom & air-con US\$16.20; 🍴) A well-equipped hostel, this has a communal kitchen and free use of kayaks and bicycles. There are now two well-furnished double rooms, for a bit more luxury, alongside dormitories, double rooms with shared showers, a terrace for hammocks and a tent area. There is purified water on tap. Watch out for the (numerous) hostel rules, including an 11pm curfew – the Swiss owner has little patience with rule-breakers. He operates a shuttle to La Ceiba and Puerto Barrios (see right).

Hotel Fisherman (☎ 658 9224; r per person US\$8.10) About the only other half-decent budget option in town. Make sure you have a nose around before you take a room – some of the bathrooms are so tiny, you had better be ready to breathe in. The owners have a restaurant just opposite.

La Casa Romántica (dishes US\$2-6; 🍴 9am-9pm) The quirky German-speaking owner whips up some lovely seafood dishes, including red snapper and barracuda and some excellent

salads. The hours are unreliable, however, and there was talk of selling the restaurant when we visited. Turn left at the pier and walk about 100m down to see if it is still there.

Comedor Doña Rafa (dishes US\$1-2; 🍴 7am-8pm) A short walk up the main road from Roli's Place, this simple eatery is run by a chatty, friendly señora. It serves well prepared *típica* including eggs, beans, beef soup and more. A good breakfast option.

Getting There & Away

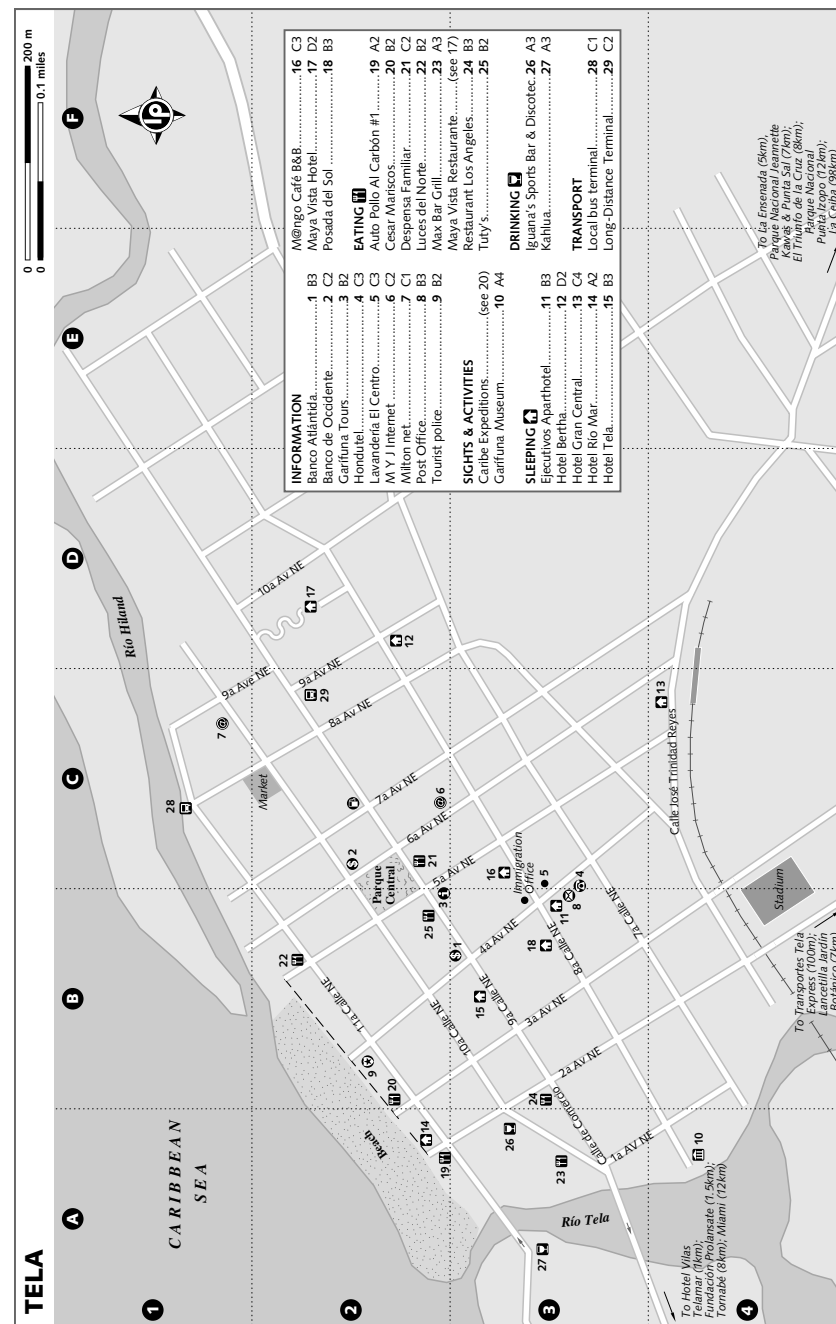
BUS
Buses direct to Omoa depart from Puerto Cortés every 20 minutes from 6am to 7:20pm (US\$0.70, one hour). They depart just behind the Cital and the Impala terminals in Puerto Cortés. Most will take the turnoff on the highway, and drop passengers off on the beach. From Omoa to Puerto Cortés, buses depart every half hour from 4:30am to 6:30pm. From Puerto Cortés, buses leave frequently for San Pedro Sula, a transport hub.

Roli's Place runs shuttles to La Ceiba (US\$20, minimum six people) or to Puerto Barrios in Guatemala (US\$15).

TELA

pop 30,000

There is something about Tela. On the surface it's not much to look at. It is hot and humid, and the center is just another Honduran town – maybe moving at a slower pace. But after a day or so checking out its beaches, chatting to the locals and sampling the seafood, many find themselves falling for its languid, laid-back vibe.



Tela is sleepy most of the year, but it's another story during **Semana Santa** (Holy Week before Easter), when the town fills up with Honduran vacationers. During Semana Santa, hotel room rates can double, and advance bookings are essential if you want to get a bed. In July and August, the number of travelers skyrockets, although room rates are unchanged.

The town is a good base for excursions to several wildlife and beauty hotspots nearby.

Orientation

Tela is divided into two sections: Tela Vieja, the 'old town', on the east bank of Río Tela where the river meets the sea, and Tela Nueva, on the west side of the river, where Hotel Villas Telamar hugs the best stretch of beach.

Information

EMERGENCY

Tourist Police (☎ 448 2079; 11a Calle NE at 4a Av NE; ☎ 24hr)

INTERNET ACCESS

M Y J Internet (6a Av NE; per hr US\$0.65; ☎ 7:30am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun)

Milton.net (☎ 415 3040; 10a Calle at 9a Ave NE; ☎ 8am-9pm) Ramshackle little internet and call center.

LAUNDRY

Lavandería El Centro (4a Av NE; ☎ 7am-6pm Mon-Sat) Charges US\$3.50 to wash, dry and fold 10lb of clothes.

MONEY

Banco Atlántida (4a Av at 9a Calle NE; ☎ 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30-11:30am Sat) Changes traveler's checks and gives cash advances on Visa cards.

Banco de Occidente (☎ 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30-11:30am Sat) Northeast corner of the parque central. Does cash advances on Visa and MasterCard.

POST & TELEPHONE

Next door to each other:

Hondutel (☎ 448 2004; 4a Av; ☎ 7am-8:45pm)

Post office (4a Av; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

There's no tourist information office in Tela but the following places can fill the gaps.

Fundación Prolansate (☎ 448 2042; www.prolansate-ecoturismo.com; Bo Independencia; ☎ 7am-noon & 1:30-5:30pm Mon-Sat, 8:30am-noon Sun) Opposite Villas Telamar. Promotes sustainable tourism in Tela and has information on Lancetilla Botanical Gardens and Punta Sal

and can organize educational visits. It is a 20-minute trek from town.

Garifuna Tours (☎ 448 2904; tours@hondutel.com; 9a Calle NE at 5a Ave NE; ☎ 7:30am-6:30pm) Local, well-established tour operation.

Dangers & Annoyances

Cases of assault and robbery used to occur regularly on the beaches in and around Tela. While the tourist police has mostly stopped the problem, exercise caution and do not walk on the beaches after dusk.

Sights & Activities

Tela's main attraction is its **beaches**, which stretch around the bay for several kilometers on either side of the town. The beach in front of the town is sandy, but can be littered. The beach just over the bridge in Tela Nueva, in front of Hotel Villas Telamar, is much better; its pale, powdery sand and shady grove of coconut trees are kept clean. Beach chairs and umbrellas can be rented by nonguests (each US\$1.40). Beaches further afield, while much better, can be risky for solo travelers or after dusk.

Garifuna Museum (8a Calle NE) Closed for renovation when we passed through. Not much work seemed to be going on, but it might be worth seeing if things have changed – there were some interesting exhibits about Garifuna daily life.

Just outside of Tela there is some prime bird-watching and nature-spotting territory (see p390).

Tela's annual **fiesta day** is June 13.

Tours

Caribe Expeditions (☎ 448 9393; www.caribeexpeditions.com; 3a Av NE) Seems a professional outfit, offering reasonable trips and excursions (minimum six people) to local wildlife reserves such as Punta Sal and Lancetilla. It was moving at the time of research. Ask at the Cesar Mariscos restaurant.

Garifuna Tours (☎ 448 2904; www.garifunatours.com; 9a Calle NE at 5a Ave NE; ☎ 7:30am-6:30pm) Offers all-day boat excursions (US\$27), as well as bird-watching excursions to Los Micos Lagoon and kayak excursions to the Parque Nacional Punta Izopo. Bilingual tours (English and Spanish) are available. Some travelers report that the guides are not very informative.

Sleeping

M@ngo Café B&B (☎ 448 0388; 8a Calle NE btwn 4a & 5a Aves; s/d with fan US\$8/11.70, with air-con US\$16.50/21.25; ☎) A lot of backpackers end up here so it's not a

bad place to meet people. It is fairly ordinary – you get basic, clean rooms with hot water. It is operated by Garifuna Tours. You can also rent bikes here (half a day US\$4.10).

Posada del Sol (☎ 448 1895; 8a Calle NE btwn 3a & 4a Aves NE; s/d US\$8.10/13.50) This easy-come, easy-go little family-run *posada* (pension) has well-scrubbed basic rooms with private bathroom (cold water only) and a bible. The family, who lives on-site, is relaxed and friendly and will chat to you as you lounge in the communal courtyard.

Hotel Tela (☎ 448 2150; 9a Calle NE btwn 3a & 4a Aves NE; s/d US\$11/16.25; (P)) This matriarch of the Tela hotel scene offers one of the best deals in town, especially if there is more than one of you. It has not changed much over the years – the lino and varnish on the wooden floorboards have faded a little but its light, airy rooms remain elegantly simple. Only one room had a hot-water shower (number 11) when we were here. There's a large rooftop terrace and a restaurant.

Hotel Río Mar (☎ 448 1065; cnr 11a Calle NE & 2a Ave NE; with fan US\$15.75, with air-con US\$31.50; ☎) Clean, unflashy rooms with cable TV and cold-water bathrooms. Rooms branch off a long, dark corridor. The beach is just a stone's throw away.

Hotel Bertha (☎ 448 3020; 8a Calle NE btwn 8a & 9a Aves NE; s/d US\$11/22) This is not a bad deal, especially for a solo traveler. Although it is a little out of the way (it is close to the main Tela bus terminal), it is very well-kept, with floors you could eat off. Rooms have cable TV but no hot water.

Maya Vista Hotel y Restaurante (☎ 448 1497; www.mayavista.com, r with fan US\$25, with air-con US\$40-50; (P) ☎) Still one of the town's big traveler gathering spots and with good reason, even though it is pricier than most places. Most rooms have tasteful indigenous-inspired décor and a superb panorama of the bay. The stack-em-high design means you should have a floor (and therefore the view) to yourself. There is also a good restaurant on site.

Ejecutivos Aparthotel (☎ 448 1076; cnr 8a Calle NE & 4a Av NE; d/tr apt US\$27/30; (P) ☎) Very clean and well kept, this is a possible long-term option, especially if you are in a group. The spacious, tiled apartments – dotted with crosses and religious decorations – have a well-equipped kitchen, two double beds, cable TV and hot-water bathroom.

Hotel Gran Central (☎ 448 1099; www.hotelgrancentral.com; s/d US\$40/50; ☎) If you fancy splashing

out, this is the place to do it. The renovated colonial building has been beautifully decorated by the well traveled, engaging French owners. The high-ceilinged rooms are painted in earth colors. There is a small bar, and breakfast is available. Note that the hotel is a little way from the center – but Tela is not hard to get around.

Eating

Seafood is plentiful, delicious and cheap in Tela. Seafood soups are a particular delicacy of the town; fish, shrimp, lobster and *caracol* (conch) are found in many restaurants. Another specialty of the town is *pan de coco* (coconut bread); you'll see Garifuna women or their children walking around town selling it. Try it – it's delicious.

Tuty's (☎ 448 0013; 9a Calle NE at 5a Av NE; dishes US\$2-4; ☎ 7:30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 7:30am-3pm Sun) You'll find simple Formica tables, a bustling kitchen and friendly service (although you may have to wait for it) at this place just off parque central. There are omelet breakfasts if you are bored of *baleadas*, as well as pastries, juices and ice cream. Lunchtime options are particularly good value (sandwich and french fries US\$2.50). It is next door to a good bakery.

Auto Pollo Al Carbón #1 (11a Calle NE at 2a Av NE; dishes US\$2-4; ☎ 8am-11pm) Not a frill to be seen here: just simple roast-chicken platters served under a corrugated iron roof in an open-air shack, a wishbone's throw away from the Caribbean Sea.

Max Bar Grill (dishes US\$2-4; ☎ 8am-3pm & 5-9pm Mon-Wed, 8am-3pm & 7pm-2am Thu-Sat, weekends only in low season) The friendly owners here are so laid-back they are almost horizontal. This is the kind of place that closes up when it has run out of food, and will have a day off when business is slow. If you do find the doors open, there are good-value chicken and pork lunch specials for around US\$2.

Luces del Norte (☎ 448 1044; 11a Calle NE at 5a Av NE; dishes US\$3.50-9; ☎ 7am-10pm) With its rustic, wooden setting and sea-salt faded paint, this remains as popular as ever among both backpackers and locals – it has some real devotees. Excellent seafood is dished up among the tropical plants that sway throughout the restaurant. Pick your own seafood style – the menu runs the gamut from pasta to paella.

Cesar Mariscos (☎ 448 2083; 3a Av NE; dishes US\$5.50-9; ☎ 11am-10pm) A great open location by the beach boardwalk means you can spend your

meal next to the ocean while enjoying its bounty. Seafood, of course, is the specialty here, prepared in soups, pastas or on the grill.

Maya Vista Restaurante (☎ 448 1497; off 9a Calle btwn 7a & 8a Avs; dishes US\$3-11; 🕒 7am-9pm) The view over Tela's bay is spectacular from this well-established traveler's favorite – it is quite something to eat your spaghetti and *camarones* (prawns) with the waves crashing below. Afternoon coffee and cake is also a good option.

Restaurant Los Angeles (☎ 448 2389; Calle del Comercio; 🕒 10am-2pm & 5-9pm) This Chinese restaurant is just about the only Tela option where surf does not dominate the entire menu. Portions are enormous, even for the monstrous rations typical of Central America's Chinese restaurants. For about US\$3, you can feast for the 5000.

Despensa Familiar (Parque Central; 🕒 7am-7pm Mon-Sat, 7am-6pm Sun) Self-caterers should head to this central supermarket.

Drinking

The outdoor bar at the Maya Vista restaurant, with its fine ocean views, is about as good as it gets for an evening beer or frozen margarita; Max Bar Grill also gets lively on weekend nights.

The Iguana's Sports Bar & Discotec, in town, and Kahlua, just across the 11a Calle bridge, are both open Thursday to Sunday nights and are the most popular clubs with travelers.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Slower normal buses leave Tela every 20 minutes for La Ceiba (US\$1.30, 2½ hours, 4am to 6pm) from the long-distance terminal at the corner of 9a Calle NE and 9a Av NE, three blocks northeast of the square. For quicker direct buses, you can take a taxi to the Dippsa gas station on the highway, where buses headed to La Ceiba from San Pedro Sula pass regularly.

Eight direct buses a day go to San Pedro Sula (US\$3, two hours, 6am to 5pm) from the **Transportes Tela Express terminal** (2a Av NE) beyond the train tracks.

Local buses to the Garífuna villages near Tela depart from a dirt lot on the corner of 11a Calle and 8a Av (see p392 for times and schedules).

TRAIN

A train used to run between Puerto Cortés and Tela but is no longer in operation.

Getting Around

Tela has many taxis; a ride in town costs US\$0.55. A taxi to Lancetilla or San Juan is about US\$5; to Triunfo de la Cruz, La Ensenada or Tornabé the fare is around US\$6. Mountain bikes can be rented at the **M@ngo Café B&B** (☎ 448 2856; 8a Calle NE & 5a Av NE) for US\$7 for a full day.

AROUND TELA

Lancetilla Jardín Botánico

The second largest tropical garden in the world, the **Lancetilla Botanical Garden & Research Center** (www.lancetilla.org; admission US\$6; 🕒 7:30am-5pm, no entry after 4pm) was founded by the United Fruit Company in 1926 to experiment with the cultivation of various tropical plants in Central America. Although it is still an active research center, the public can now wander through this tropical wonderland of plant species from all corners of the globe. It has the largest collection of Asiatic fruit trees in the western hemisphere.

Admission includes an introductory tour, then you are free to roam the well-marked trails through the arboretum and main garden area. The bottom of the garden leads to a swimming hole.

Birdlife also thrives at Lancetilla – hundreds of species have been spotted, and this is a popular and accessible spot for birders. Each year on December 14 and 15 the Audubon Society conducts a 24-hour bird count; you can participate if you're here at that time. Migratory species are present from November to February. Bird-watching is best in the early morning or late afternoon.

There's a **visitor information office** (☎ 448 1740; 🕒 7am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) where the park begins, and an explanatory map is available. You can arrange bird-watching tours (US\$16) in advance by calling the information office ahead of time. Expect a very early morning start. Some information is also available from **Fundación Prolansate** (☎ 448 2042; www.prolansate-ecoturismo.com; Bo Independencia, Tela; 🕒 7am-noon & 1:30-5:30pm Mon-Sat, 8:30am-noon Sun).

Accommodation is available, including **cabins** (US\$20; 🛏) with three individual beds and private bathrooms. You need to call the visitor information office to book in advance.

GETTING THERE AND AWAY

Lancetilla is 7km southwest of the center of Tela. A good way to get here is by bike, which you can rent in Tela. Five kilometers from town there is a turnout off the highway that leads to the main gardens. You pay at a ticket office here. Alternatively, a taxi will take you there for around US\$5. Buses do run directly there, carrying workers to the gardens. Call the information office for times.

Parque Nacional Jeannette Kawas

Standing on the beach at Tela, you can look out and see a long arc of land curving out to the west to a point almost in front of you. This point, **Punta Sal**, is part of the Parque Nacional Jeannette Kawas.

The park has several white-sand beaches, including the pretty **Playa Cocalito**. Offshore coral reefs make for fine **snorkeling**, and howler monkeys live in the forest. The park used to be known as Parque Nacional Marino Punta Sal. It was renamed for Jeannette Kawas, an environmental campaigner and former director of Prolansate, who was murdered in 1995 following her tireless work to protect the park from developers. There is a US\$3 fee to enter.

On the park's east side is the **Laguna de los Micos** (Lagoon of the Monkeys) with mangrove forests, which harbors hundreds of bird species (especially from November to February, when migratory species flock here).

You can arrange day trips which include hiking, snorkeling and hanging out on Playa Cocalito. Both Garífuna Tours and Caribe Expeditions run here (see p388).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Aside from day trips with the Tela tour companies, you can negotiate a trip with one of the boatmen who tie up under the bridge between old and new Tela. You can also make the trip from the town of Miami. From there you can do a day trip by boat or even walk to Punta Sal and camp there – although, we have received reports of assaults on this deserted stretch of beach.

Refugio de Vida Punta Izopo

Standing on the beach at Tela and looking to the east, you can see another point: **Punta Izopo**, part of the Punta Izopo Wildlife Refuge. Rivers entering the wildlife refuge spread out into a network of canals that channel through

the tangle of mangrove forest. Monkeys, turtles and even crocodiles live here as well as many species of birds, including toucans and parrots.

You can arrange kayak trips through the Tela tour agencies (see p388). Gliding silently through the mangrove canals in a kayak, you can get close to the wildlife without disturbing it. It's 16km by road from Tela to Triunfo de la Cruz (below), a one-hour walk on the beach or a one-hour canoe ride.

Garífuna Villages

Several Garífuna villages are within easy reach of Tela. All of them are on the coast, with rustic houses right on the beach, fishing canoes resting on the sand and tiny restaurants serving delicious Garífuna food; the specialties are seafood soups and fish cooked in coconut. Although you can, in theory, quite easily walk to all these villages along the beaches, it is not always safe. They are mostly tranquil little places, although thefts and the occasional assault have been reported. Instead you could bus it or take a guided tour or a taxi along the access roads.

All villages have places to stay and at least a couple of restaurants beside the beach specializing in seafood (of course).

The closest village is attractive little **La Ensenada**, 3km east along the arc of the beach from Tela, just before you reach the point, Punta Triunfo, crowned by the Cerro El Triunfo de la Cruz. **Hotel Leoduvís** (☎ 935 3507; r with fan/air con US\$14/19; 📞 🛏) is well-maintained, with clean rooms. Cold-water showers only, but that is no big deal in this heat. There is a good beach just in front. There are seafood restaurants in La Ensenada (although most are only open on the weekend) and places to drink along the beach.

The larger village of **El Triunfo de la Cruz** can be reached by regular buses from Tela, departing from the corner on the east side of the market. It is the largest, most developed of the Garífuna villages, and doesn't have the same peaceful feeling of the other villages. There are a couple of reasonable places to stay. **Cabañas y Restaurante Colón** (☎ 986 5622; tw US\$11-16, r with air-con US\$24; 📞 🛏) is in the center, with a bunch of cabañas a few footsteps away from the sand. There is a seafood restaurant (mains US\$3.25 to US\$10.75) on-site, open for all meals. The upmarket choice here is the **Caribbean Coral Inn** (☎ 994 9806; www.caribbeancoralinn.com;

GUIFITI: MOONSHINE SECRETS

The local moonshine on the north coast of Honduras is a mysterious concoction known as Guifiti (sometimes spelt Gifiti or Güfiti). Legend has it that it is a natural aphrodisiac, and aficionados claim all sorts of medicinal qualities, from helping diabetes to cleaning arteries. The exact recipe varies from brewer to brewer, although most versions will contain a base of *aguadiente* (a potent local gut-rot), as well as a blend of herbs and spices. In fact, there are rumors that in some versions not all of the ingredients are entirely legal. Perhaps that is why you cannot pick up a bottle from supermarket shelves. However, make a few discreet enquiries in most north-coast towns and villages, and it won't be long before you track down a dram – even in surprisingly upmarket locations. It's pretty powerful stuff so don't throw too many glasses down your throat too quickly. If you are keen to spread the love and take some home, you can buy a legal version of it in the Mercado Guamilito in San Pedro Sula (p365).

s/d incl breakfast US\$51/62) with expensively rustic beachside cabins.

On the other side of Tela, to the west, is **Tornabé**, another Garifuna village, 8km away. It is a largish village. **Hotel the Last Resort** (☎ 995 2695; tw/tr US\$27/43; P ♻) is not as bad as it sounds – but not as upscale as the price tag merits.

Past Tornabé, the beach road becomes rougher and can only be negotiated by 4WD. It continues for several more kilometers to **Miami**, a beautiful but basic village on a narrow sandbar between the Caribbean Sea and the Laguna de los Micos. This area may well change beyond recognition. The Inter-American Development Bank has approved a controversial 'soft' loan for a giant hotel complex and golf club to be built in the area – hardly a big step towards ecologically and culturally sensitive tourism. The ground was being prepared by builders at the time of research.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Although you can walk along the beach from Tela to any of the villages, the walk is not always safe and should not be done alone or at night.

Buses to the Garifuna villages depart from the local bus terminal in Tela. There are two routes: one heading west to Tornabé, another heading east to Triunfo de la Cruz. Buses on both routes depart hourly from around 6am to 5pm; the fare is about US\$0.50, and it takes about 30 to 45 minutes to reach the villages.

If you're driving or cycling, you can get to Tornabé by the beach road heading west from Tela. Be careful where you cross the sandbar at the Laguna de los Micos between San Juan and Tornabé; vehicles regularly get stuck in the sand here. You may need a 4WD vehicle to get past Tornabé to Miami. You can also get to

Tornabé from the highway; the turnoff, 5km west of Tela, is marked by a sign to 'The Last Resort.' To drive to La Ensenada or Triunfo de la Cruz, take the highway to the turnoff for Triunfo de la Cruz, 5km east of Tela. After 1km the road forks. Go left to La Ensenada, right to Triunfo de la Cruz.

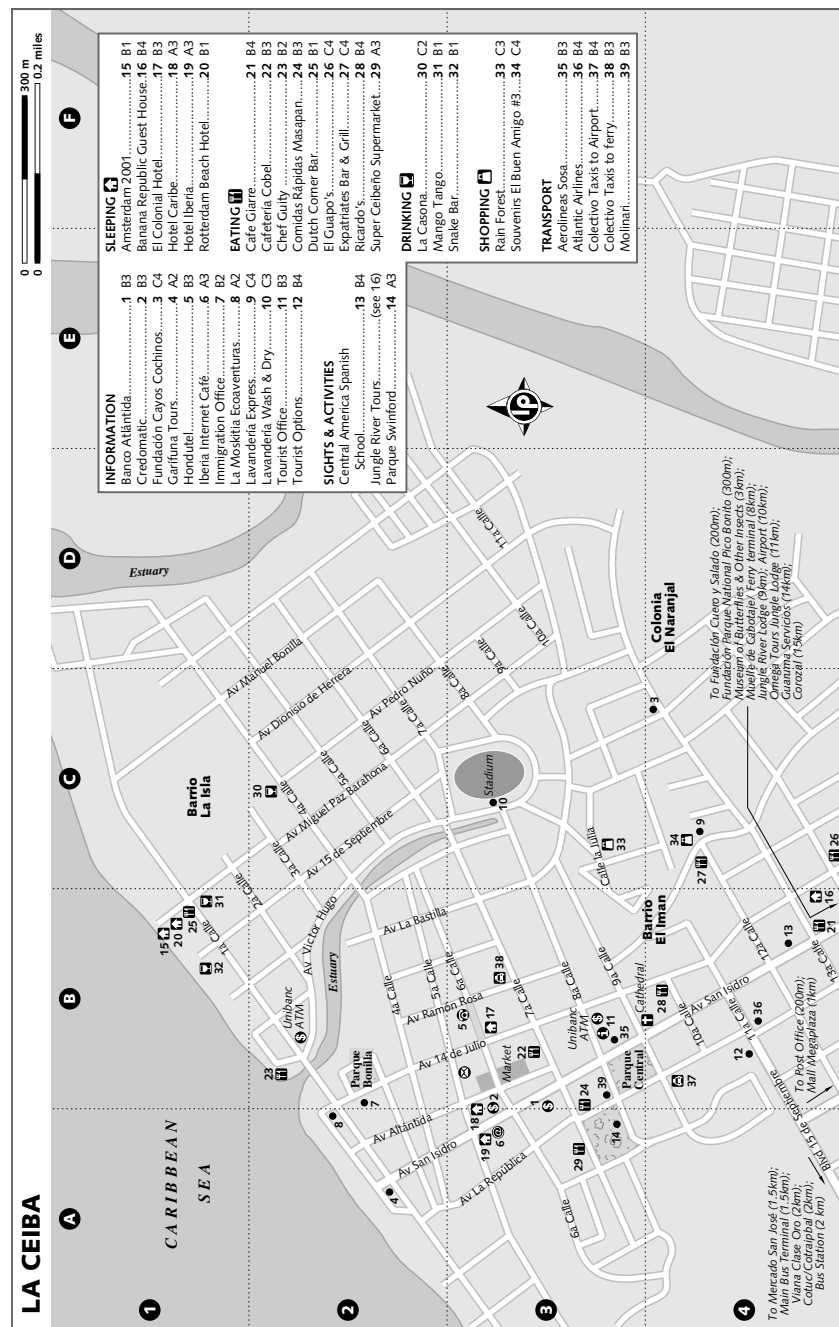
LA CEIBA
pop 138,800

It is known as Honduras' party town – Tegucigalpa thinks, San Pedro Sula works and La Ceiba has fun, the saying goes. There is certainly a full and vibrant nightlife, which makes this port city, set beneath the magnificent Pico Bonito mountain, more than just a jumping-off point to the Bay Islands or La Moskitia. Certainly, *Ceibeños*, as the locals are known, are proud of their city, Honduras' third largest. It is not a particularly attractive place at first glance. The beaches are average at best, and the buildings are not much to write home about either. But with some fine bars and restaurants, and excellent adventure tourism just a short hop away, it is small wonder that many visitors linger longer than planned.

La Ceiba got its name from a very large ceiba tree that used to stand on the coast near where the pier is now.

Orientation

The heart of La Ceiba is its attractive, shady parque central. Av San Isidro, running from the east side of the plaza to the sea, is La Ceiba's main drag. A block or two over, Av 14 de Julio is another major commercial street. Av La República, running to the sea from the opposite side of the plaza, has train tracks down its center that used to transport Standard Fruit Company cargo to the pier.



GETTING INTO TOWN**To & From the Airport**

La Ceiba's airport, the Aeropuerto Internacional Golosón, is 10km west of La Ceiba on the highway to Tela. Any bus heading west from the main bus terminal could drop you there. Taxis from Colectivo Taxensa leave from the southwest corner of parque central and pass the airport (US\$0.70); you have to wait for the taxi to fill up. A normal taxi costs about US\$3.

Coming from the airport, don't take one of the taxis right at the airport door, which charge about US\$5 per person for the ride into town; walk out to the main road and flag down a colectivo which will take you into town for around US\$0.70 per person.

From the Bus Terminal

The main bus terminal is at Mercado San José, about 1.5km west of central La Ceiba. The **Viana Clase Oro** (☎ 441 2330) express bus terminal is another 500m further west along the same street, at the Servicentro Esso Miramar. A local bus runs between the main bus terminal and the central plaza (US\$0.17), or you can take a taxi (US\$1.10; colectivo US\$0.70).

To & From the Pier

Ferries to the **Bay Islands** operate from the Muelle de Cabotaje, about 8km (20 minutes) east of town. From the bus terminal or from town, taxis should take you there for US\$5.50 per carload (up to four people); from the pier back to either location is US\$1.70 per person. A colectivo goes from the town center from 7a Calle, a good lempira-saving option if you are traveling alone. There is no colectivo on the way back.

Over the estuary is Barrio La Isla, the city's *zona viva*, or party zone. There's a large Garifuna community on this side.

Information**IMMIGRATION**

Immigration office (☎ 442 0638; 1a Calle near Av 14 de Julio; ☎ 7:30am-3:30pm)

INTERNET ACCESS

Iberia Internet Café (Av San Isidro; per hr US\$0.80; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Fri, 8am-9pm Sat, 10am-8pm Sun) Next to Hotel Iberia. Reliable high-speed connections; good-quality international calls for US\$0.17 per minute.

LAUNDRY

Lavandería Express (per 10lb US\$3; ☎ 7:30am-noon & 1-5:30pm) Near Expatriates Bar & Grill.

Lavandería Wash & Dry (per 10lb US\$2.65; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Sat) West of the stadium.

MONEY

All the banks in the Mall Megaplaza have ATMs.

Banco Atlántida (Av San Isidro) Changes traveler's checks and has an ATM.

Credomatic (☎ 443 0668; Av San Isidro) Opposite Hotel Iberia; use Visa and MasterCard here.

POST

Post office (Av Morazán at 14a Calle; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) A bit of a trek from the center.

TELEPHONE

Hondutel (Av Ramón Rosa btwn Calles 5a & 6a; ☎ 7am-8:30pm) Domestic and international phone calls.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Fundación Cuero y Salado (☎ /fax 443 0329; www.cueroyosalado.org; Av Ramón Rosa at 15a Calle; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8-11am Sat) Manages the Cuero y Salado Wildlife Reserve.

Tourist Office (☎ 440 3044; 8a Calle; ☎ 8am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Helpful local tourist office located just off the park.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Tour companies (opposite) are your best bet for booking travel services.

Sights

Parque Swinford (Av La República btwn 7a & 8a Calles) is a lush, tropical botanical oasis in the heart of La Ceiba, complete with a restored railway carriage from the area's track heyday. You will probably have to share it with a few smooching couples.

Museum of Butterflies & Other Insects (☎ 442 2874; www.hondurasbutterfly.com; Calle Escuela Internacional G-12,

Colonia El Sauce; adult/child US\$3/1.50; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat) is a remarkable collection of over 12,000 butterflies, moths and other insects. Most of them were collected in Honduras by schoolteacher Robert Lehman, and all are displayed in cases covering the walls. Highlights include the largest moth in the world, with a 30cm (1ft) wingspan, and a gigantic quarter-pound beetle, the heaviest in the world. There's a self-guided tour and an interesting 25-minute video about butterflies and moths.

The city reaches its good-time peak at **Carnaval**, when it gets very busy. It's celebrated here during the third week in May; Saturday is the biggest day, with parades, costumes, music and celebrations in the streets.

Activities

La Ceiba is, quite rightly, the adventure and ecotourism capital of Honduras. See (right) for details of tour operators offering the following activities.

WHITE-WATER RAFTING & CANOEING

The **Río Cangrejal** offers some of the best white-water rafting in Central America. Both Jungle River Tours and Omega Tours offer trips. You will likely have fun on both. Omega Tours cost more, but its trips are better received. Canoe or kayak trips in nearby, less-visited lagoons such as **Cacao Lagoon** often turn up more monkey and bird sightings than trips to Cuero y Salado. Find out how long you'll be on the water and if lunch or excursions (like short hikes into Parque Nacional Pico Bonito) are included.

HIKING

Independent travelers can visit Cuero y Salado wildlife refuge and hike in the Pico Bonito National Park without joining an expensive tour group (see p400 for more on how to go it alone). Some of the more complicated trips are better done with a guide, including trips to area waterfalls and Garifuna villages. Guaruma Servicios is a good option for the Río Cangrejal side of Pico Bonito, while on the El Pino side, get in touch with the tourism committee at **Vivero Natural View** (☎ 368 8343, 371 9631).

CANOPY TOURS

Jungle River Tours operates an eight-cable circuit that lasts two hours and includes a 200m slide across the river (per person US\$35,

reservation required). Like all Jungle River tours, a free night at the river lodge is included. There is now an even longer canopy tour about 500m past Sambo Creek, east of La Ceiba (see p399).

Festivals & Events

Visitors from far and wide descend on La Ceiba for its annual **Carnaval**, held during the week of May 15, which is the day of San Isidro, the town's patron saint. People dress up in costumes and masks and dance themselves silly; it's a great time.

Courses

The **Central America Spanish School** (☎ 440 1061; www.ca-spanish.com; Av San Isidro btwn 12a & 13a Calles) offers intensive language classes. A week's homestay and tuition costs US\$190.

Tours

Garifuna Tours (☎ 448 2904; Av San Isidro at 1a Calle; www.garifunatours.com) Organizes rafting trips and tours of Pico Bonito and Cuero y Salado.

Guaruma Servicios (☎ 442 2673; www.guaruma.org) A worthwhile operation dedicated to boosting opportunities for the local community through sustainable tourism. It's based at the small village of Las Mangas in Río Cangrejal.

Jungle River Tours (☎ 440 1282/1268; www.jungleriverlodge.com) At Banana Republic Guest House, organizes white-water rafting trips (from US\$35), canopy tours and hiking; rappelling and bouldering also available. Trips can include a free night at the jungle lodge.

La Moskitia Ecoaventuras (☎ 442 2124; www.honduras.com/moskitia; Av 14 de Julio) Offers white-water rafting, tours of Pico Bonito and Cuero y Salado, and multi-day trips into La Moskitia. Based at Hotel Plaza Caracol.

Omega Tours (☎ 440 0334; www.omegatours.hn; Omega Tours Jungle Lodge, road to Yaruca Km 9) Set up by a former international kayaker, it offers white-water rafting (from US\$44), and swimming, kayak and canoe trips, horseback riding, and jungle- and river-hiking tours. All trips include a free night at its jungle lodge. Slightly pricier but slicker than rival Jungle River Tours.

Tourist Options (☎ 440 0265; www.hondurastouristoptions.com; Blvd 15 de Septiembre) Friendly agency, arranging trips to Garifuna villages, Pico Bonito, Cuero y Salado and Cayos Cochinos, among others. In the Viajes Atlántida travel agency.

Sleeping

Accommodations are fairly uninspired in La Ceiba. Staying in the center is convenient, although it is eerily quiet at night. Barrio La

Isla is nearer the nightlife. There is now one decent hostel, which has improved things. More interesting accommodation is outside the city amid the tropical jungle by the Río Cangrejal.

DOWNTOWN

Banana Republic Guest House (☎ 441 9404, 440 1268, Av La República, www.jungleriverlodge.com; dm US\$5, d with shared bathroom US\$10; d/tr with bathroom US\$13/19; P) This is a welcome addition to La Ceiba's accommodation scene, which was short on good hostels. It is run by the same people who manage Jungle River Lodge. We trust this new site will be the same as the last – basic, clean, secure and a good place to bump into fellow travelers. A bus to the ferry terminal runs right outside.

Hotel San Carlos (☎ 443 0330; Av San Isidro btwn 5a & 6a Calle; s/d with bathroom US\$6.50/8.10) Upstairs rooms are bare but efficiently scrubbed and with clean linen. It has the same owner as the midrange Hotel Iberia next door. In room 21 you can just squeeze a view of Pico Bonito through the mosquito net and glass slats. You do not have to go far for bread – it is set behind a bakery.

Hotel Caribe (☎ 443 1857; 5a Calle btwn Aves San Isidro & Atlántida; s/d US\$6/10, with TV US\$8/11, r with air-con & TV US\$14; ☺) Large upstairs rooms with fans are a reasonable deal, although get flip-flops at the ready for the shared bathrooms. Linen is not always clean.

El Colonial Hotel (☎ 443 1953; fax 443 1955; Av 14 de Julio btwn 6a & 7a Calle; s with fan US\$11, s/d with air-con US\$14.50/18.50; ☺) Formerly one of the more up-market places in town, this fell on hard times and has reinvented itself as one of the better downtown budget places. Spotless rooms have cold-water private bathrooms. The entrance is hard to find – look out for the doorway up some stairs in the central shopping district.

Hotel Iberia (☎ 443 0401; www.hoteliberia.com; Av San Isidro btwn 5a & 6a Calles; r US\$25; P) Not an amazing deal for what you pay (the rooms are past their overhaul date) but the service is friendly and the hotel is secure. The central location – just a few paces away from internet cafés and banks – is also a plus. Rooms have private hot-water bathrooms.

BARRIO LA ISLA

These two options are a good 15-minute walk from downtown, but a mere stumble away from the nightlife.

Amsterdam 2001 (☎ 443 2311; off 1a Calle; dm/d/tr US\$5/9/13) On the same street as Rotterdam Beach. Run by a Dutch former sailor, this was the town's original backpackers' hangout. The rooms were clean when we visited but many other travelers have been unimpressed.

Rotterdam Beach Hotel (☎ 440 0321; off 1a Calle; d/tr US\$10/15) Near the *zona viva* area. Rooms front onto an attractive, tropical garden with a wood-cabin reception. Rooms are clean and a good value. It is run by a Dutch-Honduran family.

RÍO CANGREJAL

Guaruma Community Lodge (☎ 443 0618, 442 2673; www.guaruma.org; s/d US\$8/15) Set high in the mountainside community of Las Mangas, beyond the two jungle lodges, these hillside cabins were built by a local workforce. They are comfortable, basic and clean, and include hot water. Profits are channeled back into the community. There's a restaurant with good-value meals (US\$3.30) for guests. You can organize walks with local guides through the surrounding jungle, including to the lovely El Bejuco waterfall. The one downer is that there is not much in the way of organized transfers. You'll have to make your own way by bus to Yaruca (see p399) or flag a pickup.

Jungle River Lodge (☎ 440 1268; www.jungleriverlodge.com; road to Yaruca Km 7; dm/d US\$9/23) The rooms and dorms are rustic but the setting is a winner. On a hillside, the lodge overlooks the roaring Río Cangrejal. Sitting in the outdoor restaurant will be one of your more memorable Honduran experiences. Canopy tours start here; swimming, hiking and white-water rafting options are nearby. To get here, take a Yaruca bus from the main terminal and look for a sign on your right, or call and organize it with Banana Republic Guest House. You stay in the dorm room for free if you take an organized trip.

Omega Tours Jungle Lodge (☎ 440 0334, 965 5815; www.omegatours.hn; Road to Yaruca Km 9; s/d with shared bathroom US\$10/14, cabins US\$25-75) Set in the mountainside a little up from the river, Omega Lodge is a study in tasteful development. A trip with Omega Tours includes a clean, basic room at the bottom of the complex. A lot more pricey but very memorable are the cabins at the top – beautifully done out in a style best described as modernist German meets tropical tree cabin, and with superb views. The simpler Creek Cabin is elevated over running water. Outdoor showers are solar heated

and no chemicals are used in the swimming pool. Among the tropical gardens is a bar and restaurant serving good dishes with a German twist. Take the Yaruca bus from the main terminal and look for a sign on your left, just beyond the Jungle River Lodge; or contact Omega to arrange a transfer.

Eating

DOWNTOWN

Cafeteria Cobel (☎ 442 2192; 7a Calle at Av Atlántida; dishes US\$2-3.50; ☎ 6:30am-6pm Mon-Sat) Cheap little eatery where you can get your *comida típica* (typical lunch) for two bucks, including grilled meat or chicken with rice. The bustle means you may take a while to attract the attention of the neatly uniformed waitresses. There is air-con in the back room – or you can order a *licuado* (US\$0.70) to cool down.

Comidas Rápidas Masapan (☎ 442 0627; cnr 7a Calle & Av La República; dishes US\$2.50-5.50; ☎ 6am-8pm) Its cafeteria style may take you back to lunchtime in the fourth grade, but there's a good spread of cheap, filling and tasty dishes, whichever meal you slide your tray down the rails for. Dishes are mostly Honduran, but there are some pastas and Caribbean meals thrown into the mix. A very good budget option.

El Guapo's (☎ 440 1302; 14a Calle with Av 14 de Julio; mains US\$5.50-7; ☎ lunch & dinner) This is run by a larger-than-life American and his Honduran partner. Grill dishes are heaped high and are surprisingly good value. The shaded outdoor tables are very pleasant despite the proximity of the main road. It hosts regular events at the restaurant, from literary evenings to live music.

Café Giarre (cnr Av San Isidro & 13a Calle; dishes US\$5.50-7.50; ☎ 11:30am-10pm Wed-Mon, closed Sun morning) Take your pick from the outside terrace shaded by arching palm leaves or the cute little inside dining area at this elegant European-style café. Coffee-lovers are in for a treat – good espresso and cappuccinos are served here, as well as pasta, Italian cakes and tropical cocktails.

Expatriates Bar & Grill (☎ 442 0938; 12a Calle, Barrio El Imán; dishes US\$7-11; ☎ 2:30pm-midnight) This is a slice of Americana under a thatched roof in the tropics. Big games are often screened here; the barbecued chicken wings are rightfully famous and vegetarian options are reasonable too. You may find yourself whiling away an evening drink speculating about the various expat characters that gather here. There is also a cocktail bar with a selection of fine cigars.

Ricardo's (☎ 443 0468; cnr Av 14 de Julio & 10a Calle; dishes US\$11-15; ☎ 11am-1:30pm & 5:30-10pm Mon-Sat) One of the finest restaurants in Honduras, Ricardo's is for the moneyed traveler or for a blow-out. Seafood dishes fetch almost North American prices, but with service this attentive, few complain. Hanging baskets dot the attractive garden patio; inside is the main dining room with air-con. There is an extensive wine list, including fine Chilean reds.

Super Ceibeño Supermarket (7a Calle; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Sat, 7am-7pm Sun) You can stock up on adventure rations.

BARRIO LA ISLA

Chef Guity (off 1a Calle; mains US\$2.50-5; ☎ 11am-10pm Tue-Sun) This is a simple open-air Garifuna restaurant. The service is friendly but as laid-back as a Sunday morning – don't go if your time is tight. However, the excellent *tapado* (a fish stew in coconut sauce) is definitely worth hanging around for. The restaurant is tucked away down a little unpaved side street.

Dutch Corner Bar (1a Calle; dishes US\$3-5; ☎ 7am-10pm) Next to Rotterdam Beach Hotel and Amsterdam 2001 – and run by the same family – this serves simple, good-value dishes such as fried chicken and spaghetti.

Drinking & Nightlife

Most of La Ceiba's nightlife centers in and around 1a Calle in Barrio La Isla, known as the *zona viva*.

La Casona (☎ 440 3471; admission US\$3.25-5.50; ☎ 9pm-2am Wed-Sat) It's the happening disco of the moment. Attracting a young, early-20s crowd, the venue is off a dirt road four blocks inland. The reggaeton tunes pump and the dance floor jumps, especially on weekend nights.

Mango Tango (☎ 440 2091; ☎ 5:30-11pm Wed-Mon) On the main strip, often packed with diners and drinkers enjoying the open-air ambience. It does cocktails (Tom Collins, Sex on the Beach) for about US\$2.60.

Snake Bar (☎ 8am-3am) Has its doors open at most times of the day and night, although the party only really gets going well after dark.

The Expatriates Bar & Grill (left) attracts a mix of foreigners and locals.

Entertainment

Gines Millenium (Mall Megaplaza; US\$2.20; ☎ screenings 7pm & 9pm) Two-screen-theater with recent Hollywood fare.

Shopping

Mall Megaplaza (22a Calle at Av Morazán; ☎ 10am-9pm) A modern American-style mall with a cinema, food court, internet cafés, banks and ATMs as well as an airline office.

Souvenirs El Buen Amigo #3 (☎ 442 0716; 12a Calle, Barrio El Iman; ☎ 8am-6:30pm Mon-Sat) Has a good choice of Honduran *artesanía*, although it is a bit out of the way. It includes everything from Lencan pottery, to Maya replicas, and coffee – and its fair share of tack too.

Rain Forest (☎ 443 2917; Calle la Julia; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) Has good-quality, but pricey, wooden artifacts, pottery, paintings and jewelry, and an English-language book selection.

Cigar buffs can get a wide range of local and imported cigars at the Expatriates Bar & Grill (p397).

Getting There & Away

La Ceiba's Aeropuerto Golosón is 10km west of downtown. Flights leave frequently for San Pedro Sula, Tegucigalpa, the Bay Islands and La Moskitia.

AIR

Aerolíneas Sosa (☎ 443 1399, airport at airport 440 0692; Av San Isidro btwn 8a & 9a Calles)

Atlantic Airlines (☎ 440 2343, airport 440 1220; 11a Calle at Av República)

TACA/Isleña (☎ 441 3190, airport 443 2683, 441 2521; Mall Megaplaza, 1st fl, 22a Calle at Av Morazán)

Destination	Fare
Guanaja	US\$87 (return US\$105)
Puerto Lempira (Atlantic Airlines)	US\$105 (return US\$191)
Roatán (Atlantic Airlines)	US\$48 (return US\$88)
San Pedro Sula	US\$66
Tegucigalpa	US\$81

BOAT

Ferries to the Bay Islands operate from the Muelle de Cabotaje, about 8km east of town. Taxis will take you there for US\$5.75 per carload (up to four people); coming back from the pier, it's US\$1.45 per person. Be at the pier at least half an hour before departure to buy your ticket.

Two boats ply the waters between La Ceiba and the Bay Islands. The **Galaxy Wave** (☎ in La Ceiba 443 4633, in Coxen Hole 445 1795) sails twice daily to Roatán; the smaller **Utila Princess II** (☎ La Ceiba pier 408 5163) goes between La Ceiba and Utila,

also twice daily. Departures for Roatán are at 9:30am and 2pm (one way US\$21.60, 1½ hours). From Roatán, the boats leave Terminal Nueva, Dixon's Cove (between Coxen Hole and French Harbor) at 7am and 4:30pm.

For Utila (one way US\$16.20, one hour), there are departures at 9:30am and 4pm, returning from the island at 6:20am and 2pm.

Note that these times are particularly prone to change. Check before you depart.

You could ask around the Muelle de Cabotaje about boats to other destinations. Captains of cargo and fishing boats might be persuaded to take along a passenger, but the practice is officially discouraged so don't count on it.

BUS

Most bus traffic goes through the bus terminal at Mercado San José, about 1.5km west of the center of La Ceiba – but there are some important exceptions. A local bus runs between the bus terminal and the central plaza (US\$0.20), or you can take a taxi (US\$0.80). **Diana Express** (☎ 441 6460), **Catisa-Tupsa** (☎ 441 2539) and **Kamaldy** (☎ 441 2028) all have offices there. The **Viana Clase Oro** (☎ 441 2251) express bus terminal is another 500m further west along the same road, at the Esso gas station. **Cotuc** (☎ 441 2199), for Trujillo, shares its terminal with Cotraibal further down the main highway, while luxury bus company **Hedman Alas** (☎ 441 5347; www.hedmanalas.com) has its terminal on the main highway just east of the center.

Buses go from La Ceiba to the following locations:

Copán Ruinas (US\$9.15) Take an early Diana Express service to San Pedro for the 1:30pm connection to the ruins.

El Porvenir (US\$0.55, 45 minutes, 15km)

La Unión-Cuero y Salado (US\$0.65, one hour, 20km, buses every 45 minutes 7am to 6pm (5pm Sunday) The last bus back to La Ceiba leaves La Unión at 4pm.

La Unión, Olancho (via Olanchito) (US\$2.70, five to six hours, 6am, 6:30am and hourly from 7:45am to 4:45pm) Take bus from the terminal to Olanchito and transfer to a La Unión bus (US\$3.50, three to four hours, noon only). Catch an early Olanchito bus to make the La Unión connection.

Nueva Armenia (US\$1.35, 2½ hours, 40km) Buses leave La Ceiba at 9am, 11:20am, 12:30pm, 2pm, 3:30pm and 4:30pm.

Sambo Creek (US\$0.50, one hour, 21km, every 40 minutes) First bus leaves La Ceiba at 6:10am, last leaves at 5pm. Last return bus leaves at 4:30pm.

San Pedro Sula Diana Express and Catisa-Tupsa (US\$4, 3½ hours, 202km, 5:45am to 5pm, every 45 minutes); Hedman-Alas (luxury service, US\$13, three hours, 5:15am, 10am, 2pm, and 5:45pm); Viana Clase Oro (luxury service, US\$10, 6:30am and 3pm)

Tegucigalpa Kamaldy (US\$9.50, seven hours, 397km, 5:15am, 9am and 2:15pm); Viana Clase Oro (luxury service, 6½ hours, US\$20, 6:30am, 10:30am, 2pm and 3pm); Hedman Alas (luxury service, US\$21.50, 6½ hours, 5:15am, 10am and 2pm)

Tela (US\$1.60, two hours, 103km, leaves main terminal every 30 minutes from 4:30am to 6pm) A quicker option is to take a San Pedro Sula bus (US\$3, 1½ hours). Tell the driver you want to get off at Tela and the bus will stop on the highway above town.

Trujillo Cotuc and Cotraibal (US\$4.30, three hours, every 45 minutes from 7:30am to 5pm) From main terminal: normal service (US\$3.50, 4½ hours, nine buses daily, first at 4am, last at 3:20pm); direct service (US\$4.65, 3½ hours, 6:10am).

Yaruca (US\$0.70, at 9am, 10:30am, 11:30am, 12:30pm and 1:30pm)

Getting Around

CAR

There are plenty of rental agencies in La Ceiba:

Advance Rent A Car (☎ 441 1105; www.advancerentacar.com; Carretera a Tela; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri)

Molinari (☎ 443 0055; 8a Calle at Av República) At the Gran Hotel Paris, facing the parque central.

TAXI

Taxis in La Ceiba are easy to find – they will normally find you – and a ride anywhere in town costs US\$0.80, going up to US\$1.10 after 8pm.

AROUND LA CEIBA

Cayos Cochinos

Cayos Cochinos (the Hog Islands), 29km from La Ceiba and just 17km from the shore, can be visited as a day trip or camping trip from La Ceiba. Access is by motorized canoe from the town of Nueva Armenia or Sambo Creek, east of La Ceiba.

The Hog Islands and the waters and reefs around them are a designated biological marine reserve – it is illegal to anchor on the reef, and commercial fishing is prohibited. Consequently, the reefs are pristine and fish abundant. Diving and snorkeling are excellent around the islands, with black coral reefs, wall diving, cave diving, seamounts and a plane wreck. The islands are also known for their unique pink boats.

It is possible to go independently to the cays, although you will not save much money, and local boatmen are unlikely to have a radio or life-jackets. Day trips start at around US\$35 per person. Several tour operators do them; see p395. It is worth contacting the foundation that campaigned for the marine park, **Fundación Cayos Cochinos** (☎ 442 2670; www.cayoscochinos.org; 13a Calle, Barrio El Iman, La Ceiba), for more information.

Rustic accommodations are available on some of the cays.

Garífuna Villages

Two seaside fishing villages are easy to reach from La Ceiba; **Corozal**, 15km east of La Ceiba, and **Sambo Creek**, 6km further east. Both places have thriving Garífuna communities, and you will see women in the striking traditional attire and headaddresses. However, poverty here is tangible. There are also some good-value restaurants. You can arrange to see local musical groups in both villages. The beach at Sambo Creek is more attractive than Corozal's.

The **annual fair** at Corozal, held from January 6 to 18, attracts people from far and wide, especially on the weekends of the fair, when you'll find dancing, partying, games and competitions. The annual fair at Sambo Creek is held in June.

If you are out this way, don't miss the **Sambo Creek Spa & Canopy Tour** (☎ 990 3743, 960 8318; US\$36), which whizzes you through the tree tops for more than an hour, and includes as long as you want in the hillside thermal springs. The turnover to the canopy is to the left, about 500m further along from the Sambo Creek turnover on the main highway to Trujillo.

At Sambo Creek, **Hotel El Centro** (s/d with shared bathroom US\$8/16) is basic but well-kept, with cheerfully bright décor. It is on the main street.

Just out of town, at the bottom of a dirt track turnover 200m past the main Sambo Creek entrance (walkable along the beach from Sambo Creek in the dry season), is **Helen's Hotel & Restaurant** (☎ 441 2017; s/d US\$24, 1-bed cabin US\$19; ♿ ☎ ☎ ☎). It has options to suit most budgets (although those on a serious shoestring have to sleep several to a bed). There are some nice touches – dried flowers in the bathrooms, carved doors – although some room interiors look a bit 19th century. The outdoor restaurant is also appealing. Lush gardens, two swimming pools, a terrapin pool and the adjoining black-sand beach are other pluses.

Right next door is **Hotel Canadien** (☎ 440 2099; s/d/tr US\$41/41/51; 📍 📺 📺 📺), a big white-washed building with pristine, tastefully decorated but expensive rooms. The restaurant has some spectacular views of the Caribbean Sea, which laps just outside the hotel. Evangelical church groups often stay here. You can also arrange trips to Cayos Cochinos from here.

Motorboat rides (per person approx US\$25) can be arranged to Cayos Cochinos from here. However, going on organized trips is generally not much more expensive and you have a bit more security of mind (onboard radios for example).

At Corozal, **Brisas del Mar** (s/d US\$5.50/11, with TV US\$8.10/16.20) has stark blue barracks-style rooms, some with cable TV. It is toward the east of the village, almost on the beach. It has a Garífuna restaurant and bar right next door. A few short steps along the beach but a big step up in comfort is the new **Ocean View** (☎ 429 1025; s/d with TV US\$55/75). It has four very well-appointed flats, including kitchen, hot water and dining room. Cheaper deals are on offer during the week and off season. Carpenters were carving the distinctive adjoining restaurant's chairs when we passed through. Local buses connect both villages with La Ceiba.

Finca El Eden

About 32 km west of La Ceiba at Km 158 on the highway, **Finca El Eden** (bertiharlos@yahoo.de; Carr a Tela, Km 158) has received good reviews for its pretty setting near a gorge, good camping, cabins and options for hiking and horseback riding. It is run by a German-Honduran couple.

REFUGIO DE VIDA SILVESTRE CUERO Y SALADO

On the coast about 30km west of La Ceiba, the Cuero y Salado Wildlife Refuge takes its name from two rivers, the Cuero and Salado, that meet at the coast in a large estuary. This estuary, now a reserve, protects varied and abundant wildlife; manatees are the most famous (and the hardest to see), but there are also howler and white-faced monkeys, sloths, agoutis (rabbit-sized rodents), iguanas, caimans and hundreds of bird species. Migratory birds are here from around August/September to April/May.

The small town of **La Unión** is the gateway to the reserve. From there, you catch a train to its entrance. At the end of the railroad track is a new **visitors center** (☎ 440 1990; park fee adult/child US\$10/5) in Salado Barra, with a small but

informative exhibition on the refuge. You can organize tours from here. For further information on the refuge, contact La Ceiba-based **Fundación Cuero y Salado** (☎ /fax 443 0329; www.cueroyalado.org; 19 Av at Av 14 de Julio, La Ceiba; 🕒 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8-11am Sat).

By far the best way to get around and see the reserve is by water. Canoe tours (US\$8 for two people) can be arranged at the visitors center.

A well-maintained **dorm** (per person US\$7) is a short walk away, and simple meals are available at the visitors center café. **Camping** (per person US\$3) is also permitted.

Getting There & Away

To get to the reserve, take a bus to La Unión from La Ceiba's main terminal (US\$0.50, 1½ hours, every 45 minutes from 6am to 4pm). From La Unión, jump on the *trencito* (a railcar) for the 9.5km ride on the old banana railroad to the visitors center in Salado Barra (one person US\$10.50, two or more people US\$5 each, 45 minutes, 7am to 2pm, every 1½ hours). Between trains, you can take a *burra*, a railcar basket pushed gondola-style by a couple of men with poles (per person US\$5.30, one hour). Tell the *trencito* or *burra* drivers when you'd like to return; the last bus from La Unión to La Ceiba is at 4pm. If you walk along the railway tracks, it takes 1½ hours to reach the visitors center at a brisk pace (it's about 9.5km). When you reach the reserve, hire a boat and guide (US\$17.60, up to seven people) for a two-hour trip through the reserve.

PARQUE NACIONAL PICO BONITO

Pico Bonito is the lush, forested area that climbs steeply behind La Ceiba. It is one of Honduras' best-known national parks, with an unexplored core area of 500 sq km. It has magnificent, varied forests at different elevations as well as rivers, waterfalls and abundant wildlife, including jaguars, armadillos, monkeys and toucans.

Pico Bonito itself is one of the highest peaks in Honduras at 2436m (and very difficult to climb). The main entrance to the park is at El Pino; from La Ceiba it is on the way to Tela. In El Pino, you can arrange tours, book accommodations in advance or arrange accommodations at the **Vivero Natural View tourist office** (☎ 368 8343, 371 9631).

The other entrance is at Río Cangrejal, up in the hills on the other side of La Ceiba. Almost every tour agency in La Ceiba offers Pico Bonito tours, mostly to the El Pino side.

For additional information about the park, contact the **Fundación Parque Nacional Pico Bonito** (Funapib; ☎ 442 0618; www.picobonito.org; Av 14 de Julio at 15a Calle, La Ceiba; 🕒 7:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8-11am Sat).

You can also see the park on horseback; several tour operators offer trips, see p395.

Entrance to Pico Bonito National Park is US\$6.

Hiking

The park's first trail is still a favorite. It is a moderately difficult three-hour hike to **Cascada Zacate** (per person incl guide, transport & park entrance fee US\$11). You'll hear the falls before you see them – in fact, they are also known as Cascada Ruidoso (noisy falls). You can organize this hike at the Vivero Natural View.

On the Río Cangrejal side, there is a lovely trail threading through some lush mountain-side jungle to **El Bejuco** waterfall. Contact Guaruma Servicios (p395) to arrange a guide. Several of the lodges have their own trails, which are worth investigating.

Sleeping

For lodging on the Río Cangrejal side, see p396.

Centro Ecoturístico Natural View (☎ 368 8343, 371 9631; r US\$11) A couple of simple rooms sleep two here. It is a few kilometers north of the highway. Camping is possible on the large grassy plot. This is also a good place to eat and relax après-hiking, with *palapa*-covered tables and shady hammocks.

Getting There & Away

Any bus headed toward Tela or San Pedro Sula can drop you at El Pino. To get to **Vivero Natural View** (☎ 368 8343, 371 9631) look for the purple tourist information sign on your right.

To get to the Río Cangrejal side of the park, take a Yaruca-bound bus from the main terminal in La Ceiba; see p398 for times.

TRUJILLO

pop 10,230

Sleepy, tropical Trujillo sits above the wide arc of the Bahía de Trujillo, an expanse of water that has seen the sails of Columbus and many a famous buccaneer. Things move at their own pace here. Whether you sample some of the excellent seafood or take in the town's nightlife, don't plan to do it in a rush. The town took a hammering at the hands of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 but now shows signs of its old self –

tourism is on the up, and language schools are reopening. Shrimp and the nearby port of Puerto Castilla plays an important role in the local economy. Trujillo is the capital of the department of Colón.

History

For a small town, Trujillo has had an important part in the history of Central America. It was near Trujillo, on August 14, 1502, that Columbus first set foot on the American mainland, having sailed from Jamaica on his fourth (and final) voyage. The first Catholic Mass on American mainland soil was said on the spot where he and his crew landed.

Founded on May 18, 1525, Trujillo was one of the earliest Spanish settlements in Central America. The first Spanish town in the colonial province of Honduras, it was the provincial capital until the seat was shifted to Comayagua in 1537. The Catholic bishop's seat remained in Trujillo until 1561, when it too was moved to Comayagua.

The Spanish used the port at Trujillo to ship out gold and silver from the interior of Honduras – and inevitably pirates soon came sniffing around. The Bahía de Trujillo was the scene of several great battles when the town was attacked by pirates, including Henry Morgan.

The Spanish built several fortresses, the ruins of which are still visible; the ruins of the fort of Santa Bárbara lie near the plaza in town. Despite the fortifications, the buccaneers prevailed, and after a sacking by Dutch pirates in 1643, the town lay in ruins for over a century until it was resettled in 1787. Trujillo was also the stage for William Walker's bid to take over Central America. It was doomed to failure – he was captured and executed by firing squad. His grave is now in the town center.

Information

EMERGENCY

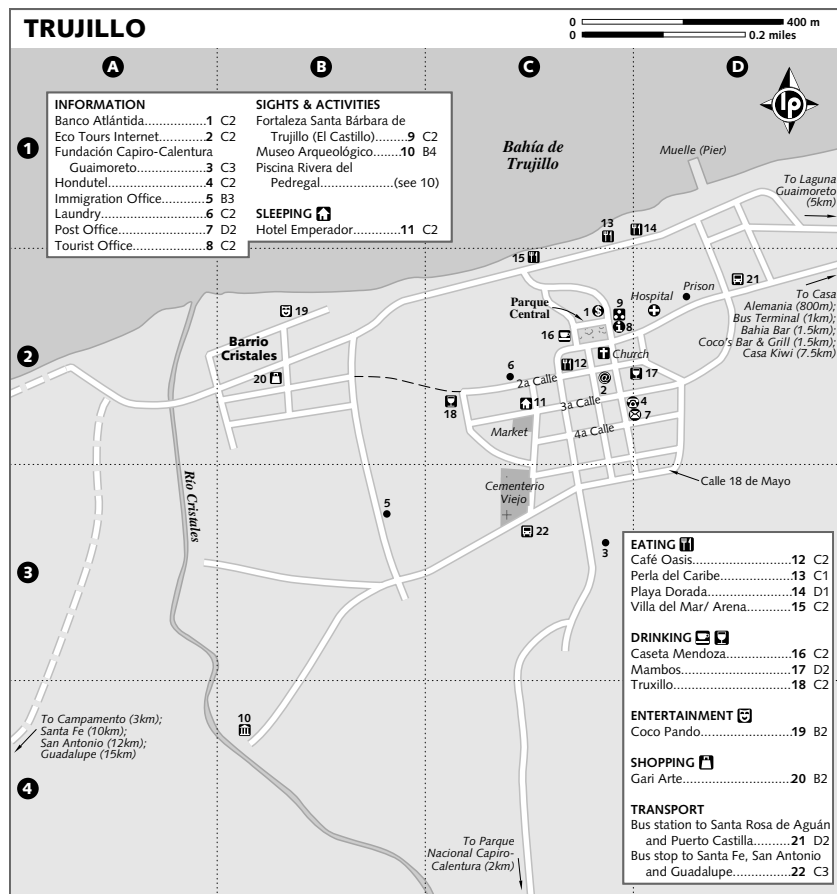
Police (☎ 434 4038)

IMMIGRATION

Immigration office (🕒 8-11am & 2-4pm Mon-Fri) Long-term visitors seeking to extend their stay should visit here.

INTERNET ACCESS

Eco Tours Internet (per hr US\$1; 🕒 7am-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-10pm Sun) It's a bit of a scam – one hour here only actually includes 55 minutes and no downloads are allowed – but it is about the most reliable in town.

**LAUNDRY**

Lavandería Colón (2a Calle; per 10lb US\$2.80; ☒ closed Sun)

MONEY

There are no MasterCard-friendly services in Trujillo.

Banco Atlántida (Parque Central) Changes cash, traveler's checks and has a Visa-card ATM.

POST & TELEPHONE

Eco Tours Internet (☎ 7am-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-10pm Sun) Cheaper international phone service.

Hondutel (☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) Next to the post office.

Post office (☎ 8am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri, 8-11am Sat) Three blocks inland from the plaza.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The hostel Casa Kiwi has a folder full of local information and bus timetables. There is also a Fundación Capiro-Calentura Guaimoreto (Fucagua) office, although staff offer limited help.

Tourist office (☎ 434 4535; Parque Central, Barrio Buenos Aires; ☎ 8am-5pm) New municipal office run by a friendly fellow called Nelson. It is by the fort.

Sights

The ruins of a 17th-century Spanish fortress, the **Fortaleza Santa Bárbara de Trujillo** (☎ 434 4535; adult/child US\$3/0.50; ☎ 9am-5pm), are in the center of town near the plaza, overlooking the sea. The fort has recently undergone a makeover and now includes a small museum. It houses

several old cannons and other historical relics. A plaque marks the place where North American adventurer/would-be conqueror William Walker was executed and there's an excellent view along the coast. The museum also has colonial and Garifuna artifacts on display, and it has occasional temporary displays.

There are several **beaches** in and around Trujillo, including one at the front edge of town. Ask if it is safe to swim. The water is not always the cleanest, especially in rainy season. There are also beachside open-air thatched-roof restaurant-bars near the airstrip, a 20-minute walk east along the beach from town. Casa Kiwi has a good stretch of beach away from any town pollution.

Near the Río Cristales, the **Museo y Piscinas Naturales Riveras del Pedregal** (adult/child US\$1.90/US\$1.10; ☎ 7am-5pm, hours vary) is a fascinating, eclectic and disorganized collection of exhibits. You'll find jade jewelry arranged higgledy-piggledy alongside ancient pre-Columbian archaeological relics as well Pech and Miskito artifacts. There are also a whole bunch of other random objects – check out the piece of a plane that crashed in the bay in 1985 for example. The museum admission includes entry to the gardens at the rear of the museum, with a couple of open-air swimming pools, and picnic- and children's play-areas.

Just west of town, where the Río Cristales flows into the sea, there is the largely Garifuna district of Barrio Cristales. You can see the **grave of William Walker** (see p447), who was buried in the town's cemetery following an ill-fated bid to conquer Central America. Other good places to visit (including Parque Nacional Capiro-Calentura) are a short distance from town.

Visitors descend upon Trujillo for the **Semana Santa** celebrations and it also gets busy for the **annual fair** of the town's patron saint, San Juan Bautista, in the last week of June (the exact day is June 24, but the festival goes on for a week).

Sleeping

Trujillo has a number of good places to stay. Most of the good ones are out of town. You should book ahead during Semana Santa.

Casa Kiwi (☎ dm/s/d US\$4/6.50/8.10, cabins with air-con US\$27; ☎ ☎ ☎) This beachside hostel has justifiably become a magnet for backpackers. It's 7.5km out of town but that's no bad thing – most guests find everything they need at the

restaurant and bar, not to mention its isolated stretch of beach. It is the kind of place where travelers find one- or two-night stays gently slipping into one or two weeks. For those heading to La Moskitia, this is an ideal place for picking up information and hooking up with other travelers going the overland route. Smart new cabins with pristine, blue-tiled bathrooms have broadened the appeal beyond the budget crew. A taxi from town should cost US\$4.30.

Cabañas y Restaurante Campamento (☎ 991 3391; camping US\$6, cabins with fan/air con US\$35/37; ☎ ☎ ☎) These comfortable beachfront bungalows 3km west of Trujillo each have a hot-water bathroom, and an ocean-facing porch. You can also camp under palm trees. A thatched-roof restaurant (mains US\$4 to US\$15) is open for all meals and overlooks an inviting pool.

Hotel Emperador (☎ 434 4442; s & d US\$8) This family-run place is the best of the downtown budget options. Its compact rooms face out onto a narrow courtyard – the mom runs a tight ship and won't let any dust settle. The family also runs a little adjoining cafeteria.

Casa Alemania (☎ 434 4466; camping US\$5.50, d/tr US\$25/27) With its distinctive, steep European-style sloping roof and impeccably decorated modern rooms, Casa Alemania is a notch above the in-town accommodations options. It is near the beach, a few minutes' walk from the main bus terminal. The on-site restaurant does all-you-can-eat breakfasts for US\$6.

Eating

There are several good inexpensive restaurants in town.

Playa Dorada (☎ 434 3121; mains US\$5-7; ☎ 8am-10pm) Touted as the most reliable seafood restaurant in town. A simple set-up where the ocean breezes drift off the beach into the dining area, it concentrates on the fundamentals – it's less fancy than some of its neighbors. The dishes, however, are delicious. We had a succulent *cangrejo* (king crab) soup.

Mambos (☎ 434 4013; 2a Calle; mains US\$5.50-9; ☎ 9am-10pm Wed-Mon) This relaxed, airy venue is behind tinted doors. Photos of famous Latino songstrels are strewn around the walls. You can feel a bit surrounded by TVs (there are four of them). There's a dance floor for livelier weekend nights and an outdoor *champa* (thatch) area was being built at the time of research. The menu is identical to Oasis, which has the same owners.

Restaurant Oasis Colonial (☎ 434 4828; 2a Calle; mains US\$5.50-9; 🕒 9:30am-10:30pm Tue-Sun) Meals are set upon ruby tablecloths in this poky little dining room. It's quite a sweet, wannabe-bohemian type of place with reasonable food, where you can graffiti your name on the wall if you need to quell inner urges for wanton vandalism. It also sells cigars.

Caseta Mendoza (dishes US\$3-7; 🕒 7am-8pm) This simple little patio café with a corrugated-iron roof and red wooden benches overlooks the parque central. You may have to shout for service, but when it comes you'll get decent coffee for next to nothing (US\$0.30). It also does basic *típica* food dishes. It's a favorite hangout for local soldiers.

Drinking & Nightlife

In town, Trujillo is a popular nightspot with drinking and dancing, usually on the weekends. Beware of the special gringo rate.

Bahia Bar (mains US\$4.50-7; 🕒 7am-10pm Mon-Thu, 7am-1am Fri & Sat) By the old airport runway, it has a bunch of sun lounges, and the beach party goes on well into the night at weekends.

Coco's Bar & Grill (dishes US\$5-7.40; 🕒 10am-8pm Mon-Thu, 8am-10pm Fri-Sun) Near Bahia Bar, on the same beach, this is the Christopher Columbus resort's bid to grab a slice of the backpacker buck. It should work – it's a cheap little *champa* restaurant that has wallet-friendly plates such as fried fish and spaghetti, and beers for US\$1.35.

Coco Pando (Barrio Cristales) In the mainly Garífuna neighborhood, discos are held Thursday to Sunday nights (cover US\$1). The air fills with reggaeton and reggae beats on lively weekend nights – though the atmosphere can be intimidating. The nightclub is above a restaurant with exceptionally good-value Garífuna dishes.

At latest report, Villa del Mar was the nightlife hotspot with the Arena disco on the beach below the plaza, mainly for the early-20s crowd. Note that this is just a free-access party on the beach. There's no security. The playlist goes from merengue, *bachata* to reggae.

Shopping

Gari Arte (☎ 434 4365; Barrio Cristales) Offers a selection of Garífuna handicrafts, music and souvenirs.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Trujillo has an airport but, at the time of writing, it had been closed for years.

BOAT

The *Island Tour* passenger boat departs from the *muelle* (pier) at Trujillo for Guanaja in the Bay Islands twice a week (one way US\$27, Thursday and Sunday, 3pm, 2½ hours) – but note that the service is regularly canceled or delayed. You could also try your luck hitching a ride to the Moskitia region, and the Nicaraguan coast – although none of these is a scheduled departure. Ask around among the fishing or cargo boats at the pier. Some say it's safe, others say they'd never set foot in these boats – you'll have to judge for yourself.

BUS

The two main bus companies, Cotraibal and Cotuc, operate from the large main bus terminal a kilometer from town, with direct and ordinary services. Be sure to get the direct – the ordinary ones tend to stop if a gecko blinks on the roadside, and can take hours longer.

There is another smaller terminal closer to town, where the local chicken buses and the services through Olancho depart.

Buses to La Ceiba (US\$4.30, three hours) and onto San Pedro Sula (US\$7.10, five to six hours) depart from the main terminal once or twice an hour from 1am to 1:45pm.

Two direct buses go to Tegucigalpa at 1am and 4:45am daily from the main terminal (US\$11, 10 hours), going via La Ceiba and El Progreso. A Tegucigalpa-bound bus (12 hours) also goes along a dirt road via Juticalpa in Olancho (nine hours, US\$7) leaving Trujillo at 5am from the gas station terminal closer to town. You can also get this bus if you arrive early at the Corocito turnoff. Or you can go via La Unión (change at Tocoa). Both services are on unpaved roads, and are not easy journeys.

Local buses go from Trujillo to the Garífuna villages of Santa Fe, San Antonio and Guadalupe to the west leaving from in front of the old cemetery. Buses to Puerto Castilla across the bay (going past Casa Kiwi) leave from the gas station terminal at 7:15am, 9:30am, 10:30am, 12:30pm, 2pm, 4pm and 6pm Monday to Saturday; Sunday departures are at 8am, 1pm and 5pm only. There are six return buses from Puerto Castilla (three on Sunday).

Getting Around

Taxis abound in the center of Trujillo. Fares around town are US\$0.80. The taxi fare out of town is usually US\$3 to US\$4.30, although you will usually be quoted more.

AROUND TRUJILLO

Santa Rosa de Aguán

Paul Theroux's novel *The Mosquito Coast*, which was later made into a movie starring Harrison Ford, featured this small tropical town. Just 40km from Trujillo, Santa Rosa de Aguán is a good place to get a taste of the Moskitia if you don't have the time or the money to go all the way out there. The town was severely damaged during Hurricane Mitch – 44 people drowned – and it hasn't fully recovered. Still, it has an engaging, frontier-like atmosphere, and you can hire boats to take you up the Río Aguán, where you might catch sight of 3m alligators. Two very basic hotels charge US\$3.50, and there's an annual **Garífuna festival** here from August 22 to 29. Five buses to Santa Rosa de Aguán leave Trujillo from the gas station terminal each day at 6:30am, 10am, 1pm, 3pm and 4:30pm. There is a reduced service on Sunday.

Parque Nacional Capiro-Calentura

The mountain behind Trujillo, called **Cerro Calentura**, 1235m above sea level at the summit, is part of the Capiro-Calentura National Park. You can get there simply by heading straight up the hill from town. The unpaved road goes right up to the summit, which is 10km from town. It is badly eroded in places and a 4WD is essential. You could also walk it in about 3½ hours. For a guided tour, ask Nelson in the **tourist office** (☎ 434 4535; Parque Central; 🕒 8am-5pm) in Trujillo.

On the way up the hill, you pass through a couple of distinct vegetation zones. At around 600m to 700m the vegetation changes from tropical rain forest to subtropical low-mountain rain forest, and you find yourself in a zone of giant tree ferns, with lush forest, large trees, vines and flowering plants. There's plenty of wildlife in the park, too, including many species of tropical birds and butterflies, reptiles and monkeys.

About a third of the way up, a couple of trails take off from the road to the left, leading to a waterfall and a tiny reservoir; they're not marked, but you can see them distinctly from the road. It can be sunny, clear and warm in Trujillo, and cloudy and much cooler at the top of the hill. If you're lucky, you can get a superb view from the top over the beautiful Valle de Aguán, along the coast as far as Limón, and across the bay. There is a radar station at the summit.

Information about the park is from the tourist office, or from the **Fundación Capiro-Calentura Guaimoreto** (Fucagua; ☎ 434 4294; 🕒 7:30am-noon & 1:30-5pm) – its office is about half way to the park entrance – although info can be quite vague. Entry to the park is US\$2.15 but there isn't always someone around to collect it.

You're best off doing this in a group or with a guide. Although it is generally a safe walk, occasional attacks have been reported.

Laguna de Guaimoreto

Five kilometers east of Trujillo, past the airstrip and the Río Negro, is Laguna de Guaimoreto, a large lagoon with a natural passageway onto the bay. About 6km by 9km, the lagoon is a protected wildlife refuge; its complex system of canals and mangrove forests provide shelter to abundant animal, bird and plant life, including thousands of migratory birds between November and February, and the elusive manatee. There have even been reported panther sightings.

You can also hire **rowing boats** or **canoes** (and even someone to paddle for you) if you turn left down the road marked by the sign 'Refugio de Vida Laguna Guaimoreto' and call out when you get to the old bridge between Trujillo and Puerto Castilla. If you bargain skills are up to it, you can rent canoes for around US\$5.50.

Shipwreck

Just off the coast 2km east of Casa Kiwi on the road to Puerto Castillo is the wreck of a sunken ship that is good for **snorkeling**. It is close to the shore, and is easily accessible from the beach. Ask at Casa Kiwi for more details.

Garífuna Villages

West of Trujillo are three Garífuna villages, all with houses stretching along the beach. **Santa Fe**, the largest village, is about 10km west of Trujillo. Santa Fe has two *hospedajes*: **Mar Atlántico** (☎ 429 0593; r/tw US\$8/11) and **Hotel Las Tres Orquideas** (☎ 429 9297; tw US\$13.30), which just shades it as it is right on the beach. Both have simple rooms with fan, fresh sheets and private bathroom with cold water. **Comedor Caballero** (mains US\$2-11; 🕒 8am-6pm), aka 'Pete's Place,' is renowned as the best restaurant in town. It's all about the seafood – go for the house special with huge dishes starting at US\$7.

A couple of kilometers further along from Santa Fe are the smaller, seldom-visited Garifuna villages of **San Antonio** and then **Guadalupe**. San Antonio has several seafood restaurants but no accommodations. In Guadalupe, the only sleeping option is **Hotel Franklin** (☎ 429 9046; s/d US\$5.50/8) at the eastern end of the main street. Don't expect much. Let's just say, make sure you have flip-flops – and not just for the bathroom.

From Santa Fe, you can organize boat trips out to snorkel on an unspoiled reef called **Cayos Blanco**, out in front of town. It will set you back about US\$35. The town's **annual fair** is July 15 to 30. The last three days are the most frenetic.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses to Guadalupe leave from the old cemetery in Trujillo at 9:30am, 10:30am, noon, 1pm, 3pm and 5pm (Monday to Saturday), passing Santa Fe (US\$0.75, 45 minutes) and continuing to San Antonio and Guadalupe (US\$0.80, 1 ¼ hours).

Buses return from Guadalupe at 6:30am, 7am, 8am, 10am, noon and 2pm, passing Santa Fe 30 minutes later. On Sunday, just one bus leaves Guadalupe (at 7am) and returns from Trujillo at noon.

BAY ISLANDS

Spectacular diving and snorkeling draws visitors from around the world to the three Bay Islands (Islas de la Bahía) – Roatán, Utila and Guanaja – about 50km off the north coast of Honduras. Their reefs are part of the second-largest barrier reef in the world after Australia's Great Barrier Reef, and teem with fish, coral, sponges, rays, sea turtles and even whale sharks. Divers come year round, although the rainy season (November to February) puts a dampener on things – it makes diving trickier and some dive sites difficult to access. Diving here is very affordable.

Lodging and food (more expensive than on the mainland on all three islands) are easily cheapest on Utila, so the majority of backpackers go there. On the other hand, Roatán has better beaches and more nondiving things to do. Both islands have many aficionados. Diving is also good on Guanaja, though the prices on this island are prohibitive to most backpackers.

The island economy is based mostly on tourism and fishing, and shrimp and lobster catching.

HISTORY

Ruins on all three Bay Islands indicate that they were inhabited well before the Europeans arrived. Apparently human habitation began around AD 600, although the evidence is slim until after around AD 1000. The early settlers might have been Maya; there are also caves that perhaps provided shelter for groups of Pech (Payá), and Nahuatl-speaking people seem to have been here (Nahuatl was the language of the Aztecs in Mexico).

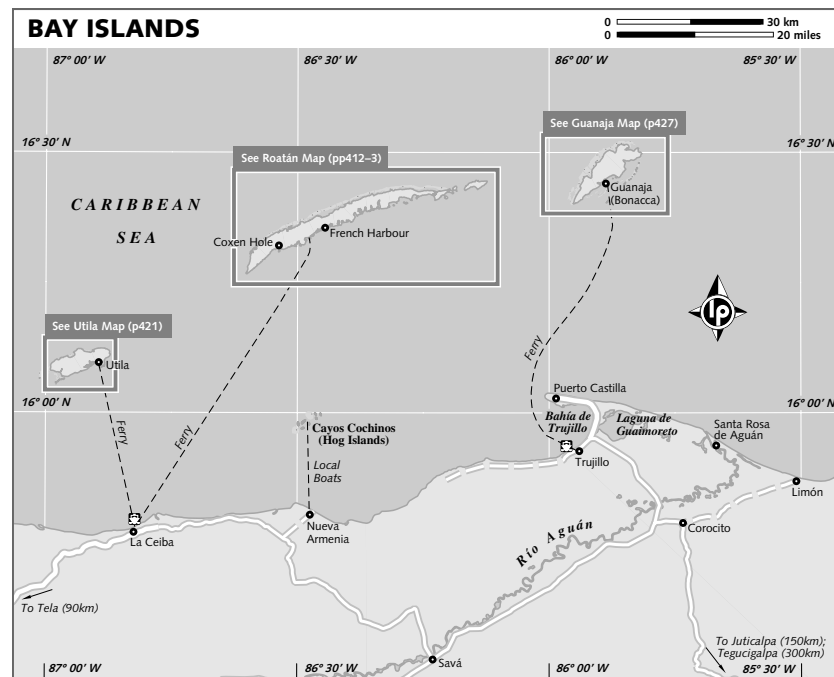
Christopher Columbus, on his fourth and final voyage to the New World, landed on the island of Guanaja on July 30, 1502. He encountered a fairly large population of *indígena*, whom he believed to be cannibals. The Spanish enslaved many islanders and sent them to work in the plantations of Cuba and in the gold and silver mines of Mexico.

English, French and Dutch pirates turned their attention to the islands, establishing settlements and raiding the gold-laden Spanish cargo vessels. The English buccaneer Henry Morgan established his base at Port Royal on Roatán in the mid-17th century; at that time, as many as 5000 pirates were ensconced on the island.

In March 1782, after many vain attempts, the Spanish waged a successful land attack against Port Royal, either killing or selling the pirates off as slaves.

One of the most influential events occurred on April 12, 1797. Thousands of Black Caribs were dumped by the British on Roatán, following a rebellion on the Caribbean island of St Vincent. This group settled at Punta Gorda, survived and mixed with the natives. Migrant groups reached the mainland, setting up small fishing and agricultural villages along the coast from Belize to Nicaragua. And the Garifuna were born.

The Bay Islands, along with the Moskitia in northeastern Honduras, remained in the hands of the British until 1859, when Great Britain signed a treaty ceding the Bay Islands and the Moskitia to Honduras. Only in the last few decades, however, when Honduran education officials decided that Spanish must be spoken in all the country's schools, did the islanders begin to speak Spanish. English, spoken with a broad Caribbean accent, remains



the preferred language of the most islanders, although more and more migrants from the mainland are shifting the balance.

The orientation of the islands is still, in many ways, more toward the UK and the USA than toward the Honduran mainland just 50km away; many islanders are more likely to have visited the US than their own capital, Tegucigalpa, and many have relatives in the US. The government focuses much of its tourism development efforts on the islands. Recently the Bay Islands were declared a Free Trade Zone, which means that businesses are exempt from the sales taxes applied on the mainland.

PEOPLE

The population of the Bay Islands is very diverse. *Isleños* have heritage that includes African and Carib, European and other ancestry. English is the dominant spoken language, and Spanish is a second language. On Roatán there is a Garifuna settlement at Punta Gorda.

There are still some white descendants of early British settlers, especially on Utila. You might meet people who look like they just got off the boat from England, Scotland or

Ireland, though actually their ancestors came here over a century ago.

Many islanders are strongly religious (you will quickly spot the number of churches). Be mindful of this in the way you dress – men going into shops without a shirt on can be taken as a sign of disrespect.

Recently, many Ladinos have come from the mainland, especially to Roatán, where taxi drivers and security guards are in high demand. The migration is changing the island's language; you hear much more Spanish here than just a few years ago.

There is also a significant population of foreigners, working for dive shops and other tourist-oriented businesses; in dive shops you often hear a variety of languages, including English, Spanish, German, Italian, French and Hebrew.

CLIMATE

The rainy season on the islands runs roughly from October or November to February. March and August are the hottest months; at other times the sea breezes temper the heat. Tropical storms are possible in September.

COSTS

The Bay Islands are much more expensive than the mainland. Guanaja is the most expensive of the three, and well out of backpacker range. Roatán is less expensive, but still a steep hike up – it's not cheap if you are a lone traveler. If you're in a group, you can minimize your food and accommodation costs – especially if you get a shared place with a kitchen. Internet costs are still sky high in West End. Utila easily has the cheapest places to stay and eat. There is little to choose between diving prices (see right) on Roatán and Utila.

Visiting the islands will inevitably eat into your budget, but if you want to dive, it doesn't get much more affordable (or better) in the Caribbean than here. If you can only afford to dive a few times, or not at all, you can snorkel and kayak cheaply, or swim and sunbathe free of charge.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The islands are generally safer than the mainland, although the occasional assault does happen on Roatán. When swimming or snorkeling, don't leave unattended valuables on the beach. There have been reports of thefts from West Bay in Roatán and occasionally in Utila.

The main thing likely to affect visitors are the mosquitoes and sand flies, which are voracious, especially during the rainy season. You'll need plenty of repellent, which you can bring along or buy on the islands. It's very important that you take antimalarial medication – five different strains of the disease have been identified on Roatán alone. Mosquitoes also carry dengue fever. The recommended

dose is 500mg of chloroquine once a week; ask for 'Aralen' in any pharmacy.

DIVING

Diving is by far the most popular tourist activity on the Bay Islands, and it's still one of the cheapest places in the world to get a diving certification. Note that diving is more difficult and not as rewarding during the Islands' rainy season (November to February). Dive shops usually offer an introductory courses (basic instruction plus a couple of dives) and full PADI-certification courses qualifying you to dive worldwide. Though most dive shops are affiliated with PADI, NAWI and SSI courses are also available. An open-water diving certification course typically lasts three to four days and includes two confined-water and four open-water dives. Advanced diving courses are also available. Despite the low cost, safety and equipment standards are usually reasonable – accidents are rare, despite the high volume of divers.

Utila used to have the lowest certification and fun diving prices of the three Bay Islands, but prices on Roatán are about the same now. (Food and lodging are still cheaper on Utila, however.) Guanaja is not a budget destination. PADI certification dive packages on Utila and Roatán work out to at around US\$230 to US\$260. Fun dives are around US\$25 to US\$30 each, although you can often negotiate a discount if you are doing more than five days.

Don't make the mistake of selecting a diving course purely on the basis of price – you'll find the differences are small, anyway. In-

SAFE DIVING IN THE BAY ISLANDS

Diving safety must be taken very seriously. Because Utila and Roatán are known as affordable places in the world to be certified as a diver, they attract many visitors looking for a bargain. Price-fixing is now helping dive outfits turn over enough money to ensure safety standards and environmental aims are upheld.

Generally the Bay Islands have an excellent safety record. The single biggest concern for a student diver on the Bay Islands should be quality of instruction and supervision. You should like and trust your instructor. Ask other divers for recommendations, not just for shops but for specific instructors and divemasters. It's perfectly OK to ask instructors how long they have been teaching and how long they have been on the island. If you're uncomfortable with a particular instructor, ask to move to a different course or simply go to a different shop.

Quality of equipment is also important. While it takes training to truly assess equipment, you can and should check certain things, like the O-ring on your tank isn't broken or frayed and whether your regulator hisses when you turn on the air. Arrive early to check your gear; if you're uncomfortable with something – even if the instructor assures you it's OK – ask for a replacement. Being comfortable and confident in the water is a crucial part of safe, enjoyable diving. Shops should also have their air analyzed three to four times per year, and have a certificate prominently displayed to prove it. If you don't see one, ask about it.

There are certain boat safety guidelines that shops should follow as well. All boats should have a captain who stays onboard (that is, who's not also your divemaster). All boats should have oxygen, usually carried in a green first aid kit, and a VHF radio – cell phone service is not reliable. Don't be afraid to ask about each of these things, and to have the instructor actually show you the items onboard – if enough divers did so, more shops would follow the rules; in the rare case of an emergency, they can make the difference between life and death.

Finally, no matter where you sign up, do not rely on your instructor or divemaster to anticipate every problem. Check your own equipment, assess your own comfort level and be vocal about your concerns. Actively monitor your own safety using the following guidelines:

- Accept responsibility for your own safety on every dive. Always dive within the limits of your ability and training.
- Use and respect the buddy system. It saves lives.
- Do not surface if you hear a boat motor, unless you are pulling yourself slowly up by the dive-boat mooring line. The Bay Islands have a lot of boat traffic, and accidents have occurred when boats collided with divers who were on the surface or just under it.
- Do not go into caves. Go through tunnels and 'swim-throughs' only with qualified guides.
- Don't drink or use drugs and then dive – it's stupid and can kill or injure you or the people around you.
- If you haven't dived for a while, consider taking a refresher course before you jump into deep water. It takes about an hour and only costs around US\$15. It's much better to discover that you remember all your diving skills in 1.2m of water than to realize you don't in 12m of water.

LOCAL VOICES: GARÍFUNA DIVEMASTER DAVID VALERIO

- **Have the Bay Islands changed much?** When I arrived, this island was just fishing boats – even just 10 years ago. Now this is a tourist place.
- **Have you always lived on the Bay Islands?** No. I used to work on a shrimp and shark fishing boat from La Ceiba, then I came to Roatán for work. I am now 40, and have been living here for 19 years – this is where I learned English.
- **How did you become a divemaster?** My first job here, I called 'no sleep' – I was watchman at the dive resort where I work. Then I started to drive the dive boat, and after that I began diving.
- **What do you like about working here?** The south side, where I work, has a very beautiful reef, with lots of soft corals. You have many fish including eagle rays, seahorses and my favorites, yellow tail snappers. Nobody goes fishing here, so you can get very close to the fish.
- **Describe your relationship to the sea.** I am from the Garífuna culture – we have always lived near the beach and made our living from the ocean. I am doing so now, just in a different way.

As told to Jolyon Attwooll

stead, find a shop that has a good record and where you feel comfortable (for safe diving see above).

Qualified divers also have plenty of options, including fun dives, 10-dive packages, night dives, deep dives, wreck diving, customized dive charters and dives to coral walls and caves. There is a great variety of fish and marine life present, and the visibility is great. The waters between Roatán and Utila are among the best places in the world to view whale sharks, usually from May to September.

TRANSPORTATION Getting There & Away AIR

Several companies operate flights from the mainland of Honduras (La Ceiba) to the Bay Islands. Some flights originate at San Pedro Sula. Airlines include **Isleña/TACA** (☎ 445 1088, reservations 443 0179; www.flyislena.com), **Sosa** (☎ 445 1658; www.aerolineassosa.com) and **Atlantic Airlines** (☎ 445 1179; www.atlanticairlines.com.ni).

Delta and Continental both have flights to Roatán (see p418).

FERRY

There are regular boat services from La Ceiba to Roatán and Utila and air services going to each of the Bay Islands. A less-reliable boat service runs from Trujillo to Guanaja. See each island for relevant times. Make sure you check the times as they are prone to change. Ferry companies still do not offer direct services between these islands – you have to go via La Ceiba. More private boat owners are now making the trip.

Ask around, you will quickly find out what is going on.

There are occasional ad hoc yachts from Utila to Belize, or Livingston in Guatemala, but these are subject to the whims of yacht owners. Normally yacht owners advise a dive shop in Utila beforehand if they are planning a visit.

Getting Around**BOAT**

Water taxis are used on Roatán between West End and the beach at West Bay, as well as at the community of Oak Ridge, where many of the houses are on stilts above the water. Water taxis are also common on Guanaja, where you'll need a boat to go between the main village, which is on a small cay, and the main island.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

You can rent cars on Roatán and motorcycles on all three islands. However, renting vehicles here is not cheap (about US\$50 a day), especially if fuel isn't included.

TAXI

Taxis ferry people all around Roatán, and to a lesser degree on Utila. Colectivo fares are reasonable (US\$1 to US\$2), but private rates are high (more than US\$10).

ROATÁN

pop 65,000

Roatán is the largest and best known of the Bay Islands. It is about 50km off the coast of Honduras from La Ceiba. Long and thin (50km in length by 2km to 4km wide), the island is a real diving and snorkeling mecca, surrounded by over 100km of living reef. Its beaches are picture-postcard idyllic especially stretches along West End and West Bay, with clear turquoise water, colorful tropical fish, powdery white sand and coconut palms.

Dangers & Annoyances

Occasional assaults have occurred on the beach between West End and West Bay, although not for some time; this attractive beachside walk is fine during the day, but best avoided after sunset. Coxen Hole can get sketchy after nightfall and you should avoid hitching or waiting for taxis on the main roads outside of the towns after dark – robberies are not uncommon.

Roatán is sometimes used as a drugs thoroughfare. Be aware of that if you stumble across any particularly desolated coves.

West End

Curled around two small turquoise bays and laced with coconut palms, West End is a busy but pleasant village on the west end of the island. This is where virtually all backpackers and divers come, and the town's one sandy road is packed with restaurants, hotels and dive shops. Most accommodations are mid-range to expensive, but a few cheaper options exist, and more are being built.

ORIENTATION

It's impossible to get lost in West End, though some hotels and shops can be hard to find. The road from Coxen Hole intersects with the town's main sandy road at the eastern side of Half Moon Bay, the first of West End's two small bays. Buses and taxis to Coxen Hole wait at this intersection. Immediately to the right (north) are a few hotels, restaurants, bars and dive shops; further down are three more lodging options and also an internet café.

Left (south) from the intersection, the road curls around Half Moon Bay, passes a Baptist church and turns into 'the strip,' where you'll find most of West End's restaurants, bars and dive shops. You can walk end to end in five to 10 minutes. Water taxis to West Bay leave from a pier halfway down the strip.

INFORMATION

There are now two ATMs in West End. One is right at the entrance by the Coconut Tree supermarket. It gives Visa and MasterCard advances. The other Unibanc option is within the Hotel Dolphin lobby and accepts most cards. Internet connection on Roatán can be frustratingly sporadic and frequently drops out. Prices are just as painful.

Bamboo Hut Laundry (☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Sat) On the main road, beyond most of the main restaurants and shops, this will wash, dry and fold up to 5lb of dirty clothes for US\$4.

Barefoot Charlie's (☎ 9am-9pm; per hr US\$7) Weekly internet rates and a two-for-one book exchange are also available.

Paradise Computers (Half Moon Bay; per hr US\$12.75; ☎ 8am-10pm) Prepaid internet accounts available (one hour/nine hours US\$10/60).

Police (Coxen Hole; ☎ 445 3438)

Roatán Online (www.roatanonline.com) A charmless but comprehensive guide to all things Roatán.

ACTIVITIES**Diving**

The entire coastline of Roatán, especially the western tip, is dotted with dozens of dive sites, many just meters off the shore. With names

such as Hole in the Wall, Sponge Emporium, Black Rock and Texas, Roatán is truly a diver's paradise, with endless variety and near-perfect diving conditions. Diving in Roatán used to cost more than on Utila, but the difference is now negligible. Roatán tends to have smaller classes than on Utila, and the reef is in slightly better shape. Most sites are nearby, so shops typically offer three to four one-tank dives per day, as opposed to two two-tank dives common on Utila. Prices are pretty standard among the shops: a four-day PADI open-water diving certification course costs around US\$250 including instruction book and Marine Park fee; an advanced course is about the same; fun dives run from US\$25 to US\$30 per dive, less for more than five days.

Make sure you sign up with a diving outfit that belongs to the **West End & Sandy Bay Marine**

DON'T TOUCH THE CORAL!

Coral comes in many shapes, sizes and colors. Some coral, such as fan coral, resembles a plant. On the other hand, brain coral looks more like a rock. In fact coral is neither plant nor rock. It's an animal – and a delicate one at that. The coral in the Bay Islands (and throughout the region's entire barrier reef) is under pressure from pollution produced by humans and pumped into the water. In fact, a recent World Resources Institute report estimates that over 80% of the sediment and over half of all nutrients that damage the reefs come from Honduras, where large rivers drain agricultural run-off (one of the main causes of reef deterioration) into the Caribbean. Only with careful management will the wonderful underwater reef that skirts the coast of Central America be preserved.

All divers and snorkelers can help the conservation campaign. 'Don't touch the coral' is a refrain you will often hear in the Bay Islands, where thousands of inexperienced divers and snorkelers come every year to explore the magnificent reefs just a few yards offshore.

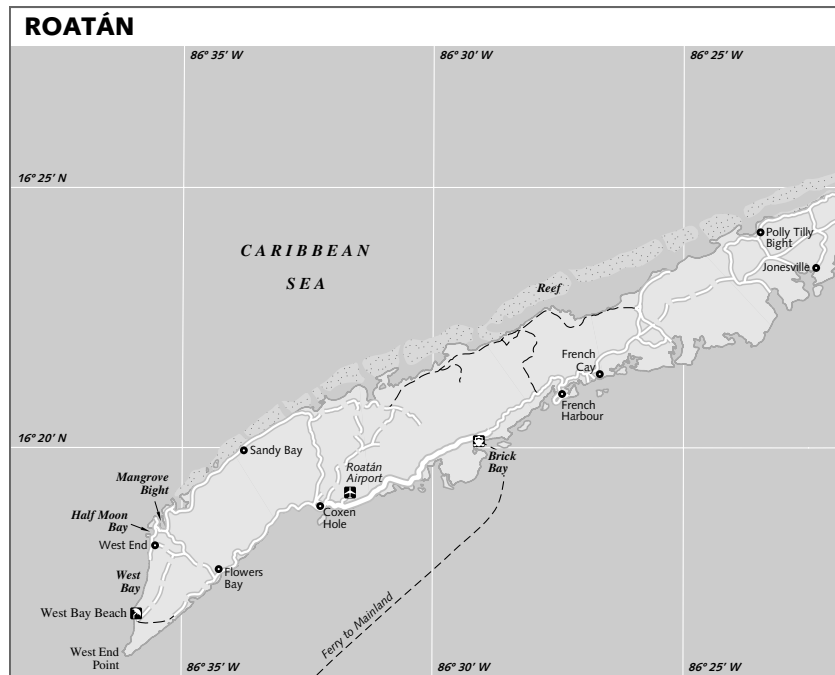
Coral is fascinating and beautiful, and many beginning (and experienced) divers are tempted to touch it. Even if you resist that temptation, it's easy to accidentally brush the coral with your fin or tank, either as you swim past or if you are still learning to maintain neutral buoyancy.

Avoiding such contact is extremely important. Coral has an invisible covering of slime that protects it, much like skin on other animals. Touching the coral can damage this protective covering, exposing the coral to infection and disease. Large segments of coral can be killed by a single brush of a diver's fin.

If you hit it hard enough, you can even break the coral; some places underwater are littered with coral fragments, broken by divers or heavy surf. Under ideal conditions, most coral grows about 1cm (less than half an inch) per year; even the fastest-growing sponges grow only an inch per year. The coral and sponge formations you see in the Bay Islands are the result of centuries of growth.

Coral could also sting you, most famously fire coral. Even coral that doesn't sting can be surprisingly sharp, and cuts from coral are slow to heal. (If you are stung by coral, vinegar helps stop the stinging and antibacterial cream helps it heal; no such luck for the coral, though.)

For the most part, the reefs around the Bay Islands remain healthy and pristine, thanks to the historically low number of divers. But those numbers have risen dramatically in recent years, especially among beginners, and the coral is already beginning to show signs of damage. With even more divers expected to come (not to mention legions of snorkeler-toting cruise ships), it is crucial for everyone to help preserve the reef.



Park (www.roatanmarinepark.com). The reef is under enormous pressure, both from the building works and the amount of visitors, and this organization is campaigning strongly to conserve its beauty.

Prices for courses are now supposed to be standard among most of the dive outfits on the island, although not all adhere. But remember that price isn't everything (see boxed text, p409).

At the safety-first **Coconut Tree Divers** (☎ 445 4081, 403 8782; www.coconutreedivers.com), very professional, experienced instructors head all the dives. There are also regular beers and BBQs on the deck overlooking Half Moon Bay after the day's diving is done, drawing a younger crowd. Fun dives cost US\$20 apiece. There are cheap cabin beds (US\$5) available just for divers.

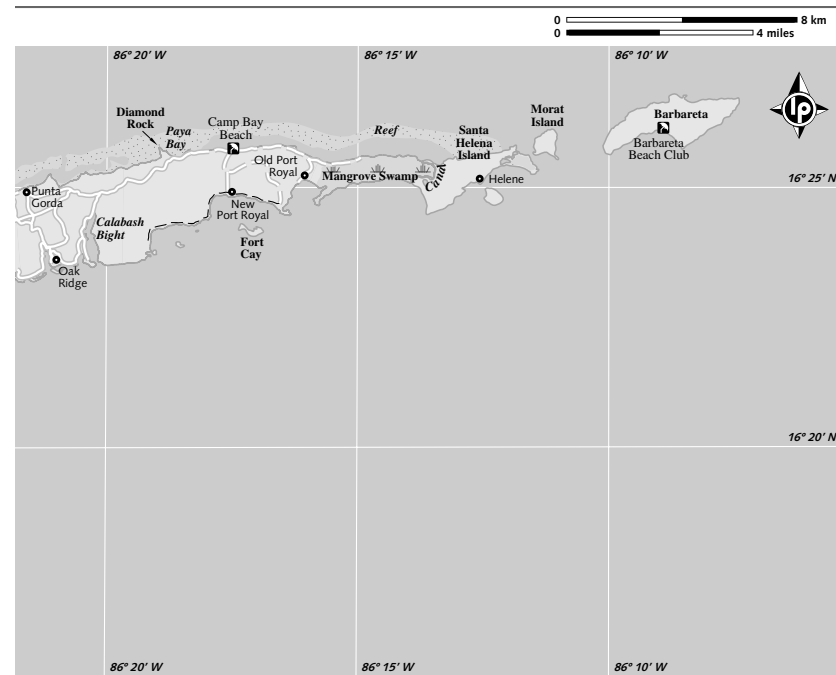
Run by Alvin Jackson, a local instructor with almost three decades of experience, **Native Sons** (☎ 445 1214; www.nativesonsoroatán.com) has a good reputation. All dives are led by instructors, not divemasters. Native Sons has fast, well-maintained boats which easily go to the more distant dive sites.

Owned and operated by the same British couple for more than a decade, **Ocean Connections** (☎ 327 0935; www.ocean-connections.com) has small classes and a friendly, noncompetitive atmosphere, catering to a slightly older crowd. It also has a dive shop. Packages are available with Sea Breeze Inn.

Pura Vida (☎ 445 4110, 403 8798; www.puravidaresort.com) is an Italian-run resort with a good reputation. Its instructors usually have five years' teaching experience, with at least three years' teaching on the islands. The instructors are multilingual and organize fun dives according to high or low season. If doing a dive course, there are a few dorm beds available for US\$10 a night – you'll need to book ahead. There is also a fine Italian restaurant next door.

Capably managed by a young British couple, **Reef Gliders** (☎ 403 8243; www.reefgliders.com; next to Purple Turtle) has two modern Panga boats; it is very safety and conservation conscious. It also offers a Dive Master internship for an insight into running a dive business.

Sueño del Mar (☎ 445 4343; www.suenodelmar.com) is an upscale option with a well-equipped retail shop and beautifully kept accommodations –



some include a balcony with sea view. It is geared toward the luxury end of the market (four-day open-water course with lodging US\$403).

A relaxed, friendly dive shop on the main drag is **Tyll's Dive** (☎ 455 5322; www.tyllsdive.com).

West End Divers (☎ 368 0616; www.westenddivers.com), a small dive shop opposite the water-taxi pier, caters to a younger crowd.

Deep-Sea Diving

One of Roatán's most unusual activities is offered by Karl Stanley, the man behind the grandly named **Roatán Institute of Deep Sea Exploration** (www.stanleysubmarines.com; per dive US\$500). A highly inventive, driven history major, Stanley became obsessed with submarines when he was nine years old. Now he has turned his passion into a commercially viable reality, having designed and built his own submergible. He takes passengers in the small yellow submarine, named *Idabel* after the Oklohoma location in which it was constructed, to a depth of up to 2000ft. Light doesn't penetrate to those depths and those who do dare to take the ride come face to face with some extraor-

dinary marine life that very few ever get to see, including the elusive six-gilled sharks. Stanley freely admits you take the plunge at your own risk, and takes passengers' money after they dive.

Beaches & Snorkeling

Half Moon Bay has a small, nice beach and decent snorkeling, although there is some sea grass to wade through. Hire your snorkel equipment from the Marine Park Reserve office that overlooks the beach (US\$5) – the money goes to help protect the reef. The beach at **West Bay**, about 4km southwest of West End village, is the most beautiful beach on Roatán – although more and more high-end resorts are lining the beach; you can rent beach chairs (per person US\$5, or try just 'tipping' the guard) or bring a blanket and set up under the palms at the far end. There's fantastic snorkeling at the western end, and buoys to ward off the boats. You can easily rent snorkel equipment. Try Las Rocas at the beginning of the beach (per day US\$6).

You can walk to West Bay from West End – just keep heading west along the beach – but

the walk is not safe at night. Water taxis (per person each way US\$2.15, 10 minutes) go back and forth regularly. Plan on returning by 5pm or so. A normal taxi there costs an extortionate US\$10.

Horse-Riding

Roatan's surprisingly lush, undulating interior has some decent horse-riding country. The friendly, helpful people at **El Rancho Barrio Dorcas** (☎ 403 8754; www.barriodorcasranch.com) arrange horseback trips for US\$30 a head. They also organize rides on full-moon nights (per person US\$40).

SLEEPING

The cheapest way to stay in West End is in a dorm room with access to a communal kitchen. More are on the way (after research we heard of a new hostel opening near the Fu Bar) – ask around. If you're not keen on dorms, couples and groups have better and cheaper options. Accommodations fills up fast, especially during the high season (July to August, November to January and Easter). Unfortunately, few hotels take reservations, and then only with a credit card or bank deposit. Many taxi drivers will try to shepherd you to hotels where they get a commission – not all hotels play that game, so insist on stopping at your choice.

The people at Coconut Tree Divers are happy to hold your backpacks while you sort out your accommodations.

Georphi's Tropical Hideaway (☎ 445 4205; www.georphi.com; d with outside bathroom US\$10, with bathroom & kitchen US\$35, q with kitchen US\$50; 🏠) Perhaps the best-value backpacker accommodations on the island, especially if you're with others. This is a sprawling collection of hexagonal cabins in lush, sloping grounds. All the cabins are sturdy-but-basic pine structures, some have a kitchen, and all have a private patio with hammocks. Rooms with air-con cost more. From the intersection, turn left and walk along the beach toward the end of the sandy road. It is on the same site as Rudy's eatery.

Chillies (☎ 445 4003; www.nativesonsroatan.com/chillies.htm; r with shared bathroom US\$18, cabins with shared bathroom & kitchen US\$22, with bathroom US\$27) This place is an ever-popular budget-traveler choice and it's with good reason. The shared bathrooms are unusually pleasant, while the landscaped gardens are lush. Cabins are a good option if you are in a couple. Shared

kitchens are not great, but they serve their purpose well enough. It is affiliated with the Native Sons dive shop.

Burke's Place (☎ 445 4146; r with/without air-con US\$30/20, studios US\$25; 🏠 🏠) A traditional family-run place, with wooden accommodations set around a large yard with tall mango trees. Check the cabins first – they vary from perfectly kept to somewhat less pristine. Rooms in the main block are simple and clean and there is a good communal kitchen. It is five minutes' walk right off the main intersection.

Valerie's (dm US\$5, r with shared bathroom US\$15, with bathroom & TV US\$25) There is a chance that this backpacker's institution will no longer be here by the time you read this. The eponymous Valerie, a Chicago native, was looking to move on at the time of research. Set back from the main street, this is a mad, ramshackle tumble of wooden rooms and dormitories, which charms some and repels others. The shared kitchen for the bottom dorm is nothing short of grim, but the upstairs dorms are a big step up. There is also a restaurant and bar on the premises.

Mariposa Lodge (☎ 445 4450; www.mariposa-lodge.com; d with shared bathroom US\$25, extra person US\$10, apt US\$35) A short way behind the main sandy road and set in tropical gardens, this Canadian-run place is one of Roatán's most attractive lodgings. The apartments – fully kitted out with gas cookers and fridges – are a great place to kick back after a day's diving. Each has a deck with hammocks, some with fine sea views. A new cottage at the front of the lodge has three impeccably tidy new rooms, sharing a kitchen and bathroom.

Half Moon Resort (☎ 445 4008; s/d with fan US\$30/40, with air-con US\$38/50; 🏠) This is down at the bottom of a shaded cul-de-sac. Its location is a winner. The pine-constructed rooms are nothing fancy (you might expect fancier for the price), but when you tumble out of bed to the sun lounges right by the reef (prime snorkeling territory), you won't care. The on-site restaurant is good and the staff is friendly.

Sea Breeze Inn (☎ 445 4026; www.seabreezerootan.com; r with air-con US\$30, studio with/without air-con US\$50/45, ste with/without air-con US\$65/55; 🏠) This is a good option for families or groups. Rooms are neat, with plenty of character but not much space. The suites, however, are spacious, and are great places to chill out. Each has a fridge and microwave, and hammocks draped on the porch in front. Ask for the ocean-view

suites up top if you can. It is a three-story wood building behind the Cannibal Café (to the south of the main intersection).

Posada Arco Iris (☎ 445 4264; www.roatanposada.com; s/d US\$35/41, 4-bed apt US\$55; 🏠 🏠) Guatemalan tapestries and carvings, impeccably varnished floors, and an extended leafy, shady setting are some of the stylish touches that make this classy midscale choice stand out. Rooms and apartments are available – for groups it can work out reasonably cheaply. You do get free internet, use of a full kitchen (with the apartment), as well as beach chair and kayak use.

Posada Las Orquideas (☎ 445 4387; www.posadalasorquideas.com; s/d without kitchen US\$35/40; s/d with kitchen US\$40/46) Run by the same people who manage Posada Arco Iris, with similar amenities and tasteful décor. This is more secluded and has a jetty that is just for guests, jutting out over the pretty Gibson Bay. Go past Arco Iris and follow the signs.

Keifitos Plantation Retreat (www.keifitos.com; s/d US\$30/60; 🏠) This is a cluster of cabins clinging to the hillside about 10 minutes' walk beyond the edge of town toward West Bay. The 14 cabins have superb views, if you can get a glimpse through the garden's mango trees. Cabins were being renovated at the time of research. Most have queen beds, all have hot water. There's a steep climb up a wooden stairwell steps to reach the cabins. The downside is you have to walk in the dark along the beach to get back if you go out in West End.

Casa del Sol (☎ 403 8887; d US\$30, studio with kitchen US\$60) A new set-up, this is right by the entrance to West End where the road forks off to West Bay. Billed as Mexican Riviera meets tropical island, it is a very good-value mid-range option. Rooms have a Mexican-style colorwash, there are big ceramic floor-tiles and the bathroom sinks are hand-painted porcelain from El Salvador. The studios sleep four and have a kitchen and big bathtubs.

Other good options:

Milka's Rooms (☎ 445 4241; dm US\$8, r US\$25) This is a good cheapie, with four rudimentary but functioning kitchens. The three new cabins with hot water are the best deal, but all the rooms are adequate, if a little tight on space. To get there, follow the sign saying 'cheap price,' just behind Pura Vida.

Sue's Cabin (☎ 445 4488; r US\$20) Set back from the main street, this is a freshly built cabin on a local family's land. It's quiet, simple and good value, with a kitchen and sporadically working hot water. Ask for Sue at Velva's Place restaurant.

Hotel Dolphin (☎ 445 4499; s/d US\$25/30; 🏠) If a bunch of you don't mind sharing, try to bag the top floor here. There's nothing special about the room, but the view over Half Moon Bay is lovely. Other rooms are simple but nicer than the careworn concrete stairwell leading to them would have you expect. You pay more for the bay view.

EATING

Food in West End is pricey. A few basic places have reasonable prices. Staying in a place with a kitchen will cut costs, especially if you are in a group. Supermarket prices are lower in Coxen Hole, but it can be a pain to go there and back. If practical, shop in La Ceiba before getting on the ferry.

International Rotisserie Chicken (🕒 4:30-11pm, mains US\$3-8; closed Sun) Easily the biggest bang for your buck this side of the mainland, this classic open-air budget option dishes up some genuinely tasty fare. Its few tables are often full to overflowing as tourists and locals queue for the roast chicken dishes, with healthily portioned sides of rice, beans, potato salad or coleslaw. Get there early.

Le Bistro (☎ 357 8599; mains US\$5-9; 🕒 11am-10pm, shorter hours in low season) Another busy little venue, this new kid on the culinary block is excellent value for expensive Roatán. And get this for global cuisine – there's a French manager preparing Thai and Vietnamese dishes in the Caribbean. You could easily walk by here without noticing – it is wedged between shops. The *blau blau* (Vietnamese hotspot; two people US\$19) is a treat.

Rudy's (☎ 445 4104; mains US\$3.50-5; 🕒 6am-5pm Sun-Fri) The banana pancakes (US\$3.50) are renowned at this pleasant open-air café. Service can drag a bit, but it just gives you more time to watch the waves washing in across the sandy main road. It also has reasonably priced lunch dishes, including spaghetti dishes, and good mugs of coffee go for US\$1. Next door to International Rotisserie Chicken.

Cannibal Café (☎ 445 0020; 🕒 7am-10pm Mon-Sat) Seriously large tacos are a specialty here at this relaxed Mexican-food eatery. And are you big enough for the burritos challenge? Eat three and you get them free – but check out their size before you begin.

Lighthouse Restaurant (breakfast US\$3.50-5, dinner US\$7-10; 🕒 7:30am-10pm) Simple waterside restaurant serves good seafood in the evening – including grilled fish, shrimp salad and lobster. There are different, cheaper menus for breakfast and lunch.

Argentinian Grill (☎ 445 4264; mains US\$3.50-13; 🕒 3-10pm Thu-Tue) Carnivores should head here for a splurge. As you would expect, steaks are the order of the day – and the wine (mainly from Chile and Argentina) washes it down rather nicely. Service can be snooty but magnificent sunsets compensate. It's just east (right) of the intersection, in front of Posada Arco Iris.

Velva's Place (☎ 445 4488; 🕒 7:30am-10pm Mon-Sat) Unpretentious home-cooking at this simple outdoor restaurant fuels a day's diving and/or snorkeling, or lazing at the beach. 'Island breakfast' – eggs, bacon, beans and toast – costs US\$4, burgers are about the same, and fish and shrimp dishes go for US\$7 to US\$9. It is away from the hubbub of West End's main strip, about two minutes' walk east of the intersection.

There are four supermarkets in West End, with roughly the same high prices. Woody's (closed Saturday) is 100m north of the intersection. **Coconut Tree Market** (🕒 7am-8pm) is at the intersection, and there are two more between the Baptist church and Ocean Connections (one closed Saturday, the other closed Sunday). Watch out too for the pickup trucks that pass through, laden with cheap fresh fruits. As with all produce in Honduras, wash it before you eat – crops here are usually sprayed with DDT.

DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT

Foster's is a well established bar on a long jetty, with hip-hop on weekend nights, attracting a mainly local crowd. Fu Bar (formerly the Black Pearl, though this venue has more name changes than P Diddy) is the *in* after-hours place of the moment. Live music and DJs keep the island party vibe alive deep into the night. Ask about the full-moon parties, which the resident DJs often organize. It is right out at the south end of the beach toward West Bay, just before Luna Beach Resort.

Sundowners (🕒 3-10pm) Across from Native Sons and Posada Arco Iris, this is a beachside bar, at its liveliest in the early evening when off-duty divers gather to watch the horizon turn brilliant shades of red. There is also the occasional beach-side grill and barbecue. Happy hour is 5pm to 7pm.

Purple Turtle (☎ 445 4483; 7am-midnight Mon-Sat) From Sundowners, revelers usually move onto this small, hole-in-the-wall bar with a lively, upbeat crowd, often showing live sports during the day.

Brick Oven (admission free; 🕒 5-10pm Wed-Mon) Recent big-budget movies are shown on video at

this place (shows at 5pm and 7pm); you can't miss the flyers plastered all over West End. It cooks up some good thin-crust pizzas – but they ain't cheap (around US\$11).

Blue Channel (pizzas & pastas US\$7.50-9; 🕒 7am-1pm & 4.30-10pm, closed Fri) Opposite Ocean Connections, this has a big screen and shows more alternative movies (US\$2.75, free if you are eating at the restaurant; shows at 8pm).

Coxen Hole

Coxen Hole is the largest town on Roatán, and home to government offices, banks, the post office and Hondutel. The airport is just outside town. People come here on business errands or to stock up at the supermarket, HB Warren (cheaper than the West End). Groceries are still cheaper in La Ceiba though; shop ahead if possible. Coxen Hole is not particularly attractive – it's hot, humid and there are no good beaches. Avoid walking around at night, as discos and bars can get rowdy.

ORIENTATION

The commercial section of Coxen Hole is a few short blocks. The HB Warren supermarket, with the tiny city park beside it, is at the center of town; everything of interest is nearby or on the road leading into town. Buses and taxis arrive and depart from in front of the city park. The airport is a five-minute drive east. The main through road in town is one way (west to east) – be careful if you are driving a rented car, as there are no signs telling you this.

INFORMATION

Emergency

Police (☎ 445 3438)

Internet Access

Hotel Juarez (🕒 7:30am-5pm Mon-Sat) Opposite HB Warren. The 2nd floor has internet access for US\$0.80 for 15 minutes, much less extortionate than the West End set-ups.

Money

As well as the options following, BAC Credomatic has an ATM.

Banco Atlántida (Front St; 🕒 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8:30-11:30am Sat) Has an ATM; gives advances on Visa cards and changes traveler's checks. Queues are often long.

BGA (Front St; 🕒 8:30am-3:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30-11:30am Sat) Changes American Express traveler's checks and gives cash advances on Visa cards. Also has an ATM.

Located across from HB Warren.

Post

Post office (🕒 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Just opposite the BGA bank on the same side of the street as the HB Warren supermarket.

Telephone

Hondutel (🕒 7am-8:30pm) Also on the main street.

SLEEPING & EATING

You probably won't want or need to stay in Coxen Hole, especially since the ferry terminal moved.

Hotel Juarez (☎ 445 1565; tr US\$27) On the 3rd floor in the building opposite the HB Warren supermarket, this is not a bad option. Simple rooms with uneven wooden floorboards and cable TV are tidily kept. There's no hot water.

Restaurante Caribe Sol (☎ 445 0134; mains US\$6-7; 🕒 7:30am-5pm) In the same building as the Hotel Juarez, this has a basic *comedor*, with big chicken and pork dishes. It also has a huge Caribbean-style grill for four (US\$37.80).

¿Qué Tal? Café (☎ 445 1007; mains US\$6-8; 🕒 8am-4pm) Located at the west entrance to town, at the intersection of the highway to West End. Reasonable salads and sandwiches, and a bright and breezy atmosphere. It also has a pulp fiction collection and one computer with internet access (per minute US\$0.15).

HB Warren supermarket (☎ 445 1208; 🕒 7am-7pm Mon-Sat) Stock up on groceries here.

SHOPPING

Yaba Ding Ding (☎ 445 1683; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) A well-stocked and surprisingly tasteful souvenir and postcard store. It's off the main street down a precinct toward the water.

French Harbour

French Harbour is the second-largest town on Roatán. An important port, it's home to a large fishing, shrimp and lobster fleet. With no decent budget hotels and restaurants, the area's main attraction for backpackers is the impressive **Arch's Iguana Farm** (☎ 975 7442; admission US\$5; 🕒 8am-3:30pm) in French Cay, just outside of town. It is a worthwhile stop. Less a farm than the house of a serious iguanophile, everywhere you look you see iguanas – on the driveway, in the trees, under bushes, everywhere. In all around 3000 iguanas live here, some as long as 5ft (1.5m). Midday is feeding time, and the best time to visit. At the pier (at the Iguana Farm) an enclosed pool has a school of huge fish, several small sea turtles, and dozens of conches.

Oak Ridge

Oak Ridge is another port town on Roatán's eastern side, a somewhat more appealing town than French Harbour or Coxen Hole. It's known officially as José Santos Guardiola, but almost no one calls it by its Spanish name. The tiny town hugs a protected harbor, with wooden houses on stilts all along the shore and colorful boats plying the waters. More homes and shops are on a small cay just a two-minute motorboat ride from shore. Water taxis take passengers around the harbor and across to the cay for US\$1.20; they dock in front of the bus stop.

Water taxis can also take you on a pleasant tour through mangrove canals to Jonesville, a small town on a nearby bight. A 45- to 60-minute boat tour costs US\$20 for up to eight people. For another US\$5, you can stop and eat at the locally famous Hole in the Wall restaurant. A shorter, cheaper trip (US\$15, 30 minutes) goes to another part of the mangrove forest and isn't as good.

SLEEPING & EATING

The Hole in the Wall is a popular place with a sunny terrace, and all you-can-eat fresh shrimp for around US\$10 on Friday and Sunday. West of Jonesville, you have to take a water taxi from Oak Ridge to get here, or combine it with a tour of the mangrove forest (up to eight people around US\$20).

Reef House Resort (☎ 435 1482; www.reefhouse.com; 7-night package s/d per person US\$900/799) This is an excellent, relaxed resort, favored by those who want to concentrate on diving. There is an unspoiled reef just in front, and divemasters instinctively know how to spot the wildlife. The resort is like being at a large family gathering – you talk about your latest underwater adventure over a hearty lunch and dinner in a central dining hall. Rooms are unshowy but very comfortable. You need to get here by water taxi from the pier in Oak Ridge.

Sandy Bay

About 4km before you reach West End is Sandy Bay, a quiet little community strung out along the seashore. It's not as developed as West End – although it is getting there – and it doesn't have a village center as such – it's just a long settlement along several kilometers of beach.

Anthony's Key Resort, long one of Roatán's best dive resorts, is not for budget travelers, but it is definitely worth a visit. It has the

Institute for Marine Sciences, a research and educational facility working with dolphins. There is a **dolphin show** (US\$4 for nonguests; ☎ 4pm daily). You can also come face-to-face with a resident dolphin with the **Dolphin Beach Encounter** (per person US\$50) or go on a **Dolphin Dive** (per person US\$112). Some people initially feel uneasy about swimming with captive dolphins, but that usually fades when they see the happy, well-cared-for animals. The resort also houses the small but interesting **Roatán Museum** (☎ 445 3003; admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm), with reasonable displays on the island's archaeology, history, geology and wildlife. It includes what locals call *yaba ding ding* (pre-Columbian artifacts).

Across the road from Anthony's Key Resort, the lush **Carambola Botanical Gardens** (☎ 445 3117; admission US\$5; ☎ 7am-5pm Mon-Sat, 7am-1pm Sun) covers 40 acres of protected hillside, with several nature trails filled with orchids, spice plants and an 'iguana wall.' It won't be long before you spot a wandering *agouti* (rodent-like animal). A lookout has views to Utila and, at the right time, into the dolphin show at Anthony's Key Resort. There is also the **Wind & Fun Windsurf School** (☎ 445 3292; jm_carvajal@yahoo.com; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun), which offers individual lessons for US\$20 (one to two hours, including equipment); west of Blue Bahía Resort.

It's a stiff climb to **Rick's American Café** (☎ 445 3123; dishes US\$8-15; ☎ 5-9:30pm Thu-Tue) but worth it for a fine panorama over the bay, good steaks and hamburgers, and an international menu. With satellite sports showing this is also a good option if there's a ball game you just can't miss. It has a large sign on the main road, west of Anthony's Key Resort.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Roatán's **Aeropuerto Juan Ramón Galvez** (☎ 445 1880) is a short distance east of Coxen Hole.

Isleña/TACA (☎ 445 1088, reservations 443 0179; www.flyisleña.com), **Sosa** (☎ 445 1658; www.aerolineas.sosa.com) and **Atlantic Airlines** (☎ 445 1179; www.atlanticairlines.com.ni) all have offices in Roatán's airport; they offer daily flights between Roatán and La Ceiba (all charge around US\$42 each way), with domestic and international connections. At the time of research, **Continental** (☎ 445 0224; www.continental.com) operated nonstop flights from Houston to Roatán on Saturday and Sunday, and from Newark (high season only); **Delta** (☎ 550 1616; www.delta.com) had flights from Atlanta on Saturday only.

BOAT

The **Galaxy Wave** (☎ 445 1795) is a sleek, comfortable catamaran ferry service that zips between the island and the mainland in about 1½ hours. The boat leaves Roatán from a new terminal in Dixon's Cove (between Coxen Hole and French Harbour) at 7am and 2pm, and leaves from La Ceiba at 9:30am and 4:30pm. It costs US\$21.50 each way. The swells can be bumpy – ask for the anti-sea sickness tablets if your tummy is sensitive. There is no direct service from Roatán to Utila – you have to go to La Ceiba first.

Getting Around

BICYCLE

Captain Van's (☎ 445 4076; ☎ 8am-4pm), across from the church in West End, rents bicycles for US\$10 per day.

BOAT

Many towns – Oak Ridge, West End, West Bay – have regular water-taxi services. Anywhere else, you can fairly easily hire someone to take you wherever you want to go. In West End, colectivo boats to West Bay (per person US\$2.10, last one from either end around 5pm) leave from the pier near Bamboo Hut Laundry. You have to wait until they fill up.

BUS

Roatán has two bus routes, both originating in Coxen Hole.

Bus 2 (ruta 2) is the one you're most likely to use – it goes west from Coxen Hole past Sandy Bay and on to West End and West Bay. Minibuses depart both ends every 15 minutes from 6am to 6pm. The cost is US\$0.80 to go to West End; it's a 25-minute ride on a good road.

Bus 1 goes east from Coxen Hole past the airport to French Harbour, past Polly Tilly Bight, through Punta Gorda and on to Oak Ridge. Minibuses depart every half hour from 6am to 5:30pm and cost US\$0.70 to US\$1.20 depending on your destination, but can be deadly slow and full to the gills. The trip takes about 10 minutes from Coxen Hole to the airport, another 20 minutes to French Harbour, and an hour more to Oak Ridge.

In Coxen Hole, the bus stop is in front of the small park beside the HB Warren supermarket in the center of town. In West End, wait for the bus at the main intersection, where all the taxis are parked. If the minibus

is empty, be sure it's a colectivo so you don't get charged the taxi rate. Minibuses don't run on Sunday.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Car rental agencies on Roatán:

Best Car Rental (☎ 445 1494; www.roatanbestcurrental.com; airport; ☎ 7am-5pm)

Captain Van's (☎ 445 4076; ☎ 8am-4pm) Across from the church in West End, this rents motorcycles (US\$50 per day) and scooters (US\$45 per day), as well as push bikes (US\$10). It has the best reputation for safety and maintenance.

Caribbean Rent a Car (☎ 455 6950, airport 455 1430; www.caribbeanroatan.com; ☎ 8am-6pm) Outside the airport.

Roatán Island Rental (☎ 455 6759; www.roatanislandrental.com; French Harbour; ☎ 8am-5pm)

Sandy Bay Rent a Car (☎ 445 1710; Sandy Bay; ☎ 7am-5pm)

HITCHHIKING

Although Lonely Planet cannot recommend hitching, it is easy on Roatán in the daytime, and usually safe. It's much more difficult – and risky – to get a ride at night.

TAXI

Taxis operate around the island. Many are colectivos during the day and don't charge much more than buses; from West End to Coxen Hole, a colectivo is US\$1.40 per person. From Coxen Hole to French Harbour it is US\$1.10. Again, if you are the first passenger, let the driver know you want to go colectivo. As everywhere in Honduras, always clarify the price of the ride before you start.

UTILA

pop 6000

Utila has a slow, welcoming place, where the locals and visitors interact much more frequently than on Roatán, mainly because everyone is in the same town. Dive courses and fun dives cost about the same here as on Roatán – maybe slightly less – but food and lodging is noticeably cheaper – although more expensive than on the mainland. Utila's shops focus on certification courses, and classes can be larger than on Roatán. Utila does not have the beaches that Roatán does, and the snorkeling isn't as good, but the strong local presence and culture make for a unique, refreshing island experience. The party scene is stronger here, which appeals to younger backpackers.

Utila is a small island, about 13km long and 5km wide, with tiny cays dotted on the south side. It is the closest island to the mainland, just 29km away. Utila is mostly flat, with only one small hill. The population lives almost entirely in one settlement on a curving bay; another small settlement is on a cay about a 20-minute boat ride away.

Orientation

Utila is very easy to find your way around. East Harbour (known as Utila Town) is the only town on the island, with one main road and a smaller one, known generally as Cola de Mico road, that intersects with the road in front of the pier. At the east end of the main road is the old airport, just a few hundred meters from the main intersection and a good place for snorkeling. At the western end of the road is Chepes beach, also good for snorkeling.

The public jetty, where the ferries arrive and depart, is at the intersection of the town's two main roads. There, you can turn left, right or go straight; several dive shops send people to meet the boat and hand out maps with the location of competing shops mysteriously absent. There used to be a notion that shops and restaurants were better or worse depending on the direction you turned from the pier, but that is completely irrelevant now – you'll find good (and not so good) places in all directions. Besides, the town is so small, you can check out literally every shop and hotel in less than an hour. Captain Morgan's Dive Center, right at the intersection, will watch your backpack while you go to look for a place to stay.

Supermarkets, the post office, Hondutel and a Spanish school are on the main road.

Information

BOOKSTORES

Bundu Café (☎ 425 3557) On main road east of the intersection; has a decent selection of books in English and other languages, including a range of preloved Lonely Planet titles.

EMERGENCY

Police (☎ 425 3145)

IMMIGRATION

There's an immigration office on the first floor of the Palacio de Municipio building next to the public jetty.

GETTING INTO TOWN

From the Airport

Cabs try to charge US\$15 (at night US\$20) although prices are usually negotiable. It's worth making a little more effort: walk out the airport gates, cross the road and taxis are a third of the price or less (agree on a fare before getting in). Even cheaper, take a colectivo taxi to Coxen Hole (US\$1.10) then a minibus (US\$0.80) or another colectivo (US\$1.40) to West End.

From the Pier

Taxis are the quick, easy and expensive way to get to West End. Drivers have a price sharking system in operation from the pier – the going rate is quoted at US\$15 a ride. You can usually barter it down to a more reasonable US\$10. If you haven't got much stuff, walk 150m to the main road (wait on the far side) and flag a colectivo (US\$1.10 to Coxen Hole, then US\$1.40 from Coxen Hole to West End) or a minibus (US\$0.80). Minibuses don't run on Sunday.

INTERNET ACCESS & TELEPHONE

Utila has numerous internet centers, and some dive shops also offer internet access to students. The cheapest at last check:

Caye Caulker Cyber Café (East Main St; per hr US\$1.85; ☎ 9am-8pm) Right next to the Central American Spanish School, this has a low-cost connection, as well as cheap international calls.

INTERNET RESOURCES

The website www.aboututila.com has general info and news about Utila.

LAUNDRY

Next to Central American Spanish School, this laundry with no name will wash, dry and fold clothes for US\$0.40 for pants or shirts, and US\$0.11 per underwear. It is open from 7am to 4pm.

MONEY

Most dive shops and many hotels accept lempira, US dollars, traveler's checks and credit cards (usually with service fee).

Banco BGA (☎ 8am-3:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30-11:30am Sat) Changes traveler's checks and give cash advances on Visa cards. It now has the only ATM in town. Plan your finances in advance as the machine does run out of notes.

POST

The post office is right by the public dock.

Sights & Activities

WILDLIFE-WATCHING

The **Iguana Research & Breeding Station** (☎ 425 3946; www.utila-iguana.de; admission US\$2.15; ☎ 2-5pm Mon, Wed & Fri), east of Mamey Lane, studies and protects the endangered Utila iguana. The

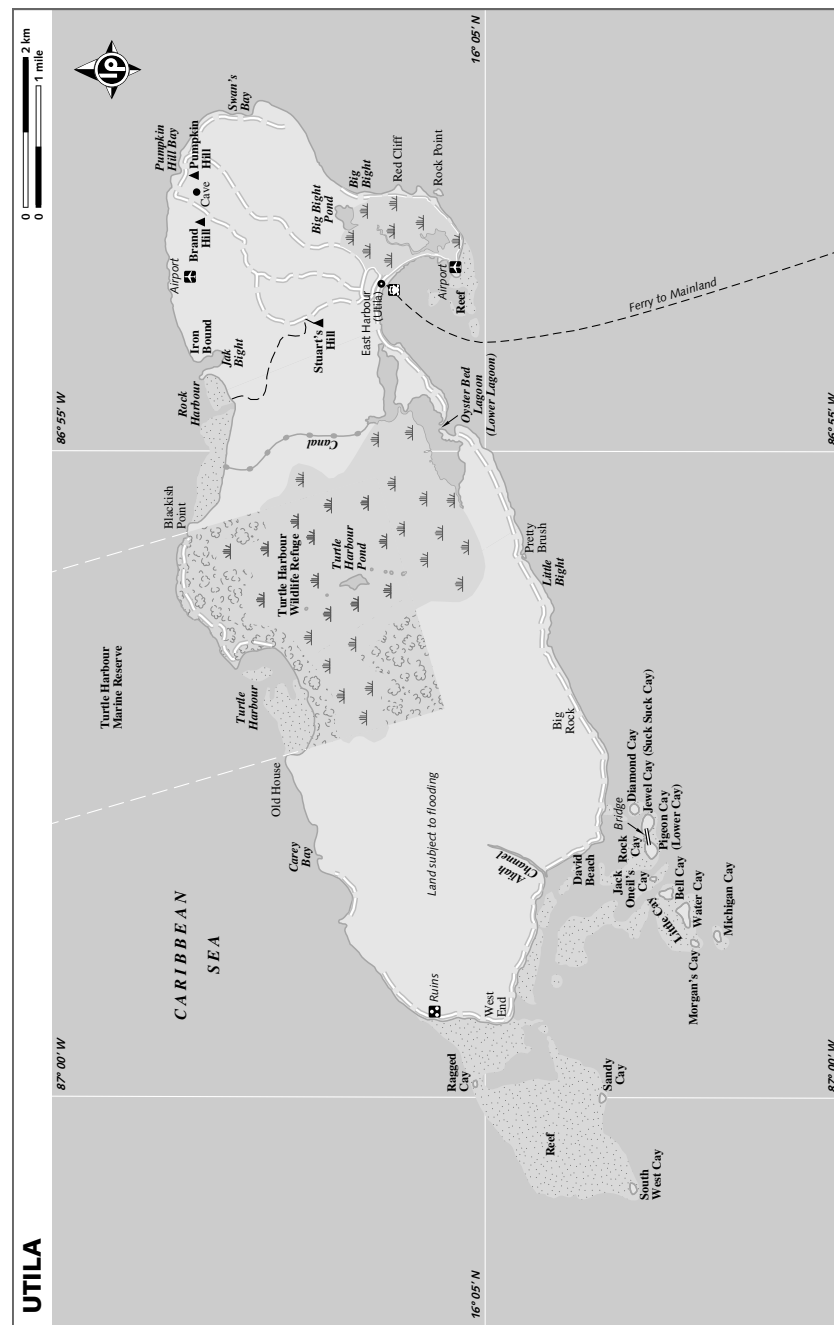
island's rapid development and a lack of environmental planning have seriously threatened this endemic species, which survives in a small section of mangrove forest. Visitors get to see plenty of these fascinating, spiny tailed critters on a tour of the research station. Station workers can also arrange other wildlife-spotting tours to the far side of the island. There are some volunteer opportunities too.

DIVING

Utila's south shore has warm crystal-clear waters filled with tropical fish, corals, sponges and other marine life. On the north side, a plunging wall makes for great drift and deep diving. Animal life is richer in Roatán overall, but Utila is famous for the magnificent whale sharks that gather here from March to April and September to October.

Most dive shops start a course almost every day, and many offer instruction in various languages. As on Roatán, there is a lot more to consider than simply price (although most have a price agreement so there should not be the variety there once was).

Firstly, safety: see the boxed text, p409, for questions you should be asking. Secondly, and just as crucially, the environment: does the dive school you are looking at have a responsible, sustainable attitude toward the reefs? A group of dive shops have started up the **Utila Dive and Safety Environmental Council** (www.udsec.com) – it is worth checking that your dive school is signed up to that. PADI open-water dive courses take three to four days and cost around US\$240, including a US\$3-per-day reef fee, which goes toward the upkeep of the buoys and coral. Dive schools often have



accommodations and usually include two free fun dives or free lodging with the course (most go for the more expensive fun dives).

The longest-established dive shop on the island, **Gunter's Dive Shop** (☎ 425 3350; www.ecomarinegunters.blogspot.com) is the furthest away from the main intersection (but still only 10 minutes' walk). It has a PADI-registered dive shop, the divers are welcoming, and there is simple, clean accommodation with a shared kitchen available. It offers an Instructor Development Course. If you want to sail to Roatán or Guanaja, it is worth asking here – at last report, you could organize a passage for US\$50 per person (minimum of four people) through the dive store. You can also hire kayaks here (US\$4.50 for four hours).

West of the intersection, **Bay Islands College of Diving** (BICD; ☎ 425 3291; www.dive-utila.com) is a busy, well established shop which appeals especially to nervous first-time divers. It is the only shop with an on-site pool, which helps. BICD's policy is to have only four divers per course or fun dive. The on-site recompression chamber is the only one on the island. It is also associated with the Whale Shark and Oceanic Research Center; see www.wsorc.com.

Alton's Dive Shop (☎ 425 3704; www.altondiveshop.com), a very friendly and welcoming PADI- and NAUI-certified dive school, has up-to-date gear and cheap accommodations right on the dock – you can practically roll out of bed into a dive boat. They are a sociable bunch, and attract the younger backpacker crowd. It is located 300m east of the intersection.

Captain Morgan's Dive Centre (☎ 425 3349; www.divingutila.com) is the first dive shop you come to on the island, right on the intersection. Classes are small and instruction is friendly and good. Its dive shop is PADI-certified. Managers take a responsible, sustainable approach to the island's reefs and diving. Its clean, comfortable lodging is on Jewel Cay (see opposite), a 20-minute boat ride from the main island, and a great option for getting away from it all. The cay has no cars or golf buggies and fewer bugs than the island proper.

Cross Creek (☎ 425 3397; www.crosscreekutila.com; East Main St) comes with friendly multilingual staff and professional instruction. Rooms (with fan/air-con US\$4/16) and dorms (US\$3) are small, clean, and can get very hot in the sun. Cabins are a decent deal, with cable TV and private hot-water bathroom (double/triple US\$28/33). All guests can use the big shared kitchen.

Utila Dive Centre (UDC; ☎ 425 3326; www.utiladivecentre.com) is the largest diving operation in Utila. This is a very professional outfit with a good dive shop and many happy customers. It also makes the hardest sell – you are likely to have at least one brochure almost before your feet touch dry land. UDC has good, cheap accommodations at the Mango Garden Inn.

Utila Water Sports (☎ 425 3239; www.utilawatersports.com) is owned by the same people who operate the upscale Laguna Beach Resort, so gear here is top-notch. Groups are small (maximum four people) and instruction is professional but relaxed – lower key than the party-central vibe of some schools. You can use kayaks for free if diving here. East of the intersection.

Other good possibilities: **Deep Blue Divers** (☎ 425 3211; www.deepblueutila.com) Just west of the intersection, has a PADI five-star shop and caters to a slightly older crowd. Courses are small and relaxed; instructors lead all fun dives, and there is one-on-one tuition if you do a refresher course. Equipment is new.

Utopia Dive Village (www.utopiadivevillage.com) Newest dive outfit on Utila; professional and upmarket. It is well outside of town in an exclusive location further up the coast.

SNORKELING

There's snorkeling on both ends of the main road. Manmade **Bando Beach** (☎ 425 3190; East Main St; admission US\$3; ☎ 9am–5pm) is at the old airport at the east end of town. You can also rent kayaks (US\$3) and old snorkeling gear (US\$5) there. **Chepes Beach** is at the opposite (west) end of the road, and is a pleasant, albeit small, spot, with palm trees, white sand and some basic beachside bars and snack joints.

Many dive shops rent snorkel gear to students and nonstudents (per day around US\$5).

KAYAKING & CANOEING

You can kayak to **Rock Harbour** by going into Oyster Bed Lagoon and then into Lower Lagoon and along the mangrove canal. There's a good beach at Rock Harbour, and it's very private, since the only way to get there is by boat or by hiking across the island. A round-trip from town, with time at the beach, takes a full day. Another option is to kayak under the bridge separating the town from the airport, into the lagoon and then up the channel to Big Bight Pond. You can rent kayaks at Gunter's Dive Shop.

Many local fishermen and families have signs in their windows for boat tours. They can take you to Water Cay, to Rock Harbour via the mangrove canal, though the lagoon, etc.

HIKING

For a complete escape from town, walk 3km across the island to the caves of **Pumpkin Hill Bay**. You will get an idea of what the island used to be like before the tourism boom. One of the caves was allegedly a hideout for the pirate Henry Morgan.

THE CAYS

Several cays on Utila's southwest shore make good day trips. **Jewel** and **Pigeon Cays**, connected by a small bridge, are home to a charming village and the best fish burgers on the north coast. Captain Morgan's Dive Centre operates from here, and loans kayaks and snorkel gear to students.

Water Cay, just beyond Pigeon and Jewel Cays, is a beautiful, uninhabited little island covered with palm trees. A caretaker is supposed to keep it clean and collect US\$2 per visitor for the upkeep of the island – although there was no sign of him or much litter-collecting when we showed up last. Utila's annual **Sun Jam party** is held here, usually in August, when hundreds of locals and visitors pack the island for a fun night of dancing, drinking and general mayhem. The best snorkeling is off the southeastern corner, but watch for boat traffic.

There are several ways of traveling to the cays – you will quickly spot the signs around town. Bundo Café organizes fairly regular day trips (per person US\$8, plus US\$2 for the caretaker, minimum four people).

Courses

Utila is not a natural spot for learning Spanish as many of its residents speak English. However, there are a couple of language schools, and opportunities to speak Spanish are increasing with the large number of mainland migrants.

Central American Spanish School (☎ 425 3788; www.ca-spanish.com), west of the intersection, across from Rubi's Inn, offers Spanish classes at all levels. One week one-on-one classes cost US\$125 for the first week and US\$100 for subsequent weeks. Hourly rates are available (US\$6). It has received some glowing feedback from customers and has recently introduced homestay options (including full board and lodging US\$100).

Sleeping

Utila has a bunch of good cheap places to stay, and several midrange ones. It doesn't take long to walk around and find something that suits you (you can leave your backpack at Captain Morgan's, near the pier). Many dive shops, including Captain Morgan's Dive Center, Utila Water Sports and Utila Dive Center, have good, cheap (or free) accommodations for students. Only hotels open to walk-ins are listed here.

Note that it can be hard to get a good room during the busy tourist seasons (July to August and mid-December to Easter), and also during the Sun Jam festival (usually in August). Reservations are advisable at these times.

MAIN ROAD

Bayview Hotel (☎ 425 3114; d with fan US\$18, with air-con US\$35; ☎) Reasonable rooms all have bathrooms with hot water. White tiles and floral patterns are not the most stylish, nor is this the best value that you will find, but the hotel pier is good for a cold drink and sunbathing. It lies west of the intersection.

Rubi's Inn (☎ 425 3240; s/d with fan US\$16/20, r with air-con US\$35, honeymoon r US\$45; ☎) Probably the best deal on the island, Rubi's Inn has spotless rooms with polished floors, white bedspreads, and compact, neatly tiled bathrooms (even with attractive shower curtains). The property has a delightful little jetty that juts out onto the waters of Utila harbor. There is a honeymoon suite on the 2nd floor for all you romantics out there. It is no secret, however, and books up fast. It's next to the Reef Cinema.

Margaritaville Beach Hotel (☎ 425 3366; fax 425 3266; West Main St, Sandy Bay; r with fan/air-con US\$15/30, cabins with air-con US\$50; ☎) Just under 100 yards from Chepes Beach, Margaritaville is a two-story Caribbean-style house with porches. Rooms are simple – two beds, a fan and a bathroom – while across the street, the cabins are a slight step up – updated furnishings, private porches, and on the bay.

Freddy's Place (☎ 425 3142; East Main St; d with fan/air-con US\$16/35; ☎) This has four reasonable apartments with two rooms apiece (rented individually) sharing a bathroom and kitchen. The doors are darkly varnished, while hammocks on the outside porch apparently catch 'the best breeze in Utila.' Located east of the intersection over the bridge.

INLAND

From the pier, go straight across the main road for a number of good budget lodging options.

Tony's Place (☎ 425 3376; s/d US\$5.40/7.30) These basic but neat wooden box rooms, stacked on two floors, all have shared bathrooms. They are on the same site as the owner's house, and are a reasonable long-term rent option. Look out for the white-and-green building around the corner from the Mango Inn.

Blueberry Hill (☎ 425 3141; Cola de Mico; s or d US\$8) This is a ramshackle collection of houses, on the hill up from the dock. Rooms have a shared kitchen and bathroom; upstairs rooms have a porch so you can watch the crowds go by. There are some cabins to rent too.

Hotel Bavaria (☎ 425 3809; Cola de Mico; s/d US\$8/10) Rooms above a family house with lively children. The rooms are impeccably kept, right down to the polished floorboards, all with bathrooms (cold water only). Each has one double and one single bed. It is perched on the hill, just a short way up from the Mango Inn.

Roses Inn (☎ 425 3283; Mamey's La; r with/without bathroom US\$12/8) These quieter rooms in a house on stilts about five minutes' walk up the hill from the fire station (west of the intersection) are the cheapest deal, with hot water included. Guests in the clean, no-frill rooms share a kitchen. There is an attractive flower garden at the front. Arrange your stay at Rose's supermarket at the bottom of the hill.

Colibri Hill Resort (☎ 425 3329; www.colibri-resort.com; s/d US\$41/43; 🏠 🚿) This upmarket newcomer is a clear cut above anything else on Utila, although sadly it is beyond the average backpacker's budget. Whitewashed rooms complement lovingly shellacked hardwood floorboards while the lush, rambling gardens include a small pool bar. Upstairs rooms

have superb sweeping views across the bay, and fresh coffee is available in the morning. To get there, turn left from the pier and take a right at the Bayview Hotel.

Eating

There's a good selection of eating options for such a small settlement. Several places to stay also have kitchens where you can cook. You may want to stock up on fruits and vegetables on the mainland – they are scarcer and more expensive on the island.

Mermaids Fast Food (☎ 425 3395; dishes US\$2-4.50; 🕒 10am-10pm Mon-Thu, 10am-6pm Fri, 10am-3pm Sat & Sun) Something of a Utila institution, Mermaids has an open front and canteen-style plastic chairs. Its style and prices are fast-food but the nosh is much better than that sounds. Dishes include baked chicken.

Thompson's Bakery (☎ 425 3803; breakfast US\$2.50; 🕒 6am-8pm Mon-Sat, 6am-3pm Sun) This honest, hard-working café can break your fast before the day's first dive with filling *baleadas* (usually filled with beans and cream). In the evening, a grill and BBQ are often wheeled out. Its fresh Johnny cakes (a type of doughy biscuit) are famous.

Ultralight Café (☎ 425 3514; West Main St; mains US\$3-7; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner Sun-Thu, breakfast & lunch Fri) An Israeli restaurant with an interesting history, serving up *shakshuka* (a popular Israeli egg dish), falafel, *sabich* (a pita sandwich) and the best pita bread in Central America. The conch soup is also excellent.

Bundu Café (☎ 425 3557; dishes US\$2.50-7; 🕒 8am-4pm Thu-Tue, 6-11pm Fri-Sun) This is still one of the best traveler cafés in Honduras. The large, comfy interior is a fine place to meet people, read or hang out, and there is always something going on – pub quizzes on Fridays, salsa on Saturdays and occasional piano performances on a Sunday. It has a big-portioned,

good-value menu, catering to the backpacker crowd with bagels, fresh homemade *panini* bread, pancakes, salads, fruit and yogurt, as well as some island-style dishes. It is located east of the intersection (turn right at the pier). Ask here about trips to Water Cay.

La Dolce Vita Pizzeria (☎ 425 3410; dishes US\$4-7; 🕒 6:30am-10pm) Up a lush garden path at the Mango Inn, it does great brick-oven pizzas, seafood pastas and good breakfasts. Many people come just to prop up the adjoining bar.

Driftwood Café (☎ 408 5168; mains US\$5-8; 🕒 7am-10pm) This delightful option is a little way west, offering respite from the pumping tunes that blast out in the center of town. The eating area is beyond the bar, out on a jetty over the water. We tried the snapper battered in beer, which took a while to get to our table – but hey, what's the rush? It was worth waiting for.

Munchies Café (☎ 425 3168; sandwiches US\$3.50, main dishes US\$5-9; 🕒 8:30am-10:30pm) A lot of surf, some turf and even some good vegetarian platters are dished out on the attractive veranda of this restaurant. The chef's specials are worth looking out for, and there are good reasonably priced sandwich options for those peckish moments between dives.

Jade Seahorse Restaurant (☎ 425 3270; dishes US\$5-11; 🕒 7:30am-2pm & 5-10pm Thu-Tue) The colorfully chaotic interior – including plastic iguanas poised on columns – is the island's most distinctive restaurant setting. The creativity continues in the cuisine, which includes inventive, well-prepared seafood and pasta dishes.

La Piccola (☎ 425 3746; dishes US\$6-8; 🕒 5-10pm Sat-Thu) This warm, authentically Italian restaurant serves up reasonably priced backpacker specials on candlelit tables with ruby tablecloths, in a simple stone-floor setting. There are discounts if you come in a group of six or more.

Café Mariposa (☎ 425 3979; dishes US\$6-9; 🕒 11:30am-2pm & 5-10pm Fri, Sat, Mon & Tue, 10:30am-2pm Sun) Set up in May 2006, this is in a lovely upstairs setting overlooking the bay. It is at its finest when the jetty below is illuminated at night. Business is yet to pick up but it deserves to. The cuisine takes much of its inspiration from New Orleans (links between the Louisiana town and the Bay Islands are strong). There are occasional live-music performances.

Bush's Supermarket (☎ 425 3147; 🕒 6:20am-6pm Mon-Sat, 6:20-11:20am Sun) Opens early so you can

get your day's supplies before you hop on a dive boat.

Drinking

Past the Mango Inn, the Bar in the Bush is popular, but can get rowdy. It usually is just open on Friday nights. Lone travelers should take care at night, since the pathway to the bar is unlit.

Treatican (🕒 7pm-midnight Fri-Wed) Who needs LSD with this imaginatively landscaped bar and garden that goes on forever? Its mad little assortment of arches, shelters, bridges and exotic tropical flora – an extension of the luxury cabins on the same site – are a must-see. The drinks and cocktails are good too.

Tranquila Bar (🕒 4pm-midnight Sun-Thu, 4pm-3am Fri & Sat) Jutting out on a small jetty, this is a relaxed place to swap dive tales and travel stories. Reggae tunes on the sound system add to the easygoing vibe. It also serves Cajun and Po Boy food (US\$5 to US\$7) from a hole-in-the-wall just down from the bar.

Coco Loco Bar (🕒 4pm-midnight, later in high season) A perennial favorite among the younger backpacker crowd, the music is faster and more furious than in the neighboring Tranquila Bar, and the shots seem to flow faster and more furiously too. It is *champa* style, with a jetty out onto the water. Happy hour is from 4pm to 7pm.

Entertainment

Reef Video & Cinema (☎ 425 3754; 🕒 1-8pm Mon-Fri, 11:30am-6pm Sat) Lends DVDs (US\$2.15), and shows different films each night in a cute little upstairs 60-seater cinema (US\$2.45). It is east of the intersection.

Shopping

Gunter's Driftwood Gallery (☎ 425 3113; 🕒 hours vary) is a quirky workshop a couple of blocks inland, where the eponymous Gunter carves and displays sculptures (lots of sharks) made from driftwood. Turn left just before Mango Inn; you'll see the sign on your right. It is more likely to be open in the afternoon.

Getting There & Away**AIR**

Flights between Utila and La Ceiba cost about US\$45 and take about 15 minutes.

Atlantic Airlines (☎ 425 3364; 🕒 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat) has an office on the main road, across from Banco Atlántida.

SPLURGE!

Rent your own island! It is not every day you have the chance to step out your front door and let the sands of your own Caribbean island run between your toes. But that's exactly what you can do just off Utila for surprisingly little money. You can choose between two different cays, both of which have cabins and facilities – as well as the essential crystal-clear waters lapping at the edge. If you do it in a group, it can even work out reasonably cheap. **Sandy Cay** is available for US\$85 a night, (three-night minimum). It has a butane fridge and solar power and sleeps six. The slightly more luxurious **Little Cay** goes for US\$125 a night. It has its own generator. To arrange your own private getaway, contact George Jackson on **Pigeon Cay** (☎ 425 3161) or ask at Captain Morgan's Dive Centre (p420).

BOAT

The *Utila Princess II* runs from La Ceiba to Utila at 9:30am and 4pm. Crossings take one hour. Prepare for a fun but wet ride if you sit up front! The same boat returns from Utila to La Ceiba at 6:20am and 2pm. Tickets are US\$16.25 each way; arrive half an hour in advance. There is a US\$0.60 docking tax on the return from Utila. Occasional charter boats go to the mainland or to Roatán, but they can be expensive and don't run to a set schedule. Don't depend on them.

Getting Around

Golf carts now zip up and down the main road (keep an eye out for them) and charge a standard US\$1 for any distance.

Lance Bodden (☎ 425 3245; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat) Rents four-wheel ATVs (per day US\$60), golf buggies (per day US\$50), motorcycles and scooters (per day US\$45), and good mountain bikes (per day US\$5 to US\$8). Straight ahead from the pier.

Delco Bike (☎ 8am-6pm Sun-Fri) Rents out bikes for US\$2.75 (with a US\$11 returnable deposit). Also hires out scooters (per day US\$20). Left of intersection.

GUANAJA

pop 10,000

Easternmost of the three Bay Islands, Guanaja is a small island, roughly 18km long and 6km wide at its widest point.

It is blessed with a great reef, beaches and laid-back fishing villages. A handful of cays around the island harbor shipwrecks and offer some good snorkeling and diving. Although several dive resorts have appeared on the island, diving and tourism on the scale of Roatán and Utila is yet to reach Guanaja.

The island is certainly not a haven for budget travelers – getting around by water taxis is expensive, and lodging is pricier than you will find on either Utila or Roatán. With ferries going there only infrequently, it can be more expensive to get to as well. It does feel a lot more off the beaten track than the other two islands, however, and you could make your budget stretch with a bit of resourcefulness.

Guanaja was badly hit by Hurricane Mitch in 1998, which damaged the island's famous forest of Caribbean pine – Christopher Columbus named the island *Isla de Pinos* (Isle of Pines) when he landed here in 1502. Reforestation is helping the island to recover. The waters around the island are a designated marine park.

Orientation & Information

There are a few tiny settlements on the main island, including one on Savannah Bight and another on Mangrove Bight. However, the island's principal town, called Bonacca by the locals, is on a small cay just off the island's east coast. Every inch of the cay has been built on: wooden houses with sloping roofs stand on stilts at different heights. There are no cars on the cay and no roads; walkways wind around the houses and narrow canals allow the residents to pull their boats right up to the houses.

Banco BGA changes traveler's checks and gives cash advances on Visa cards.

Sights & Activities

Snorkeling, diving and visits to the **cays** and **beaches** are the activities on Guanaja. You can snorkel right off the town cay. There's good snorkeling around South West Cay and several other cays, at Michael Rock Beach on the main island and at many other places.

On the main island are a number of **hiking trails** and a **waterfall**. You can hire a boat to take you across if you're staying in Bonacca. Diving trips can be arranged through the dive resorts on the main island.

Sleeping & Eating

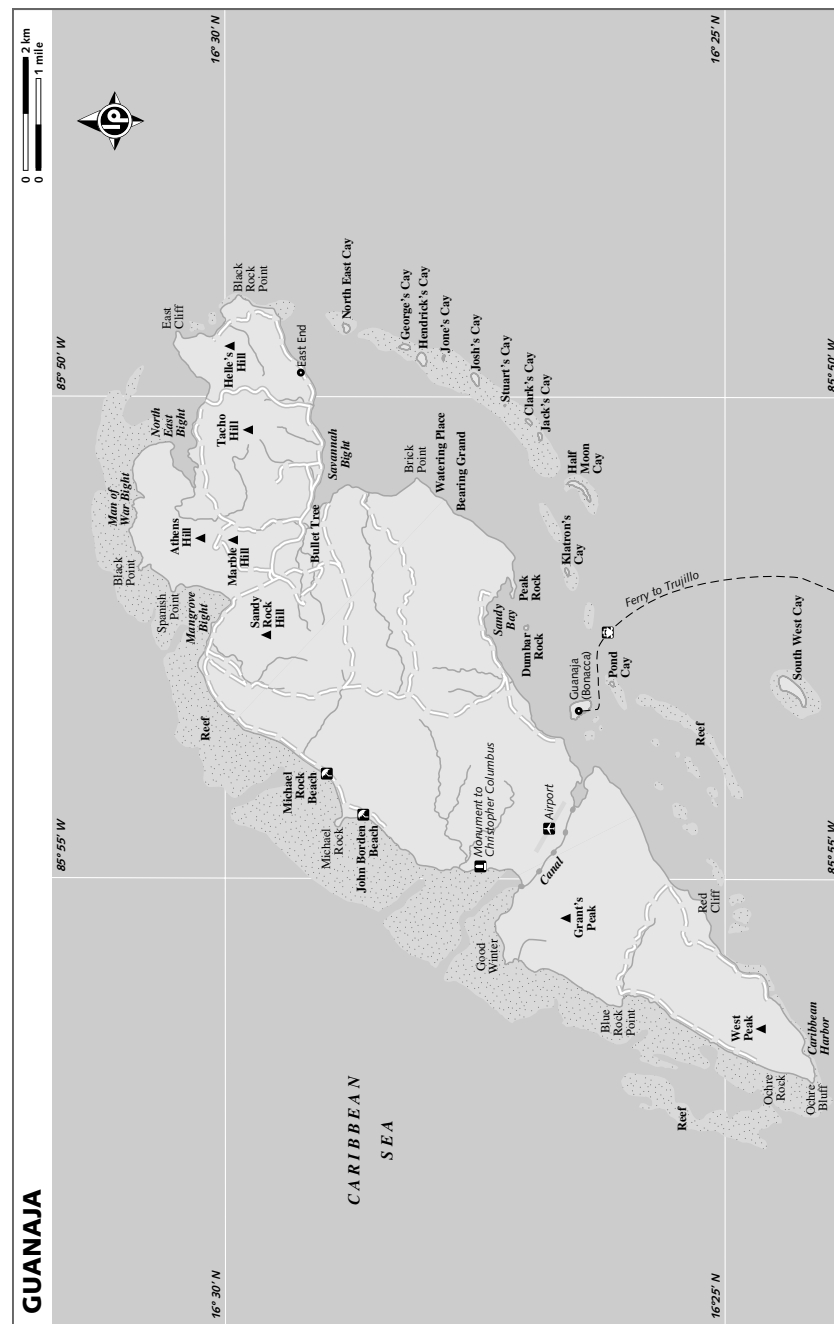
There are places to stay both in Bonacca and on the main island.

Hotel Miller (☎ 453 4327; Bonacca; r US\$32; ☎) This is a simple hotel with cable TV, private hot-water bathroom, air-con and an on-site restaurant. It is right in the center of town, on the main street.

Hotel Hilton (☎ 453 4469; d US\$50) Right by the airport, run by a colorful American expat, these are reasonable, airy rooms. The owner is a good source of information about the island, and you can hire motorboats here.

End of the World Resort (☎ 419 1405; www.guanaja.com; d with all-inclusive dive package US\$800) On the far north side of the island, this is an upscale resort, way out of range of the average backpacker, but it is one of the best around, offering cabins with lovely ocean panoramas, as well as kayaking, snorkeling, fishing and hiking possibilities.

Graham's Place (☎ 453 4498; ☎ 7am-10pm) On a cay, this has a lovely beach setting, a fine restaurant and three rooms. You will need to get a water taxi over from Bonacca, but the pleasant setting and good cuisine makes it



worth the trip. You can see a rainbow of marine species from the dock as you arrive.

Best Stop (☎ 453 4523; Bonacca; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Fri, dinner 6:30-11pm Sat & Sun) This is indeed the best stop on the island – if you are looking for good hamburgers, sandwiches, and pastries, that is. You will find it just opposite the basketball court on Bonacca.

Mexi-Treats (☎ 453 4170; Bonacca; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is the genuine article – a Mexican chef prepares the good-value snacks here.

Getting There & Away

Isleña Regional (☎ 453 4208; www.flyislena.com), **Aerolíneas SOSA** (☎ 453 4359) and **Atlantic Airlines** (☎ 453 4211; www.atlanticairlines.com.ni) have 25-minute flights between Guanaja and La Ceiba. A motorboat meets air passengers at a dock near the airport for the five-minute ride to Bonacca.

One scheduled passenger boat goes between Trujillo and Guanaja. Called the *Island Tour*, this aging vessel makes the crossing from the mainland at 3pm on Thursday and Sunday. It returns at 9am on Friday and Tuesday. It is often late; if the weather is rough it won't leave at all.

Getting Around

Transport on the island is by motorboat. Virtually everybody on the island has a boat, so finding a ride is not tough. Ask at your hotel for a trusted boat driver.

THE MOSKITIA & EASTERN HONDURAS

The eastern part of Honduras, including the entire department of Gracias a Dios and the eastern sides of Olancho and Colón, is a vast, sparsely inhabited area of rivers and forests. The largely untamed tropical, easternmost part of Honduras is known as the Moskitia. The area abounds in animal and birdlife.

Only two major roads traverse the area northeast of Tegucigalpa. Both run between Tegucigalpa and Trujillo, and are traveled by bus routes. One goes via Tocoa, Savá, Olancho, La Unión and Limones; it climbs the mountains west of Juticalpa and can be driven in about 10 or 11 hours. The other, longer, route goes via Juticalpa (three hours). These areas are little visited by tourists.

JUTICALPA

pop 35,619

The largest town in the area is Juticalpa, the capital of the department of Olancho. It's a bustling town, with a dusty approach road leading to the parque central. The central square is also the town's prettiest spot, with an abundance of different tree species from palms to eucalypti and an attractive white-washed church.

Orientation & Information

There are two bus terminals, both several blocks south of the parque central; the *iglesia* is on the eastern side of the park. Hotels and restaurants are either on the main road between the bus stop and parque central, or north/northwest of the park. The post office is right on the park; Hondutel is one block north. The BGA bank is on the south side of the parque and has a Unibanc ATM.

Sights

The **Casa de la Cultura** (☎ 785 3510; admission free; ☺ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) may be worth a visit for history and archaeology buffs. Exhibits are sparse at the moment, but the enthusiastic staff will explain the pre-Columbine origins of the region (some Spanish needed). A new museum, the **Olancho Regional History Museum**, was due to open in mid-2007.

The **annual festival** is held on December 8.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Reyes (☎ 785 2232; s/d US\$3.25/6.50, with bathroom US\$4.30/8.60) This is the sort of place where you get a single naked lightbulb in your room and walls that haven't seen a lick of paint this side of the 21st century. That said, the linen is clean and you cannot complain about the room rates. Some may resent the 9:30pm curfew, however. There's free purified water on tap.

Hotel Honduras (☎ 785 1580; fax 785 1456; s/d with fan US\$13.50/20.50, with air-con US\$20.50/30; ☺) Neatly tiled rooms and helpful, welcoming staff make this midrange place comfortably one of the best central options. All 22 rooms have bathrooms and cable TV.

Fresh Juice & Food (☎ 785 2490; dishes US\$2.50-5; ☺ 7am-11pm Mon-Sat) This busy little café may not boast the most switched-on service, but the juices are good and it's an ideal breakfast stop. It is right by the entrance to Hotel Honduras, two block west of the parque.

Restaurante El Nuevo Rancho (☎ 785 1202; mains US\$4-6; ☺ 11am-11pm Mon-Sat) This has hearty, good-value meat staples that would satisfy the hardest working ranch hand. It is in the street behind the main church, in a covered patio with wooden tables.

Getting There & Away

You are most likely to need the **Transportes Aurora** (☎ 785 2237) terminal about 1km from the town center on the main entrance road. It has services to Catacamas (US\$1.10, 45 minutes, 40km, hourly 8am to 8pm) and Tegucigalpa (US\$3.70, hourly from 6:15am to 6:15pm). Give yourself an extra half an hour before departure – queues can be hideous. Make sure you get on the much faster direct service.

Across the street, down by the market, is the dusty chicken-bus terminal. Buses leave there for Limones, La Unión, Mangulile, Tocoa and Trujillo.

Plenty of taxis run between town and both terminals (US\$0.80).

Some departures: La Unión (US\$2.70, three hours, 95km) buses depart at 11:30am, 1pm (to Mangulile), or take any bus to Limones and transfer (start early to make sure of a connection); Tocoa (US\$6.50, eight hours, 235km, 6am); and for Trujillo (US\$6.50, nine hours, 278km) catch a bus on the highway at 9:30am.

CATACAMAS

pop 35,200

There's not a whole lot for travelers in Catacamas, 40km northeast of Juticalpa (45 minutes by bus), but it is a useful base for hikes to the surrounding area, including to caves used in prehistoric times near Río Talgua (8km from town). Irregular buses head toward the Cuevas de Talgua. Ask around or take a taxi for around US\$6. You can often hitch a ride all or part of the way there too.

You can climb **El Boquerón**, 15km west of town – ask any bus driver to let you off. Ask at your hotel about conditions, as roads sometimes flood.

Hotels are gathered near the parque central. To get there when you get off the bus, take a cab (US\$1) or walk: turn left out of the terminal, right on the wide road (500m), then left at the cemetery to reach the parque, which has an ancient, moss-carpeted ceiba tree. The best cheapie is family-run **Hospedaje San Jose** (☎ 799 3222; s/d with shared bathroom from US\$2.20/4.40) on the

west corner of the square. Its very basic rooms, some with fold-up beds, are well kept.

Hotel Colina (☎ 799 4488; s/d with cable TV US\$9.75/10.50) has dour service, but is otherwise a sweet place with a lengthy courtyard. The rooms have attractive, wood-framed beds.

Eating is limited to a Chinese restaurant and a *comedor* on the parque central. You can also fill up on standard chicken fast food at **Pollolandia** (☎ 799 5623; ☺ 9am-7pm).

About 10 **Aurora/Discovery** (☎ 799 4154) buses leave for Tegucigalpa each day. It's best to get the faster, direct service (US\$4.60). There are three, pricey luxury buses each day (US\$10, 6:30am, 11:45am and 3:15pm). Frequent services go to nearby Juticalpa (US\$1.10). Other buses traverse the dirt road to the small town of Dulce Nombre de Culmí.

LA MOSKITIA

The Moskitia, that vast part of Honduras you see on maps, with very few roads, is unlike anything else you will experience in the country. It is one of Central America's last frontiers of untamed wilderness. Huge expanses of land are virtually untouched jungle, where people and animals are living much as they would have lived two centuries ago. It is sometimes referred to as Central America's Amazon, and the description is apt, both in that its natural beauty is just as awe-inspiring – and also that it is under threat.

Manatees, tapirs and jaguars all still thrive here – they have learnt to be circumspect around man, and they may not be easy to spot. Crocodiles can be seen in the waters, while birdlife is raucous. Toucans, macaws, parrots, egrets and herons are among the many species that keep ornithologists coming back again and again.

The different human cultures here are fascinating too. There are five different groups, with isolated pockets of Pech and Tawahka in the interior, as well as Mosquito, Garifuna and Ladino populations.

A visit to the region is not for the faint-hearted. Conditions are rustic at best, and you will find little air-conditioned comfort. A bit of Spanish will come in handy too. Expect your traveling expenses to go up significantly here. Its isolation means prices are noticeably higher. But the intrepid few that make the effort are often thrilled by what they find and the memories they take back. How this unspoiled paradise is developed and protected is

crucial. Environmentalists say that La Moskitia offers one last chance to get it right. And gliding down the river in a dugout canoe, past mud houses backed by vine-heavy trees, you can't help but hope they – we – do.

Dangers & Annoyances

This is wild country and needs to be treated with respect. Crucially, never venture into the rain forest without a guide. Trails are faint and overgrown, and hikers can quickly become hopelessly lost. Travel by night can also be dangerous. Don't be too ambitious – try to leave yourself time in daylight in case problems arise.

Avoid crossing the bigger lagoons late in the day – afternoon winds can create swampingly large waves.

Malaria occurs here: bring insect repellent, a mosquito net and antimalarial pills. A water purification kit (a filter or iodine tablets) is also a good idea.

Finally, the Moskitia is known to be used by drug-runners. The chances of it affecting you are slim, but note that smuggling is often done at certain times of year (the rainy season in particular) when the chances of detection are smaller. Ask around to minimize your chances of being caught in the crossfire.

Tours

Several travel companies undertake tours into the Moskitia region, providing an easier (and not necessarily much more expensive) way to get a taste of the Moskitia. All of the following ones have been recommended: Basecamp in Copán Ruinas; Omega Tours, Jungle River Tours and La Moskitia Ecoaventuras in La Ceiba; and Mesoamerica Travel in San Pedro Sula; see the relevant towns for more information on these tour companies.

When planning your trip, **La Ruta Moskitia** (☎ 443 1276; www.larutamoskitia.com) is an excellent resource. A nonprofit tourism initiative started by Rare Conservation, it can advise how to get there independently – and ensures that money gets to the guides, guesthouse owners and boatmen. It also has recommended package tours.

Laguna de Ibans

The small traditional coastal communities around Laguna de Ibans are likely to be your first overnight stop if you come the overland route. The quiet Miskito village of **Rais Ta** has

wooden houses on stilts and narrow dirt paths beneath a high leafy canopy. A new **butterfly farm** was in the works at the time of research. There are a few very simple accommodation options. **Raista Eco Lodge** (r with shared bathroom per person US\$10) has sturdy, rustic wooden rooms with basic latrine toilets. Large, filling meals (US\$2 to US\$4) are prepared here.

Belén is practically an extension of the same settlement. It has good lodging at **Pawanka Beach Cabins** (per person US\$10; meals US\$4) – although there's only two cabins (with real flush toilets).

Collective boats headed to Palacios pass Rais Ta and Belén at around 3am to 3:30am (US\$8, two hours). There is an airport between the two towns – arrange flights at the SAMI office in Rais Ta. You can also arrange transport to Las Marías, for the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve, from here; the trip takes five to six hours (round-trip US\$190). An early-morning colectivo boat takes passengers from Rais Ta to Palacios in time to catch the first speedboat to Iriona.

For Río Plátano, a colectivo pickup truck passes every hour (US\$2.75, 45 minutes); another passes in the other direction at the same frequency, making stops in Cocobila, Ibans and Plaplaya.

Reserva de la Biósfera del Río Plátano

The Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve is a magnificent nature reserve, declared a World Heritage site in 1980. A vast unspoiled, untamed wilderness, it is home to extraordinary animal life, including a number of endangered species. The best time of year to visit is from November to July, and the best time for seeing birds is during February and March, when many migratory birds are here.

One of the best places to organize tours is in **Las Marías**, a one-phone town at the heart of the reserve, with around 100 Miskito and Pech families. There is no running water or electricity. There are several basic lodgings there, which will also cook you simple meals. Clean, airy **Hospedaje Doña Justa** (center of town; r with shared bathroom per person US\$5) with a large flower garden, and the sprawling **Hospedaje Doña Rutilia** (r with shared bathroom per person US\$6), on the river, are good options.

A head guide assigns guides, according to your requirements, for a fee of US\$4. Trips vary from one-day excursions to a nearby petroglyph to amazing, but arduous, three-day trips through primary rain forest (Pico

EXPLORE MORE AROUND THE MOSKITIA

For intrepid eyes, the vast expanse of La Moskitia conceals fascinating insights into indigenous cultures and a finely balanced jungle ecosystem.

- One of the most isolated and fragile of Honduras' indigenous peoples is the Tawahka, found deep in La Moskitia. To visit these communities you need to venture a long way up Río Patuca, to the towns of **Krausirpe** and **Krautara**, using Wampusirpi (see below) as a base. Krautara is smaller and more isolated, and remains 100% Tawahka.
- If you get the chance, take in **Plaplaya**, a lovely traditional Garífuna village a short boat ride from Rais Ta (see opposite), where giant leatherback sea turtles nest and are released by volunteers each year.
- One of the most rewarding trips is a three-day hike up **Pico Dama** into the heart of the Reserva de la Biósfera del Río Plátano. Go to Las Marías to arrange it; see opposite.

Dama), which require more guides. Guides cost from around US\$11 a day, and you will also need to cover expenses. Bring camping equipment. Get an early start for your best chance to see the wildlife.

An *expreso* from Rais Ta to Las Marías has a hefty fixed price of US\$190 (five to six hours). See p432 for how to get to Rais Ta. Hook up with other travelers to spread the costs. The fare is for a round trip, with two nights at Las Marías included. The boatman waits in Las Marías, so after the second night it'll cost you an extra US\$8 per night.

The super intrepid can also access the biosphere by a multiday raft ride down the river from Dulce Nombre de Culmí. Contact Omega Tours (see p395) for more information.

Palacios

Many travelers will have to pass through Palacios, a tense, rather lawless place known as a drug-courier corridor. People tend to move on from here swiftly, but if you do get stuck, **Hotel Rio Tinto** (☎ 966 6465; r US\$8) by the old airstrip is about the best place in town. A boat is the most common way out of town, with services to Belén and a morning speedboat to Iriona.

Brus Laguna

pop 4300

Beside the lagoon of the same name at the mouth of the Río Patuca, Brus Laguna is an accessible entry point to La Moskitia, as flights come here. You can head to Rais Ta or even straight to Las Marías from here. The most comfortable place to stay is surprisingly well-appointed **Hotel La Estancia** (☎ 433 8043; Main St; s/d with shared bathroom US\$9/12). **Aerolíneas Sosa** (www

aerolineassosa.com) has flights from La Ceiba to Brus Laguna (one way US\$89, one hour) on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, returning from Brus Laguna the same days.

Wampusirpi

This appealingly rustic place is a good base for exploring the Tawahka region upriver (see above). Locals, mainly Miskito people, survive on small plots of rice, beans, bananas and yucca, and by fishing the Patuca River. Houses are mostly on stilts as this area is prone to flooding. There are basic unmarked accommodations if you ask around, and you can do the same to arrange somewhere to eat.

SAMI (☎ Brus Laguna 433 8031, Puerto Lempira 433 6016) has air service to Wampusirpi.

Puerto Lempira

pop 5375

Puerto Lempira, the largest town in the Moskitia, is situated on the inland side of the Laguna de Caratasca. It has good airlines, which is the main reason for visiting, although the town does have a few modern conveniences such as restaurants and internet.

Puerto Lempira has several sleeping options. The best is **Hotel Yu Baiwan** (☎ 433 6348; s/d with fan US\$16/19, with air-con US\$19/24; ☎), which has friendly service, fresh linen and cable TV.

Aerolíneas Sosa (☎ 433 6432; www.aerolineassosa.com; ☎ 8:30am-5:30pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat & Sun) flies here. Its office faces the airstrip. **SAMI/Air Honduras** (☎ 433 6016) and **Atlantic Airlines** (☎ 433 6016; ☎ airport 6am-5pm) share counter space at the airport. You can also buy tickets for either at an ice-cream shop (open 8am to 6pm) a block and a half from the pier.

Kaukira

On the north side of Laguna de Caratasca, this medium-sized town has beach access (and great **fishing**) but is mostly known for its bird-watching opportunities – red and blue macaws can sometimes be seen flying around town. **Ralston Haylock** (☎ community phone 433 6081) can arrange excursions of just about any kind and length, and keeps a simple lodge for overnight trips. He's a fount of local knowledge, and also speaks English.

From Puerto Lempira, colectivo boats leave around 10am to 11am (US\$4, 1½ hours). They return every morning between 5am and 6am, and sometimes do an afternoon run – check in advance.

Getting There & Away

AIR

All flights to the Moskitia depart from La Ceiba. Scheduled flights go to Brus Laguna and Puerto Lempira. These change regularly, so check beforehand.

Aerolineas Sosa (☎ in La Ceiba 443 1894, in Puerto Lempira 433 6432; in Brus Laguna 433 8042; www.aerolineasososa.com; Av San Isidro btwn 8a & 9a Calles, La Ceiba; ✈ 7am–5pm Mon–Fri)

Atlantic Airlines (☎ in La Ceiba 440 2343, in Puerto Lempira 433 6016; www.atlanticairlines.com.ni; 11a Calle near Av República, La Ceiba; ✈ 8am–noon & 1–5pm Mon–Fri, 8am–noon Sat)

SAMI (☎ in La Ceiba 442 2565, in Brus Laguna 433 8031)

OVERLAND

Going overland via the north coast is an increasingly popular and accessible entry point to the Moskitia. You will need to start while the roosters are still dozing to be able to do it in a day. From La Ceiba, take an early Trujillo bus (5am) to Tocoa. From there, get the next

paila (pickup) to Batalla, a small Garifuna town (US\$21.50, four to five hours). They leave hourly from 7am to noon every day. Get the 7am to reach Belén and Rais Ta before dark – these villages are a good jumping-off point for your Moskitia adventure (see p430). Coming from Trujillo, you can catch the same trucks at the Corocito turnoff (again, with an eye-rubbingly early start – any bus going from Trujillo to La Ceiba will drop you off here).

From Batalla colectivo boats make many trips – tell the driver you want to go to Rais Ta or Belén (US\$8, one to two hours). If you catch the 7am pickup in Tocoa, you should arrive by early afternoon.

Occasionally storms wash out the roads to Batalla. In that case, you can go via Iriona. The bus leaves Tocoa between 6:30am and 7:30am (the schedule varies so check first). Again, if you are coming from Trujillo, stop at Corocito (taking the 5:45am bus) where the bus passes through. From Iriona you can get the next speedboat to Belén (US\$19, two hours).

To return, take the 3am to 4am boat in Belén, Rais Ta, Cocobila and Ibans daily to Batalla (US\$8, one to two hours), for a 6am truck to Tocoa or to Palacios (US\$8, one to two hours) and get a 6am speedboat to Iriona, where a bus goes to Tocoa.

When planning your trip, check www.laru.tamoskitia.com for latest on travel conditions in the area.

Getting Around

Different seasons present different challenges in terms of getting around the Moskitia. The rainy reason (November to January) is the most difficult.

GETTING TO PUERTO CABEZAS, NICARAGUA

From Puerto Lempira, trucks leave once a day for the town of **Leimus** along the Río Coco (US\$11, four to five hours, 7:30am). You can pick up the truck outside its owners' house – three blocks west and two blocks south of the pier – or on parque central, near Banco Atlántida. Look for a large truck with a canvas covering. In Leimus, you pass Honduran immigration on one side of the river, and Nicaraguan immigration on the other. A new road means you can board a bus right there for **Puerto Cabezas** (four hours).

Before the new highway was built, you had to take a boat or 4WD downriver to **Waspán** to clear Nicaraguan immigration and catch a bus to Puerto Cabezas. That remains an alternative if there are no buses from Leimus or the immigration office there is closed.

It costs US\$7 to enter Nicaragua, US\$3 to enter Honduras. Trucks return from Leimus to Puerto Lempira twice daily, around 7am and 4pm.

AIR

SAMI (☎ in Brus Laguna 433 8031, in Puerto Lempira 433 6016) has irregular flights between the main towns, averaging from US\$30 to US\$60.

BOAT

Most transportation in Moskitia is by boat. Upriver, the most common boat is a *pipantes*, a flat-bottomed boat made from a single tree trunk that's propelled by a pole or paddle. A *cayuco* is a wood-planked boat with an outboard motor that is commonly used on longer trips, either as an *expreso* (private taxi) or a cheaper set-route colectivo. Trips include Río Plátano to Brus Laguna (US\$11, 1½ hours) or Batalla to Rais Ta (US\$8, one to two hours).

PICKUPS

Pickup trucks ply the single dirt road along the Laguna de Ibans from the town of Ibans west through Cocobila, Rais Ta and Belén, and east to the town of Río Plátano.

SOUTHERN HONDURAS

Honduras touches the Pacific with a 124km coastline on the Golfo de Fonseca. Bordered by the gulf on the seaward side and by hills on the land side, the strip of land here is part of the hot coastal plain that extends down the Pacific side of Central America through several countries. It's a fertile agricultural and fishing region; much of Tegucigalpa's fish, shrimp, rice, sugarcane and hot-weather fruits (like watermelon) come from this area. Honduras' Pacific port is at San Lorenzo.

Southern Honduras is much traveled; it is where the Interamericana crosses Honduras, carrying all the north- and southbound traffic of Central America, and also where the highway branches north from the Interamericana toward the rest of Honduras.

TEGUCIGALPA TO THE NICARAGUAN BORDER

Between Tegucigalpa and the border post of Las Manos (the quickest route to Nicaragua), there are several interesting stops. Notice the scars of clear-cutting in this area, a legacy of indiscriminate logging. Many Hondurans fear they are headed down the same path as El Salvador, the most deforested country in Central America.

About 40km east of the capital, at Zamorano, there's a turnoff for **San Antonio de Oriente**,

an attractive Spanish colonial mining village about 5km north of the highway. This is the village immortalized by Honduran primitivist painter José Antonio Velásquez.

Further east is a turnoff south to **Yuscarán**, 66km from Tegucigalpa. Capital of the department of El Paraíso, it is a picture-postcard colonial mining town. Its **annual fair** is on December 8.

A large town 92km east of Tegucigalpa and 19km from El Paraíso, **Danlí** (population 126,000) is the biggest town on this route and the center of a sugarcane- and tobacco-producing region. There are also several **cigar factories** where you can buy good hand-rolled cigars. The annual festival at Danlí, the **Festival del Maíz** in the last weekend in August, is a big event and attracts people from far and wide. The **Laguna de San Julian**, 18km north of Danlí, is a manmade lake popular for outings.

In Danlí, the central **Hotel La Esperanza** (☎ 763 2123; s/d US\$7.60/12.10, with bathroom US\$15.20/24.30), is easily the best budget option in town, with rooms that stretch alongside a long, green patio. It is cleaned with zealous fervor making the cheaper shared bathroom option a good one. All rooms have cable TVs. In dire straits or cases of extreme inertia, **Hotel Las Vegas** (☎ 763 2145; s/d with bathroom US\$9/12) is across from the bus terminal with barely acceptable, sporadically cleaned rooms. Just off the central park, the cavernous **Rancho Mexicano** (☎ 763 4528; ✈ 11am–10pm) is good for a bite.

In El Paraíso, the **Quinta Av Hotel-Restaurant** (☎ 793 4298; s/d/tr US\$7.60/10.80/13.50) is on 5a Ave and Calle Real. It is a bit dusty but fine for a night before crossing the border. The señora at the helm is a good laugh. There is also a little restaurant, mostly offering staple beef and chicken dishes. The bus to and from Danlí passes in front – if you're not making a connection, get off early to save yourself an eight-block walk from the terminal.

Getting There & Away

Only 122km from Tegucigalpa is the border crossing at **Las Manos** (✈ 7am–5pm). You can make it in a day if you get an early start.

There are two direct buses from Tegucigalpa to the border; otherwise, take a bus to El Paraíso or Danlí and transfer. All buses leave from the **Discua Litena bus terminal** (☎ 230 0470) at Mercado Jacaleapa in Tegucigalpa; you can take a colectivo from the post a block east of Parque La Merced. Actual taxis should cost you US\$2.

There are several routes, so be sure you're on one that passes the Danlí bus terminal.

The routes: Danlí (direct US\$2.50, 1½ hours, many departures from 6am to 5:45pm); El Paraíso (direct US\$2.80, two hours); Las Manos (US\$3.25, three hours, two direct departures at 6am and 11:40am; or connect in Danlí or El Paraíso).

The last bus from El Paraíso to the border is at 4pm; last bus from Las Manos to El Paraíso at 5pm. The first bus departs at 6:30am, and from the border to El Paraíso the first leaves at 7am. Once you cross, catch a bus to Ocotal and transfer to Managua.

TEGUCIGALPA TO THE PACIFIC

Highway CA 5 heads south about 95km from Tegucigalpa until it meets the Interamericana at **Jicaro Galán**, winding down from the pine-covered hills around the capital to the hot coastal plain. From the crossroads at Jicaro Galán, it's 40km west to the border with El Salvador at **El Amatillo**, passing through the town of **Nacome** 6km west of Jicaro Galán, or it's 115km east to the Nicaraguan border at **El Espino**, passing through **Choluteca** 50km from Jicaro Galán.

If you are traveling along the Interamericana, crossing only this part of Honduras in transit between El Salvador and Nicaragua, you can easily make the crossing in a day; from border to border it's only 150km (three hours by bus). If, however, you want to stop off, there are a few possibilities. The border stations sometimes close at 5pm (although they are nominally open 24 hours), so if you can't make it by that time, you'll have to spend the night.

GOLFO DE FONSECA

The shores of Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua all touch the Golfo de Fonseca; Honduras has the middle and largest share, with 124km of coastline and jurisdiction over nearly all of the 30-plus islands in the gulf. In September 1992 the International Court of Justice eased previous disputes by ruling that sovereignty in the gulf must be shared by the three nations, barring a 3-mile (5km) maritime belt around the coast. Of the islands in the gulf, sovereignty was disputed by Honduras and El Salvador in three cases. The court found in favor of Honduras regarding the island of El Tigre, but El Salvador prevailed on Meanguera and Meanguerita. Tensions re-

main over the islands and the Honduran press regularly print unabashedly patriotic articles articulating Honduras' ownership rights.

The European discovery of the Golfo de Fonseca was made in 1522 by Andrés Niño, who named the gulf in honor of his benefactor, Bishop Juan Rodríguez de Fonseca. In 1578 the buccaneer Sir Francis Drake occupied the gulf, using El Tigre as a base, as he made raids as far afield as Peru and Baja California. There are still rumors that Drake left a hidden treasure, but it has never been found.

El Salvador has a major town on the gulf (La Unión), but Honduras doesn't; on the Honduran part of the coastline, there are only small settlements, and the highway never meets the sea except on the outskirts of San Lorenzo. The Golfo de Fonseca is an extremely hot region.

San Lorenzo

pop 23,100

The Interamericana touches the Golfo de Fonseca only on the outskirts of San Lorenzo. San Lorenzo is Honduras' Pacific port town. It is a hot, sleepy and largely unattractive place with a few seedy bars and hotels 2km from the highway at the water-edge end of town, just along from a shrimp-packing plant. Connections to Amapala on the island of El Tigre leave from here.

If you get stuck, **Hotel Rivera** (☎ 781 3499; s/d US\$21.65/27; 📶 🚰) is your best option with spacious, air-conditioned rooms off a long courtyard. Free drinking water is available. It is centrally located on the main road that goes through the market.

Buses plying the Interamericana go through San Lorenzo. Most stop on the highway, some come the few blocks into town to the market.

Isla El Tigre

pop 2400

The inactive volcanic island of El Tigre, with a 783m peak, is a ferociously hot place with a kind of untouched charm – there are few cars here and nobody is any rush. Its main town is **Amapala**, a sleepy fishing village founded in 1833. It was once Honduras' Pacific port town, before the port was moved to mainland San Lorenzo. A lot of visitors descend on the island for the **Semana Santa** holidays – otherwise there is a trickle of backpackers,

GETTING TO SAN MIGUEL, EL SALVADOR

The border crossing between Honduras and El Salvador at **El Amatillo** is officially open 24 hours although it is best to get there in daylight hours. It's crowded with trucks but otherwise a relaxed border post; Honduran *campesinos* (farmers) cross here every day to go to market in **Santa Rosa de Lima**, 18km from the border on the El Salvador side. There are basic hotels at the border, on both sides. On the Salvadoran side, there are a few places to stay at Santa Rosa de Lima, but there are more options in **San Miguel** or **La Unión**, each a two-hour bus ride from El Amatillo; the last bus to San Miguel leaves at 6:30pm.

If you are entering Honduras here, buses leave El Amatillo frequently for Tegucigalpa (US\$2.40, three hours, 130km) and Choluteca (US\$1.70, two hours, 85km).

See p313 for information on crossing the border from El Salvador.

who come for an off-the-beaten-track trip and the island's fine seafood.

There is a **tourist office** (🕒 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) on the dock with a complete list of all the accommodations options and a map of the island's many beaches. Check out the back of a two-lempira note for a view of Amapala.

ACTIVITIES

You can hike up **El Vija**, about 100m up, where there's a good view of the gulf and its islands. El Tigre also has several beaches of varying quality: **Playa Grande** is the biggest and most popular. There are views right over to El Salvador from the black-sand **Playa Negra** to the north of the island. Rays can be a painful danger at low tide – ask people whether it is safe before you go for a dip.

SLEEPING & EATING

Accommodations are more expensive than on the mainland.

Hotel Internacional (☎ 795 8539; s/d US\$8.10/10.80) A bare basic option, the first building you get to right at the end of the Amapala pier. It is poorly kept and the showers – well, you may rather stay dirty.

Hotel Veleros (☎ 795 8040; Playa El Mora; r/tr US\$16.25/21.60) Has clean, comfortable rooms (cold-water bathroom only). Right next door is the well-known Veleros beachfront restaurant, with good seafood dishes starting from US\$2.50. Maritza Grande, the owner, is well versed on tourist activities on the island, and can sort out alternative lodging if her place is full. It is on Playa El Mora (also known as Playa el Burro), a US\$2 taxi ride from Amapala.

Mirador de Amapala (☎ 232 0632; s/d US\$35/40.50; 🏊) Has a swimming pool, rooms with fridges

and neat white-tiled bathrooms as well as a seafood restaurant (open 6am to 10pm). The owner has a somewhat dodgy plan to create a fake beach at the front. It is a US\$1.60 taxi from the pier, or you could walk it in 20 minutes.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Small colectivo boats (US\$0.80, 20 minutes) and a car ferry depart from Coyolito, 30km from the Interamericana. You have to wait until the boat fills up with 10 passengers. Otherwise you can pay US\$7.60 for a private boat trip. Buses go to Coyolito from San Lorenzo (US\$0.80, one hour, 30km, every 40 minutes until 5pm) from the terminal behind San Lorenzo's pre-fabricated market or from a dusty turnoff 2km north of town. Note that there are no overnight facilities at Coyolito.

To get around town, minibuses leave from the parque central, generally doing semicircle circuits half-way around the island and returning the same way. A few buses go all the way around.

CHOLUTECA

pop 78,300

Choluteca, capital of the department of the same name, is the largest town in southern Honduras. The town is built near Río Choluteca, the same river that runs through Tegucigalpa. The first thing you will notice is the heat, which has even long-term residents mopping sweat from their brow before morning tea. There is an old, somewhat neglected, historical quarter.

There's not much to do in Choluteca; it's principally a commercial center for the agricultural region and a stopping-off point between the borders. The **annual festival** day is December 8.

GETTING TO NICARAGUA

Getting to Chinandega or León, Nicaragua

The border crossing at **Guasaule** is open 24 hours, but it's best to arrive between 8am and 5pm. Buses operate every half hour between Guasaule and Choluteca (*directo* US\$1.20, 45 minutes; *ordinario* US\$1, one hour) for the 44km trip. On the Nicaraguan side, buses go to both **Chinandega** and **León**. The last bus from the border to Choluteca is at 5pm.

If you're coming from El Salvador, minibuses go directly to the Guasaule crossing from **El Amatillo** (US\$5, two hours, departs when full).

See p488 for information on crossing the border from Nicaragua.

Getting to Estelí or Managua, Nicaragua

The border station at **El Espino** is open 7:30am to 5pm daily though hours may vary. From Choluteca, take any bus to the town of **San Marcos** and catch a colectivo (US\$0.80) the last 7km (they often charge more coming the other way). Nicaraguan immigration officials were charging travelers US\$7 for the privilege of crossing the border when we passed through.

On the Nicaraguan side, buses run to the town of **Somoto** (20km), where you can connect to **Estelí** (last bus at 5:20pm) or to **Managua** (US\$3.50, 4½ hours, direct buses until 3pm). If you need a visa for either country, be sure you already have it before you reach the border.

If it's getting late in the day, stay over in Choluteca or San Marcos and cross the following day. The choice of accommodations is better here than on the Nicaraguan side near the border. There is nowhere to stay at El Espino.

Coming into Honduras, six buses leave the **Mi Esperanza terminal** (☎ 788 3705) in San Marcos for Tegucigalpa (US\$3.15, four hours, 191km) each day at 6am, 7:45am, 10am, 12:30pm, 2pm and 4pm. Buses to Choluteca (US\$0.90, 1½ hours, 58km) operate until 4pm; from there you can connect to **El Amatillo** on the Salvadoran border.

See p479 for information on crossing the border from Nicaragua.

Orientation & Information

The streets in Choluteca follow a standard grid, with calles running east-west, and avenidas north-south. The city is divided into four zones: NO (*noroeste*, northwest), NE (*noreste*, northeast), SO (*suroeste*, southwest) and SE (*sureste*, southeast). The parque central is in the middle.

The bus terminal is in the southeast zone, on Blvd Carranza and 3a Av SE. The Mi Esperanza bus terminal is 1½ blocks north. The old market (Mercado Viejo San Antonio) is nine long blocks west and two blocks north – best to take a cab (US\$0.80).

The **post office** (cnr 2a Calle NO & 3a Av NO) is three blocks east of the old market. The state phone company, Hondutel, is next door.

Sleeping

Choluteca has several good-value hotels near the bus terminal and in the city center.

Hotel Santa Rosa (☎ 782 0355; s/d with bathroom & fan US\$4.90/7.60, with TV US\$6/9.70, with air-con & TV US\$10.30/14.60; 🏠) This cheap and friendly hotel stretches right back away from the main street along an extensive, well-tended courtyard

lined with hammocks. Rooms are tidy, although mattresses are soft. There is a water dispenser. On the west side of the market.

Hotel Mi Esperanza (☎ 782 0885; 2a Calle NO; s/d with fan & TV US\$5.40/8.65, with air-con & TV US\$8.65/13.50; 🏠 🚿) Half a block west of the market, this has basic, clean rooms with worn red-and-cream tiles. The rooms are arranged around a large courtyard and each has a private bathroom. There is a good *comedor* next door. Service can be abrupt.

Hotel Pacifico (☎ 782 0838; 4a Av NE, s/d with bathroom & fan US\$7.10/10.80, with air-con US\$11.50/16.70; 🏠) Particularly convenient for the buses, this is four blocks north and one block east of the terminal. You even get pictures in some rooms, but they can't disguise that this is basic – showers are essentially taps on the wall. That said, it is well kept and completely adequate for a night. There's a courtyard with hammocks, and cable TV in the tiny lounge area.

Hotel Pacifico Anexo (s/d with bathroom & fan US\$7.10/10.80, with air-con US\$11.50/16.70; 🏠) Across the street from Hotel Pacifico, it has the same prices. A little *comedor* serves breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Eating

Comedor Mi Esperanza (dishes US\$2; ☎ 6am-8:30pm) This exceptionally good-value café, often frequented by local workers, serves breakfast, lunch and dinner. The tablecloths could do with a wipe though.

Tio Rico (☎ 782 0308; Calle Vicente Williams; dishes US\$3-5; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Thu, 8am-2am Fri & Sat, 10am-10pm Sun) This well-known local no-frills restaurant and bar with plastic chairs can get raucous on weekend nights. The menu tries nothing new, just relying on simple typical Honduran dishes with one or two salad options for vegetarians.

Getting There & Away

Several companies share a bus terminal on Blvd Carranza, at the corner of 3a Av NE. Some buses swing by the market after leaving the station.

El Amatillo/Salvadoran border (US\$1.70, two to 2½ hours, 85km, buses every 25 minutes from 3:30am to 5:50pm) Last bus from border to Choluteca at 5:30pm.

El Espino/Nicaraguan border Take bus to San Marcos and catch colectivo: US\$0.80.

Guasaule/Nicaraguan border (*directo* minibuses US\$1.20, 45 minutes; *ordinario* buses US\$1, one hour, 44km, departures every 30 minutes 6am to 5:30pm) Last bus from border to Choluteca at 5pm.

San Marcos de Colón, near Nicaraguan border (US\$0.90, 1½ hours, 58km, buses every 30 minutes from 6am to 5pm) From there take colectivo to border at El Espino (US\$0.80, 15 minutes, 7km) Last bus from San Marcos to Choluteca at 4pm.

Tegucigalpa (US\$2.50, four hours, 133km, buses every 30 minutes from 4:15am to 6:15pm)

Mi Esperanza has its own **bus terminal** (☎ 782 0841; 3a Av NE), 1½ blocks north of the other station. It runs the Tegucigalpa–Choluteca–San Marcos de Colón route and the buses are usually more direct and comfortable. Destinations include the following:

San Marcos de Colón, near Nicaraguan border (US\$0.90, one to 1½ hours, 58km, six buses daily at 7am, 10am, 12:30pm, 2pm, 5pm and 7pm)

Tegucigalpa (normal US\$2.50, three hours, 133km, 12 daily buses daily leaving each hour from 6am to 5pm)

SAN MARCOS DE COLÓN

If it is getting late and you are heading for the El Espino border, stop off for the night at the pretty town of San Marcos de Colón. It is surprisingly tranquil for somewhere so close

to a border and is very well kept – some would even say manicured. **Hotel Colonial** (☎ 788 3832; s/d US\$10.80/12.20), two blocks south of the parque central, is excellent value, with cool, comfortable rooms including etched wooden headboards, private bathrooms and cable TV. **Restaurante Bonanza** (☎ 8am-9:30pm) is a large, open restaurant that prepares tender fajitas and *pinchos* (kabab) dishes.

HONDURAS DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATIONS

Economical accommodations are available just about everywhere in Honduras. The cheapest places have a shared cold-water bathroom, but can range from the truly awful to not-so-bad. A fair number of innocent-looking hotels are in fact used by the hourly crowd, so look at a room or two and get a sense of the place before staying there. Prices range from US\$3.50 to US\$15 for a budget room.

A room with a private cold-water bathroom is a step up, and hot water a step beyond that. You'll usually pay more for two beds than for one – save money and sleep with a friend. The same goes for air-con, only more so. Electricity costs are high, so it's an expensive luxury – sometimes doubling the price of the room. Most budget travelers will stick with fans.

Camping is not a vacation activity followed by many Hondurans, and organized campsites such as those in the USA or Europe do not exist. That said, camping is allowed in several national parks and reserves and is mentioned in the text wherever it is relevant. Water and toilets or latrines are sometimes available, and occasionally even kitchens, but generally you should bring your own gear.

If you are in one of the more touristy areas and are thinking about improving your Spanish, consider a homestay with a local family, which you can organize through a language

BOOK ACCOMMODATIONS ONLINE

For more accommodations reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at www.lonelyplanet.com. You'll find the true, insider lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

school. Starting from around US\$70 a week, often including full board, these are often a very economical and culturally rewarding option.

ACTIVITIES

Honduras' national parks are great places for hiking. Several of the parks offer trails that are well-maintained, visitors centers for information and orientation, and even guides. Guides are sometimes necessary, but the majority do not speak English. Having a guide will often allow you to learn more about the environment you're in and to see more wildlife. The north coast and the Bay Islands have great beaches and several excellent parks, plus, of course, some of the best snorkeling and diving in the world.

Bird-Watching

Bird-watching is becoming a popular activity in Honduras, where you can spot hundreds of species. It's difficult to name the most impressive birds, as there are so many: quetzals, toucans, scarlet macaws (Honduras' national bird) and the brilliant green and green-and-yellow parrots are all contenders. National parks and wildlife refuges have been established to protect many environments good for seeing birds – for example, cloud forests, tropical rain forests and coastal wetlands. Quetzals are seen in many of the cloud forest national parks, including Cusuco (p366), Celaque (p381) and La Tigra (p351).

Migratory birds are present along the north coast during the northern winter months from November to February. Good places for birders to see them are in the lagoons, national parks and wildlife refuges, and at Lancetilla Botanical Gardens (p390) near Tela. Each December 14 and 15, the Audubon Society does a 24-hour bird count at Lancetilla and other nearby places. Contact the office of **Fundación Prolansate** (☎ 448 2042; www.prolansate-ecoturismo.com; Bo Independencia, opposite Villas Telamar, Tela; ☎ 7am-noon & 1:30-5:30pm Mon-Sat, 8:30-noon Sun) if you'd like to participate.

The Lago de Yojoa (p359) is another excellent place for bird-watching – more than half of Honduras' species have been counted here so far.

In some places you can go on bird-watching tours. A couple of companies in Copán Ruinas offer birding tours (p369) in the local area and further afield, including La Moskitia.

Diving & Snorkeling

The Bay Islands reef is magnificent, and you can learn to dive here for less money than anywhere else in the Caribbean. Dozens of dive shops offer all levels of courses, from beginner to instructor. Snorkeling gear can be rented or bought, or you can bring your own – all three islands have great snorkeling right from shore. The Cayos Cochinos (Hog Islands) also have turquoise seas and kaleidoscopic marine life.

Horseback Riding

Horseback riding is a popular activity at Copán Ruinas (p367). Horseback tours are also conducted into Parque Nacional Pico Bonito (p394) near La Ceiba and at West End (p414) on Roatán Island.

Kayaking, Canoeing & Small-Boat Tours

Small-boat tours are a good way to visit a number of national parks, wildlife refuges and nature reserves along the north coast, including Punta Sal and the Laguna de los Micos (p391) near Tela, Cuero y Salado near La Ceiba (p400) and the Laguna de Guaimoreto (p405) near Trujillo. Kayaking tours of the Refugio de Vida Punta Izopo (p391) near Tela let you slip silently among the canals of the mangrove forests, where you'll see plenty of wildlife.

The Moskitia region, though more remote, is accessible by airplane and bus and offers many more possibilities for canoe and boat trips on rivers and lagoons, especially via the Río Patuca.

White-Water Rafting

White-water rafting is popular on the Río Cangrejal near La Ceiba; several companies in La Ceiba offer rafting tours on this river (see p395).

BOOKS

Topics such as the Copán archaeological site, the banana industry and the Contra war have been well studied, while others, like non-Maya indigenous communities and environmental issues, have not.

Gangs are currently a hot topic and have received extensive newspaper and magazine coverage.

Honduras: A Country Guide by Tom Barry and Kent Norsworthy (1991) and *Honduras:*

A Country Study (1990) by the US Federal Research Division are oldish but have concise historical information.

The United States, Honduras, and the Crisis in Central America by Donald E Schultz and Deborah Sundloff Schulz (1994) discusses the role of the US in Central America during the region's tumultuous civil wars.

Don't be Afraid, Gringo (1987) is the intriguing first-hand story of peasant Elvia Alvarado's reluctant rise as a labor leader, and of the Honduran labor movement, flaws and all.

Bitter Fruit by Stephen C Schlesinger is mostly about the United Fruit Company in Guatemala, but provides insight on the banana giant's impact on Honduras as well. *The Banana Men: American Mercenaries and Entrepreneurs in Central America, 1880–1930* (1995) and *The Banana Wars: United States Intervention in the Caribbean, 1898–1934* (2002), both by Lester D Langley, are incisive accounts of the banana companies' political and economic influence in Central America and the Caribbean.

Los Barcos (The Ships; 1992), and *El Humano y La Diosa* (The Human and the Goddess; 1996) and *The Big Banana* (1999) are all by Roberto Quesada, one of Honduras' best known living novelists. *Gringos in Honduras: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1995) and *Velasquez: The Man and His Art*, are two of many books by Guillermo Yuscarán, aka William Lewis, an American writer and painter living in Honduras. *Around the Edge* (1991) by English journalist Peter Ford relates Ford's journey along the Caribbean coast from Belize to Panama, especially in La Moskitia.

Love Paul Theroux or hate him, his *The Mosquito Coast* is a vivid fictional account of life in the jungle and the characters it attracts. O Henry also wrote an evocative novel *Cabbages and Kings* loosely based on Trujillo.

BUSINESS HOURS

Businesses are open during the following hours.

Banks 8:30am to 4:30pm Monday to Friday and 8:30 to 11:30am Saturday

Restaurants 7am to 9pm daily

Shops 9am to 6pm Monday to Saturday and 9am to 1pm or 5pm Sunday

Any exceptions to these hours are noted in specific listings.

CLIMATE

The mountainous interior is much cooler than the coastal lowlands. Tegucigalpa, at 975m, has a temperate climate, with maximum/minimum temperatures varying from 25/14°C in January to 30/18°C in May. The coastal lowlands are much warmer and more humid year-round; the Pacific coastal plain near the Golfo de Fonseca is hot indeed. December and January are the coolest months.

The rainfall also varies in different parts of the country. The rainy season runs from around May to October. On the Pacific side and in the interior, this means a relatively dry season from around November to April. However, the amount of rain, and when it falls, varies considerably from year to year.

On the Caribbean coast, it rains year round, but the wettest months are from September to January or February. During this time floods can occur on the north coast, impeding travel and occasionally causing severe damage (400 people died in floods in November 1993).

Hurricane season is June to November. For climate charts see p723.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Most travelers enjoy their time in Honduras and their trips pass without unpleasant incidents. That said, Honduras does have a crime problem, as many developing countries do. The country's ingrained gun culture may unsettle visitors, but the chances of a firearms assault are slim – petty theft is a far more likely risk. You should be cautious – but not paranoid – in the cities, especially San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa, which both have gang problems (again, travelers are rarely targeted). Walking in the center in the daytime is usually fine – although don't flash your belongings about. Spring for a cab at night if you are downtown.

In general, small towns are much safer than the big cities. Watch yourself on the north coast, especially on the beach. Avoid leaving items unattended and do not walk on the beach alone or at night. Although still rare, thefts, muggings and even rapes have occurred on the beaches here.

Malaria-carrying mosquitoes and biting sand flies on the north coast, the Bay Islands and the Moskitia are an annoyance and, along with unpurified water, can be the greatest threat to your well-being. Also watch out for jellyfish and stingrays, which are present on both the Caribbean and Pacific Coasts.

If you go hiking through wild places, beware of poisonous snakes, especially the fer-de-lance (known locally as *barba amarilla*); the coral snake is also present. Crocodiles and caimans live in the waterways of the Moskitia, as do the peaceful manatee and much other wildlife. Honduras also has scorpions (not lethal), black widow spiders, wasps and other stinging insects. You probably will never see a dangerous animal, but be aware that they exist.

DISABLED TRAVELERS

Honduras has few facilities for disabled travelers, other than in upmarket hotels and resorts. Wheelchair-bound visitors will find it difficult to negotiate Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula because of street congestion and generally poor road or sidewalk surfaces. Even smaller towns are difficult to negotiate as roads surfaces are often unpaved or made up of cobblestones. Public transport is often crowded, dirty and inefficient, and rarely geared to less able travelers. Toilets for the disabled are virtually nonexistent, other than in four- or five-star hotels.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Embassies & Consulates in Honduras

Diplomatic representation in Tegucigalpa:

Belize (☎ 238 4616; fax 238 4617; Centro Comercial Hotel Honduras Maya, Av República de Chile; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri)

Canada (☎ 232 4551; fax 239 7767; Edif Financiero Banexpo, Local 3, Blvd San Juan Bosco; ☎ 8am-4:30pm Mon-Thu, 8am-1:30pm Fri)

El Salvador (☎ 239 7017, 239 7909; Diagonal Aguán 2952; ☎ 8am-3:30pm Mon-Fri)

France (☎ 236 6800; fax 236 8051; 3a Calle at Av Juan Lindo; ☎ 8am-12:30pm Mon-Fri)

Germany (☎ 232 3161; fax 232 9018; Edif Paysen 3rd fl, Blvd Morazáni)

Israel (☎ 232 0776; fax 231 1874; inside Conversa Language School; Paseo República de Argentina 257; ☎ 8am-5:30pm)

Japan (☎ 236 6828; fax 236 6100; Calzada República de Paraguay btwn 4a & 5a Calles; ☎ 8:30am-noon Mon-Fri)

Netherlands (☎ 239 0525; fax 239 0526; 3a Av 2315; ☎ 9am-noon Mon-Fri)

Spain (☎ 236 6589; fax 236 8682; embesphn@hondutel.hn; Calle Santander 801; ☎ 9am-1pm Mon-Fri)

USA (☎ 236 9320; fax 238 4357; www.usmission.hn; Av La Paz; ☎ walk-ins 8-11:30am Mon-Fri, phone service 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Near 3a Av.

For some other embassies and consulates, see Map pp342-3.

Honduran Embassies & Consulates Abroad

Canada (☎ 613-233 8900; fax 613-232 0193; www.embassyhonduras.ca; 151 Slater St, Suite 805, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5H3)

France (☎ 01 47 55 86 45; fax 01 47 55 86 48; 8 Rue Crevaux, 75116 Paris)

Germany (☎ 30-3974 9710; fax 30-3974 9712; www.embahonduras.de; Cuxhavener Str 14, Berlin, D-10555)

UK (☎ 020-7486 4880; fax 020-7486 4550; hondurasuk@lineone.net; 115 Gloucester Pl, London W1H 3PJ)

USA (☎ 202-966 7702; fax 202-966 9751; www.hondurasemb.org; 3007 Tilden Street NW, Suite 4M, Washington DC 20008)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Just about every city, town and village in Honduras has a patron saint and celebrates an annual festival or fair in the days around their saint's day. Some are big events, attracting crowds from far and wide. These are mentioned in the various town sections, where relevant.

Feria de Suyapa The patron saint of Honduras is celebrated in Suyapa, near Tegucigalpa, from around February 2 to 11. February 3 is the saint's day. The services and festivities bring pilgrims and celebrants from all over Central America.

Carnaval at La Ceiba Celebrated during the third week in May, the third Saturday is the biggest day, with parades, costumes, music and celebrations in the streets.

San Pedro Sula Held in the last week of June, this is another popular celebration.

Feria Centroamericana de Turismo y Artesanía (Fecatái) Every year, from December 6 to 16, this all-Central American international tourism and crafts fair is held in Tegucigalpa.

Artisans' & Cultural Fair An annual all-Honduras artisans' and cultural fair held in the town of Copán Ruinas from December 15 to 21.

The fairs at Tela (June 13), Trujillo (June 24), Danlí (last weekend in August) and Copán Ruinas (March 15 to 20) are also good, and there are many others.

Several Garífuna music and dance troupes give presentations throughout the country, including the excellent Ballet Folklórico Garífuna. April 12, the anniversary of the arrival of the Garífuna people in Honduras in 1797, is a joyful occasion celebrated in all Garífuna communities.

FOOD & DRINK

Honduras does not have the wealth of local cuisine that Mexico or Guatemala has, but a few dishes are distinctive. Garífuna communities are famous for coconut bread and *casabe* (a crispy flat bread common throughout the Caribbean) – both are quite tasty. Seafood, especially fish, crab and lobster, is ubiquitous on the north coast, while fried chicken is a street-food staple nationwide. Honduras has several beers on offer – Port Royal is a favorite among travelers, then there is Salva Vida, Imperial (popular in Olancho) and the lighter Barena. They are all produced by the same brewery, Cervceria Hondureña (owned by the SAB Miller multinational). All are cheap but nothing to write home about. For excellent, home-brewed beers, visit D&D Brewery in Lago de Yojoa (p359).

It is normally expected that you tip 10% apart from basic eateries; some restaurants will automatically add a tip to the bill.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

Honduras is very much 'in the closet,' and open displays of affection between gay or lesbian couples are often frowned upon. Discreet homosexual behavior was tolerated more before the advent of HIV/AIDS in Honduras around 1985. Since then anti-gay incidents have increased, along with stricter legislation. Organizations serving the gay, lesbian and transsexual/transgender communities include **Grupo Prisma** (☎ 232 8342; prisma@sdnhn.org.hn), **Colectiva Violeta** (☎ 237 6398; alfredo@optinet.hn) and **Comunidad Gay San Pedrana** (☎ 550 6868).

HOLIDAYS

New Year's Day January 1

Day of the Americas April 14

Semana Santa (Holy Week) Thursday, Friday and Saturday before Easter Sunday.

Labor Day May 1

Independence Day September 15

Francisco Morazán Day October 3

Día de la Raza (Columbus Day) October 12

Army Day October 21

Christmas Day December 25

INTERNET ACCESS

Every city and most towns and villages usually have at least one internet café. Connections tend to be reasonable, and cost US\$0.50 to US\$1.10 per hour. Access on the Bay Islands

has improved thanks to satellite connection, but is still the country's most expensive at around US\$8 per hour.

INTERNET RESOURCES

A quick search on any decent internet search engine will bring you a host of hits on Honduras. Try the following links that we have dug up for you. They will inevitably lead you to other interesting sites.

http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/honduras Extensive list of links to article and websites on everything from politics to sports to tourism.

www.hondurasnews.com Translations of the latest big news issues to hit Honduras.

www.hondurastips.honduras.com The website of the free tourist magazine *Honduras Tips*.

www.letsghonduras.com Honduras' ministry of tourism website.

www.lonelyplanet.com/worldguide The source of updated Lonely Planet coverage.

www.marrder.com/htw The official site of *Honduras This Week*, Honduras' only English-language newspaper.

www.sidewalkmystic.com Private website with practical info on travel in Honduras.

www.travel-to-honduras.com Links to various services, including volunteer organizations.

LANGUAGE

Spanish is spoken throughout the mainland, although it is a second language for some indigenous communities in the Moskitia and Garífuna towns on the north coast. On the Bay Islands, Spanish is gaining ground on English and Garífuna, especially in Roatán.

LEGAL MATTERS

Police officers in Honduras aren't immune to corruption. If you plan to rent a car, for example, be aware that transit police are not above looking for infractions to get a little money for gas. Tourist police are fairly new to Honduras – you should be seeing more of them, especially in places like Tela and La Ceiba – and they are generally trustworthy. While travelers should not hesitate to contact the nearest police officer or station in emergencies, look for tourist police for less urgent matters.

MAPS

Good maps are hard to find in Honduras. Tourist offices and visitors centers are the best places for them. Bookstores occasionally carry maps.

The Instituto Geográfico Nacional in Tegucigalpa (p340) publishes high-quality maps of the various departments (states), both political and topographic.

It sells a few city and municipal maps as well.

MEDIA

Honduras Tips is a bilingual (English and Spanish) magazine-directory indispensable for travelers. It gives lots of information on things to see and do and places to stay and eat, with maps and photos. The magazine is published twice a year and is available for free in many hotels, travel agencies, tourist information offices and other places frequented by travelers.

Honduras This Week is a useful English-language newspaper published every Saturday in Tegucigalpa. It can be found in major hotels and in English-language bookshops in Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, La Ceiba, Roatán and Utila. You can read the newspaper online at www.marrder.com/htw. Honduras has five national newspapers: *El Heraldo* (www.elheraldo.hn) and *La Tribuna* (www.latribuna.hn.com) are published in Tegucigalpa, *La Prensa* (www.laprensahn.com), *El Tiempo* (www.tiempo.hn) and *El Nuevo Día* in San Pedro Sula, all prone to varying degrees of sensationalism.

MONEY

The unit of currency in Honduras is the lempira. Notes are of one, two, five, 10, 20, 50, 100 and 500 lempiras. There are 100 centavos in a lempira; coins are of one, two, five, 10, 20 and 50 centavos. Centavos are virtually worthless, except for occasional use on urban bus routes.

ATMs

There are cash machines in all cities and towns throughout the country. ATMs operated by BAC/Credomatic, Banco Atlántida and Unibanc are the most reliable, and most likely to accept out-of-country debit cards. Always be alert when withdrawing cash; whenever possible, take out money during the day, and at a machine that's in a lockable cabin (to get in, you typically have to swipe your ATM card at the door) or inside the bank itself.

ATMs typically spit out 500-lempira bills, which can be a hassle to break – get in the habit of using big bills at hotels and larger

restaurants, and saving the small bills for taxis, small eateries, street stands, markets and so forth.

Bargaining

Crafts are fairly rare in Honduras, so you won't find many opportunities to bargain while shopping. Prices for many services are fixed, so there shouldn't be any need to bargain. In large cities, for example, both colectivo and private taxis have a single fixed price for rides around town.

Ask at your hotel what taxis should cost; if you get in knowing what the price should be, most drivers won't argue. In La Moskitia, prices are fixed (and high); bargaining isn't too fruitful.

Black Market

There is no real black market as such in Honduras, and the advantages gained from changing money with street dealers have more to do with convenience than any gain. Moneychangers are commonly found at both Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula airports, as well as in the city center of both places, and also at all border crossings.

Cash

Banks will exchange US dollars and occasionally euros. Bring your passport and go in the morning. Your hotel may let you pay in US dollars (worth doing to avoid the bank queues), or exchange them for you, as may some places in the more heavily touristed areas.

Credit Cards

Visa and MasterCard are widely accepted, including at major supermarkets, retail stores, hotels and car rental agencies. Expect a 6% to 12% surcharge.

Cash advances on Visa cards are available at most banks, including BAC/Credomatic, Banco Atlántida and Banco de Occidente. BAC/Credomatic can usually process advances on MasterCard too. There's typically no transaction charge on the Honduran end for Visa or MasterCard cash advances, but of course the interest rates charged tend to be astronomical.

Exchange Rates

The US dollar and (to a lesser extent) the euro are the only foreign currencies that are easily

exchanged in Honduras; away from the borders you will even find it difficult to change the currencies of Guatemala, El Salvador or Nicaragua.

The table below shows currency exchange rates at the time this book went to press.

Country	Unit	Lempiras (L)
Australia	A\$1	16.10
Canada	C\$1	17.80
euro zone	€1	25.70
Japan	¥100	15.40
New Zealand	NZ\$1	14.70
UK	UK£1	38.00
USA	US\$1	18.80

Traveler's Checks

American Express traveler's checks can be changed in all major towns; Banco Atlántida and BAC/Credomatic are the best banks to use. They will need your passport, and may charge a commission. Go to banks in the morning, as queues tend to be long.

POST

Post offices in most Honduran towns typically are open Monday to Friday 8am to 5pm (often with a couple of hours off for lunch between noon and 2pm) and on Saturday from 8am to noon. Postcards/letters cost US\$0.80/1.30 to the US, US\$1.30/1.80 to Europe and US\$1.80/2.15 to Australia. Delivery takes 10 to 14 days, longer for Australia. Despite the apparently long delivery times for postal items, Hondurcor, the Honduran postal service, is considered relatively reliable. In fact, travelers from Nicaragua or Guatemala often hang on to their postcards and mail them from Honduras.

For more secure delivery try FedEx, DHL, Express Mail Service (EMS), or Urgent Express; all have offices in Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula and other major cities.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Travelers should not buy anything made of coral – the reefs are widely protected and the items, like coral necklaces or bracelets, probably come from illegal harvests. On the Bay Islands, particularly Utila, fresh water, energy and landfill space are in short supply. Have short showers, and refill your water bottles, rather than buying new ones. If you go diving, make sure you go with a dive outfit that is fully signed up to protecting the environment.

Be very aware of the cultural differences in indigenous communities. Tread sensitively – taking lots of photos in an indigenous area can rouse suspicion.

STUDYING

Spanish courses are popular in Copán Ruinas, La Ceiba, Tela and the Bay Islands. As well as open-water and advanced open-water certifications, shops on the Bay Islands offer most or all upper-level courses and specialties, including nitrox, divemaster and instructor.

TELEPHONE

Many internet cafés offer clear, inexpensive phone service using high-speed internet connections. Calls to the US typically cost US\$0.10 per minute, occasionally with rates as low as US\$0.05. Expect to pay a bit more to call Europe: per minute US\$0.25 to US\$0.50.

Hondutel has call centers at its offices throughout the country. Rates to the US are competitive at just US\$0.10 per minute. Calls to the rest of the world are higher. Call centers are usually open from 7am until around 9pm every day.

Some Hondutel offices and internet cafés with phone service have fax services. Prices vary widely, but are usually per page, as opposed to per minute. You can receive faxes as well, with a minimal per-page fee. Fax service typically has more limited hours, usually 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday.

Honduran carriers Aló and Telefónica use GSM 850 and 1900 protocols, which are used by North American carriers Cingular, T-Mobile, Fido and others, but will be incompatible with GSM 900/1800 phones common in Europe, Australia, New Zealand and many Asian countries.

Honduras' country code is ☎ 504. There are no area codes beyond the country code; when dialing Honduras from abroad simply dial the international access code plus the Honduran country code plus the local number. For domestic long-distance calls within Honduras, there is no need to dial the area code.

To reach a domestic long-distance operator dial ☎ 191; for local directory assistance dial ☎ 192; for directory assistance for government telephone numbers dial ☎ 193; for an international operator dial ☎ 197. A direct connection to an operator in the USA is available by dialing ☎ 800 0121 for Sprint, ☎ 800

0122 for MCI WorldCom and ☎ 800 0123 for AT&T.

Hondutel offices sell ‘Telecards’ which have a code on the back. Simply follow the instructions on the back to make a call from any pay phone.

TOILETS

Public toilets are few and far between in Honduras – stop at your hotel or at restaurants. Western-style flush toilets are the norm in most places although toilet paper goes in the wastepaper basket, not down the hatch. The exception to the rule is La Moskitia, where running water is rare and latrines are typical.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The national tourist office is the **Instituto Hondureño de Turismo** (IHT; ☎ 220 1600, toll free 800 222 8687; www.letsghonduras.com) in Tegucigalpa. IHT also maintains a **US office** (☎ toll free 800 460 9608, PO Box 140458, Coral Gables, FL 33114). Around the country, tourist information offices are run by the municipal government and public agencies (listed in the Information section of each destination).

VISAS & DOCUMENTS

Citizens of most western European countries, Australia, Canada, Japan, and New Zealand normally receive 90-day tourist cards when entering the country; US citizens get 30 days. This applies to the countries signed up to the CA-4 border agreement – Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador. You do not receive a stamp on your passport when passing between these countries.

Upon arrival you will fill out a short immigration form, the yellow portion of which will be stapled into your passport. Do not lose it!

This form will be collected when you depart, and it will be stamped if you seek an extension of your stay. Once inside Honduras you can either apply for a 30-day extension or take a trip to Belize or Costa Rica.

To extend your stay, take your passport to any immigration office and ask for a *prórroga*; you’ll have to fill out a form and pay around US\$20. Most cities and towns in Honduras have an immigration office (*migración*) where you can do this.

VOLUNTEERING

A number of organizations offer volunteer opportunities in Honduras, on projects in many parts of the country and ranging from building homes to teaching English to involving school children in environmental programs. The website www.travel-to-honduras.com has a long list of groups that run volunteer programs in Honduras, from large operations like Casa Alianza, Houses for Humanity and i-to-i, to smaller ones like the Cofradía Bilingual School and the Utila Iguana Conservation Project.

WOMEN TRAVELERS

Honduras is basically a good country for women travelers. As elsewhere, you’ll probably attract less attention if you dress modestly. On the Bay Islands, where lots of beach-going foreign tourists tend to congregate, standards of modesty in dress are much more relaxed, though topless bathing is most definitely frowned upon.

Cases of rape against foreign tourists have been reported in a few places along the north coast. As peaceful and idyllic as the coast looks – and usually is – be wary of going to isolated stretches of beach alone, and don’t walk on the beach at night.