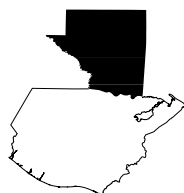


# El Petén



Vast, sparsely populated and jungle-covered, Guatemala's largest department is ripe for further exploration.

Two things really stand out about El Petén – the well-preserved (and often unrestored) archaeological sites and the abundance of wildlife that inhabits the jungle surrounding them.

There are so many Mayan ruins here that you can take your pick depending on ease of access. The towering temples of Tikal can be reached by tour from just about anywhere in the country, minimizing your time outside of air-conditioned comfort. Other, more remote sites like El Mirador and Piedras Negras require days of planning, and further days of jungle trekking.

Wherever you go, you'll be accompanied by a jungle symphony – the forests are alive with parrots, monkeys and larger, more elusive animals.

In 1990 Guatemala established the 21,000 sq km Reserva de Biosfera Maya (Maya Biosphere Reserve), occupying approximately the whole northern third of El Petén. This Guatemalan reserve adjoins the vast Calakmul Biosphere Reserve in Mexico and the Río Bravo Conservation Area in Belize, forming a huge multinational reserve totaling more than 30,000 sq km. The great variety of animal, bird and plant life is as exciting as the mysteries of the ancient Mayan cities – and many sites in El Petén combine both.

## TOP FIVE

- Taking in the majesty of the jungle-shrouded ruins at **Tikal** (p288)
- Getting right out there to little-excavated ruins such as **El Mirador** (p306) and **Piedras Negras** (p304)
- Spotting rare birds, monkeys and other **rainforest wildlife** (p294) at Tikal and other sites
- Taking a break at super-mellow **El Remate** (p285) or the picturesque island town of **Flores** (p272)
- Boating, horse riding and trekking your way to ancient Mayan ruins around **Sayaxché** (p299)



## HISTORY

Often referred to as the cradle of Mayan civilization, El Petén has historically been isolated from the rest of present-day Guatemala, a situation that continued until quite recently.

The major Mayan population centers here – Tikal and El Mirador – almost certainly had more contact with neighboring settlements in Belize and Mexico than with those down south.

The arrival of the Spanish changed little in this regard. The Itzá, who lived on the island now known as Flores, earned an early reputation for cruelty and ferocity and this, along with El Petén's impenetrable jungles and fierce wildlife, kept the Spanish out of the region until 1697, about 150 years after the rest of the country had been conquered.

Even after conquest, the Spanish had no great love for El Petén. The island of Flores was a penal colony for a couple of years, then a small city was founded, mostly to facilitate the growing trade in chicle, hardwood, sugarcane and rubber that had been planted in the region.

The big change didn't come until 1970, when the Guatemalan government saw the opportunity to market Tikal as a tourist destination and work was initiated on a decent road network.

El Petén's population boom – largely a result of government incentives for farmers to relocate – has been staggering, having gone from 15,000 to 500,000 in the last 50 years.

Some of the new neighbors are not entirely welcome, however – large tracts of land, particularly in the northwest corner and in the Parque Nacional Laguna del Tigre, have been taken over by drug traffickers and people smugglers, capitalizing on the unpatrolled border with Mexico.

## CLIMATE

If you visit from December to February, expect some cool nights and mornings. Weather-wise this can be the best time to visit El Petén. March and April are the hottest and driest months. The rains begin in May or June, and with them come the mosquitoes – bring rain gear, repellent and, if you plan on slinging a hammock, a mosquito net. July to September is muggy and buggy. October and November see the end of the occasional rains and a return to cooler temperatures.

## GETTING THERE & AROUND

El Petén's main tourism node is at the twin towns of Flores and Santa Elena, about 60km southwest of Tikal. The main roads to Flores from Río Dulce to the southeast, from Cobán and Chisec to the southwest, from Melchor de Mencos on the Belize border to the east, and from El Naranjo to the northwest are now all paved and in good condition, except for a few short stretches. Frequent buses and minibuses ferry travelers along these routes. Flores also has the only functioning civil airport in the country except for Guatemala City.

## POPTÚN

pop 19,500 / elev 540m

The small town of Poptún is about halfway between Río Dulce and Flores. The reason most travelers come here is to visit Finca Ixobel (below).

On the corner of 5a Calle, just south of the Flores minibus stop, **Banco Reformador** (5a Calle 7-98; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) has a Visa ATM and changes cash US dollars and Visa and American Express traveler's checks. One block along 5a Calle, **Banrural** (☎ 8:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) has a MasterCard ATM and changes cash US dollars as well as American Express traveler's checks.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Finca Ixobel** (☎ 5892 3188; www.fincaixobel.com; campsites per person US\$3, dm US\$4, tree houses, rooms & bungalows s US\$10-17, d US\$13-30; 📞 📺 📶) With by far the best facilities, this 2 sq km venue is 5km south of Poptún. For several decades Carole DeVine has offered travelers tent sites, *palapas* (thatched palm-leaf shelters) for hanging hammocks, beds and lip-smacking homemade meals, with veggie options galore. Carole founded this bohemian hideaway in the 1970s with her husband Michael, who was tragically murdered in 1990 during the civil war, when Poptún was a training ground for the vicious antiguerrilla forces called Kaibiles. Finca Ixobel is a special place, with large and beautiful grounds and famous for its friendly, relaxed atmosphere – a great place for meeting other travelers from all parts of the globe. It's also renowned for its food and its activities. The grounds contain a lovely natural pool for swimming, and horse riding (from two hours to four days), treks, cave trips and inner-tubing on the Río Machaquilá (in the rainy season) are all organized on a daily basis,



## THE RESERVA DE BIOSFERA MAYA

The Reserva de Biosfera Maya, occupying 21,000 sq km stretched right across the north of El Petén, is part of the Unesco world biosphere reserve network, which recognizes that the many human demands on this planet's land require innovative strategies if nature is to be conserved. In this vein, the Maya reserve is split into three spheres. Along its southern fringe is a buffer zone where economic activities are permitted, supposedly within a framework of environmental protection. The main part of the reserve is divided into a multiple use zone, composed of tropical forest and supposedly dedicated to the sustainable harvest of *xate* ferns, chicle gum and timber, and eight core areas (the Sierra del Lacandón, Tikal, Laguna del Tigre and Mirador-Río Azul national parks, and the Cerro Cahú, San Miguel La Palotada, Laguna del Tigre and Dos Lagunas biotopes) for scientific research, conservation of the natural environment and/or archaeological sites, and tightly controlled ecological and cultural tourism. Unfortunately, the theory is prettier than the reality: the forest is still being ravaged by people illegally harvesting timber on a massive scale, looters desecrating Mayan tombs and tourists (no matter how conscientious) negatively impacting on the fragile ecosystem. Even some core areas have been subject to illegal settlements by land-hungry peasants from further south. In 1998 the environmental organization Conservation International had a camp in the reserve burned down by angry settlers. At least two conservationists who have spoken out about abuses in the reserve have been shot dead. The buffer zone is rapidly changing from a forested landscape with scattered agricultural patches to an agricultural landscape with scattered forest patches.

Meanwhile the remaining forests of southern Petén are falling at an alarming rate to the machetes of subsistence farmers. Sections of forest are felled and burned off, crops are grown for a few seasons until the fragile jungle soil is exhausted, and then the farmer moves deeper into the forest to slash and burn new fields. Cattle ranchers, also slashing and burning the forest in order to make pasture, have also contributed to the damage, as have resettled refugees and urban Guatemalans moving from the cities to El Petén in their endless struggle to make a living.

The turnoff for the *finca* is marked on Hwy 13. In the daytime you can ask the bus or minibus driver to let you off there; it's a 15-minute walk to the *finca*. At night, or if you don't feel like making the walk, get off the bus in Poptún and take a taxi for US\$4. It's not advisable to walk to the *finca* at night – it's an isolated spot. When you leave Finca Ixobel, most buses will stop on the highway to pick you up, but not after dark. The *finca* offers shuttles to Flores for US\$5.50. Shuttles coming from Flores should drop you at the gate, but check first. Other recommendations in Poptún town include the following:

**Hotel Izalco** (☎ 7927 7372; 4a Calle 7-11; s/d US\$5.50/11, with bathroom US\$7/14) Small but clean rooms with TV and good mosquito netting. Some of those with private bathroom don't have a fan. And you want a fan.

**Hotel Posada de los Castellanos** (☎ 7927 7222; cnr 4a Calle & 7a Av; s/d with bathroom US\$7/14) In the center of town, this hotel has average rooms with TV, arranged around a shady courtyard.

## Getting There & Away

Most buses and minibuses stop on the main road through town: Fuente del Norte buses stop by the Shell station; minibuses to San Luís, 16km south, go from the next corner south, and minibuses to Flores start half a block further along.

Bus departures from Poptún include the following:

**Flores/Santa Elena** Fuente del Norte buses (US\$3, two hours, 113km) go every hour or two almost around the clock. The other option is a minibus (US\$3.50, about every 30 minutes, 6am to 6pm).

**Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas** (US\$6, five hours, 100km) One bus departs at 10am from the market area. If you want to push on from Las Casas to Lanquín the same day, try getting a Guatemala City-bound bus as far as Modesto Méndez (also called Cadenas), 60km south on Hwy 13. Change there for a westbound bus or minibus to Las Casas.

**Guatemala City** (US\$7 to US\$10.50, six to seven hours, 387km) Fuente del Norte buses go about every 30 minutes, from 5:30am to midnight.

**Río Dulce** (US\$3.25 to US\$4, two hours, 99km) Fuente del Norte buses leave about every 30 minutes, from 5:30am to midnight.

## NAJ TUNICH

When they were discovered in 1979, these caves created about as close to a stir as you get in the archaeological world. They only measure 3km long, but they're packed out with hieroglyphic texts and Mayan murals, depicting religious ceremonies, ball games and erotic scenes (a detail not found elsewhere in the Mayan world). Scribes and artists traveled from as far away as Calakmul in Mexico to contribute to the murals.

The caves were closed in 1984, due to vandalism, reopened briefly, then closed in 2004 for conservation purposes. Fortunately, a superbly executed replica has been created in a nearby cave. Reproductions of the murals were painted by local artists under the supervision of archaeological and cultural authorities.

Independent access to the site is near impossible at this time – your best bet is to go with one of the very reasonably priced tours from Finca Ixobel (see p269), proceeds of which go to development projects in local communities.

## MACHAQUILÁ

This unremarkable little town 7km north of Poptún is worth considering as a halt because

of the **Hotel Ecológico Villa de los Castellanos** (☎ 7927 7541; ecovilla@intelnet.net.gt; s/d/tr US\$20/25/30; 📍), by the highway at the north end of town. The hotel is right by the Río Machaquilá, which is good for swimming, and its large grounds – through which you can take a 3km circuit tour or walk – are dedicated to cultivating over 60 medicinal plants. Accommodations are in wooden, thatch-roofed bungalows, each with two four-poster beds, mosquito nets, hot-water bathroom and TV, and there's a good, medium-priced restaurant.

Machaquilá is served by the same buses and minibuses as Poptún.

## FLORES & SANTA ELENA

pop Flores 23,700, Santa Elena 29,000 / elev 110m

The town of Flores is built on an island in Lago de Petén Itzá. A 500m causeway connects Flores to its sister town of Santa Elena on the lakeshore, which merges into San Benito to the west. The three towns actually form one large settlement, often referred to simply as Flores.

Flores proper is by far the more attractive place to base yourself. Small hotels and restaurants line the lakeside streets, meaning you don't have to shell out the big bucks to get a room with some awesome views. It does have a slightly twee, built-up edge to it, though, and many Tikal-bound shoestrings opt for the natural surrounds and tranquility of El Remate (p285), just down the road.

### LOCAL LORE: THE STONE HORSE

There was a time when the waters of Lago Petén Itzá rose and fell drastically. When it rained, the islands would flood and the crops would be destroyed.

Many people left the region, feeling that the gods were punishing them, but some remained. One holy man pierced his ears, tongue and nose and with his blood the gods were calmed and there were no more floods.

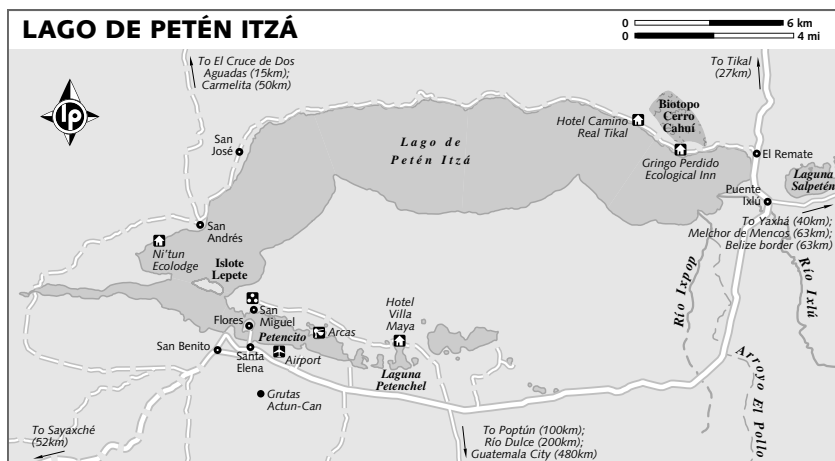
After a time, Cortés' army came through. They were headed south and didn't attack the locals, but Cortés' horse got sick and they had to leave it behind.

The horse was beautiful and strong, but it soon became weak and died. The villagers decided to throw it into the lake as an offering to the gods.

The gods were again appeased and there were no more floods, so the villagers made a stone statue of the horse and began to leave offerings for it.

Generations later, more foreigners came, this time to conquer. Their priest said they could not worship the horse any more and had it destroyed. The floods began again and continued for many years. The people were distraught, until one of the ancient ones remembered the offerings to the horse, and suggested that they make offerings again – not to the lake, or the horse, but to the new god the foreigners had brought. They threw offerings into the lake and the waters calmed.

Now the waters rise and fall occasionally, because there are some who still make offerings and some who are lazy and do nothing.



Santa Elena is where you'll find banks, supermarkets and buses. Adjoining Santa Elena is San Benito (population 35,600). There's not really much for the average traveler here, unless you're up for a night of slumming it in one of the town's numerous *cantinas*.

## History

Flores was founded on an island (*petén*) by a people called the Itzáes who came here after being expelled from Chichén Itzá on Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, maybe in the 13th century AD, maybe in the 15th. Flores was originally named Tayasal. Hernán Cortés dropped in on King Canek of Tayasal in 1525 on his way to Honduras, but the meeting was, amazingly, peaceable. Cortés left behind a lame horse, which the Itzáes fed on flowers and turkey stew. When it died, the Itzáes made a statue of it which, by the time a couple of Spanish friars visited in 1618, was being worshiped as a manifestation of the rain god Chac. It was not until 1697 that the Spaniards brought the Itzáes of Tayasal – by some distance the last surviving independent Mayan kingdom – forcibly under their control. The God-fearing Spanish soldiers destroyed its many pyramids, temples and statues, and today you won't see a trace of them, although the modern town is doubtless built on the ruins and foundations of Mayan Tayasal. Confusingly, the overgrown ruins named Tayasal, on the mainland peninsula just north of the island, date mostly from the Classic period, well before the Itzáes came to Flores.

## Orientation

The airport is on the eastern outskirts of Santa Elena, 2km from the causeway connecting Santa Elena and Flores. Long-distance buses drop passengers on or just off Santa Elena's main drag, 4a Calle.

## Information

### AIRLINE OFFICES

The following airlines are at Flores airport:

**Inter/Grupo TACA** (☎ 7926 1238)

**Maya Island Air** (☎ 7926 3386)

**Tropic Air** (☎ 7926 0348)

### EMERGENCY

**Hospital San Benito** (☎ 7926 1459)

**Policía Nacional** (☎ 7926 1365)

### INTERNET ACCESS

You can access the web at the following places:

**Flores.Net** (Map p276; Av Barrios, Flores, per hr US\$11.10)

**Internet Petén** (Map p276; Calle Centroamérica, Flores; per hr US\$1.20; ☎ 8am-10pm)

**Naomi's Café** (Map p276; Calle Centroamérica, Flores; per hr US\$1.20)

### LAUNDRY

**Mayan Princess Travel Agency** (Map p276; Calle 30 de Junio, Flores; ☎ 8am-8pm) US\$3.25 to wash and dry a load.

### MONEY

At the airport, **Banquetzal** (☎ 7am-noon & 2-5pm) changes US-dollar cash and traveler's

checks. **Banrural** (Map p276; Avenida Flores), just off the Parque Central in Flores, changes US-dollar cash and traveler's checks.

Other banks are on 4a Calle in Santa Elena. The following all change cash US dollars and at least American Express US-dollar traveler's checks:

**Banco Agromercantil** (Map p275; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Has a MasterCard ATM.

**Banco Industrial** (Map p275; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) Has a Visa ATM.

**Banquetzal** (Map p275; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat)

Many travel agencies and places to stay will change cash US dollars, and sometimes traveler's checks, at poor rates. San Juan Travel (right) will also change Belize dollars and Mexican pesos, and give Visa, MasterCard, Diner's Club and American Express cash advances.

## POST

**Post office** Flores (Map p276; Av Barrios; Santa Elena (Map p275; 4a Calle east of 7a Av)

## TELEPHONE & FAX

**Martsam Travel** (Map p276; ☎ /fax 7926 3225; www.martsam.com; Calle 30 de Junio, Flores) Offers domestic and international telephone and fax services.

## TOURIST OFFICES

**Asociación Alianza Verde** (Map p276; ☎ /fax 7926 0718; www.alianzaverde.org) This association dedicated to sustainable, responsible, low-impact tourism in the Reserva de Biosfera Maya runs Cincap. Its Green Deal program (www.greendeal.org) awards a seal of excellence to tourism businesses that meet stringent environmental and social standards.

**Cincap** (Map p276; Centro de Información Sobre la Naturaleza, Cultura y Artesanía de Petén; Petén Nature, Culture & Handicrafts Information Center; ☎ 7926 0718; mercadeo@peten.net; Parque Central, Flores; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-9pm) Has interesting displays on archaeological sites, conservation areas and the local way of life in El Petén. It also sells handicrafts from the region and has an information desk, where you can ask about visits to some of the region's more remote natural and archaeological sites.

**Inguat** (☎ 7926 0533; airport; ☎ 7am-noon & 3-5pm) The only official tourist information around is at this office out at the airport.

## TRAVEL AGENCIES

Several travel agencies in Flores and Santa Elena offer trips to archaeological sites, shuttle

minibuses and other services. **Martsam Travel** (Map p276; ☎ /fax 7926 3225; www.martsam.com; Calle 30 de Junio, Flores) is a well-established, well-organized agency with a particularly wide range of services, as you'll see from the frequency with which its name crops up in this chapter. **San Juan Travel** (☎ 7926 0041; sanjuant@internetdetelgua.com.gt; Flores Map p276, Playa Sur; Santa Elena Map p275, 2a Calle) provides various shuttles and tours and offers the most regular service to Tikal and Palenque.

Several hotels can book you on tours, shuttles, buses and flights.

## Volunteer Work

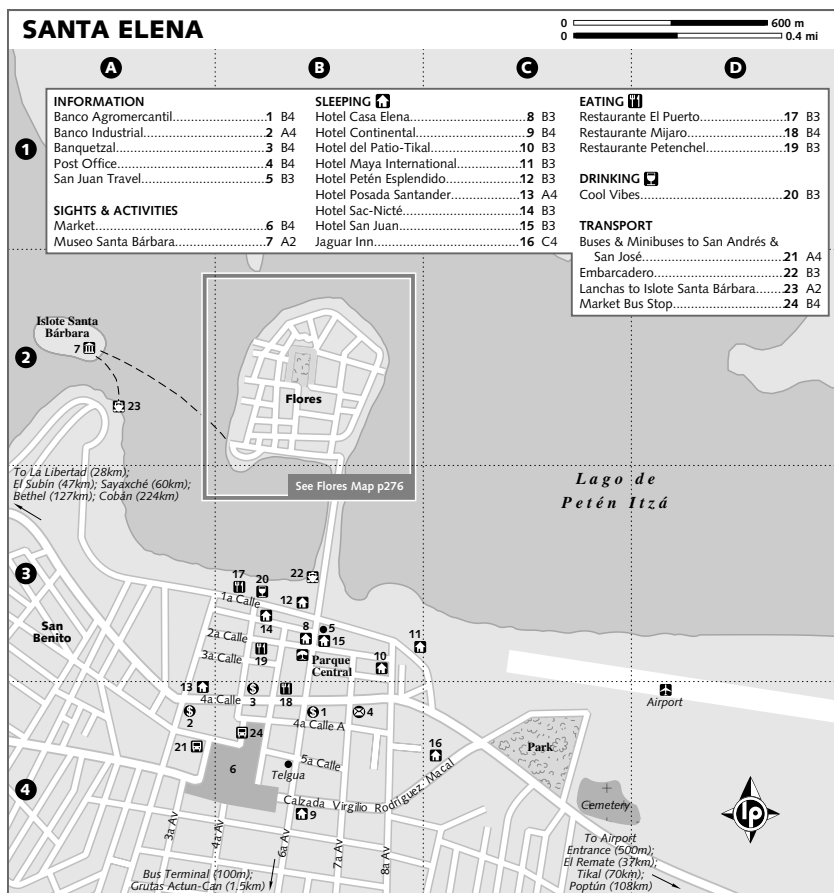
The Estación Biológica Las Guacamayas (p304), in the Parque Nacional Laguna del Tigre, and the rehabilitation center at Arcas (p283) both offer the chance of volunteer work with wildlife. At Las Guacamayas you pay US\$9 a day for the first two weeks, US\$8 a day the third week and US\$7 a day the fourth week, and provide your own food. If you're interested, contact **ProPetén** (Map p276; Proyecto Petenero para un Bosque Sostenible; ☎ 7926 1370; www.propeten.org; Calle Central, Flores; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri), the Guatemalan NGO that owns the station. At Arcas you pay US\$110 a week including food. The language schools in San Andrés (p283) and San José (p284) provide the chance to get involved in community and environmental projects.

## Tours

Many travel agencies in Flores offer day tours to the more accessible archaeological sites such as Tikal, Uaxactún, Yaxhá and Ceibal. Day trips to these places with a guide and lunch cost US\$40 to US\$60 with agencies such as Martsam Travel, Hotel Posada Tayazal and San Juan Travel (see left).

Maya Expeditions (see p81), based in Guatemala City, offers mild (ie good for families or inexperienced rafters) one- to three-day rafting expeditions on the Río Chiquibul, with options to visit lesser-known sites like Yaxhá, Nakum and Topoxte for US\$85 to US\$430 per person.

Martsam also offers more demanding hiking-and-camping ecotrails and ecotours to exciting, more remote archaeological sites such as Nakum, El Perú, El Zotz, El Mirador, Nakbé, Wakná and La Muralla, working with local Comités Comunitarios de Ecoturismo (Community Ecotourism Committees), which provide guides to these sites deep in El Petén



jungles. The three ecotourism committees, in the villages of El Cruce de Dos Aguadas (about 45km north of Flores by dirt road), Carmelita (some 35km beyond El Cruce de Dos Aguadas) and Paso Caballos (west of El Cruce de Dos Aguadas), were set up with the help of Conservation International and ProPetén, with the aim of fostering low-impact tourism benefiting local jungle communities. Comité guides are usually *xateros* (collectors of *xate*, a palm used in flower bouquets) or *chicleros* (collectors of chicle, used to make chewing gum) who know the forest very well, but may be light on the archaeological significance of the sites. There's no luxury on these trips: participants should be in good shape mentally and physically, as they'll sleep in hammocks,

hike for long stretches through thick jungle, eat what's fed them and be munched by whatever ants, mosquitoes and ticks they're sharing the forest with.

The sample prices following are per person for two-/four-/five-plus people, normally including food, water, sleeping gear and Spanish-speaking guide:

Location	Duration	Cost
El Totz and Tikal	3 days	US\$200/150/140
El Perú	3 days	US\$240/170/155
	2 days	US\$230/140/130
El Mirador-Nakbé-Wakná	7 days	US\$475/460/415
Yaxhá-Nakum-Tikal	3 days	US\$250/178/165
Yaxhá & Nakum	2 days	US\$180/125/110
Dos Pilas, Aguateca & Ceibal	2 days	US\$290/190/175



Another outfit going to some adventurous destinations is **Monkey Eco Tours** (☎ 5201 0759; www.nitun.com; Ni'tun Ecolodge).

### LAKE TOURS

Boats at the *embarcaderos* (docks) opposite Hotel Petenel and beside Hotel Santana in Flores, and beside the Hotel Petén Espléndido in Santa Elena, can be hired for lake tours. Prices are very negotiable. You might pay US\$25 for an hour on board, with stops and waiting time at no extra charge.

Carlos, the owner of Café-Bar Las Puertas in Flores, offers boat trips around the lake and along to the far end, where he has a house in the form of a Mayan pyramid, with a private beach for swimming and sunning. He's a

former guide at Tikal and very knowledgeable about the area.

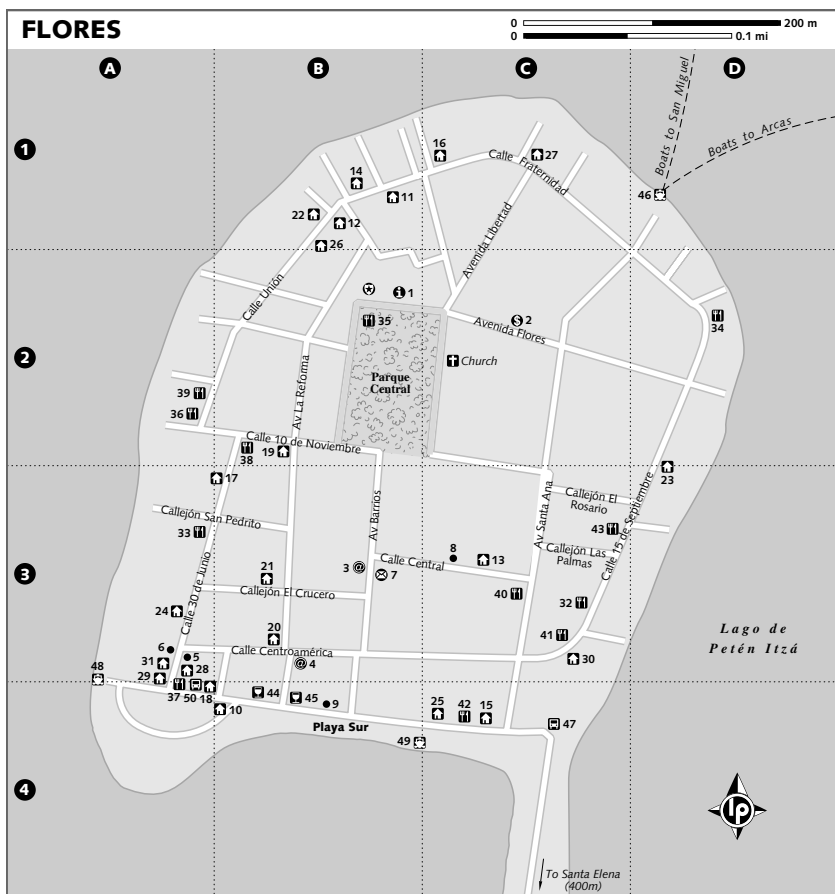
### Sleeping

#### FLORES

#### Budget

**Hostel los Amigos** (Map p276; ☎ 5584 8795; www.amigoshostel.com; Calle Central; dm US\$3.50; ☑) Flores' one true hostel, with eight-bed dorms and hammocks on offer, could be a disaster, but the place has such a cool atmosphere that it all hangs together. Nightly bonfires, happy hours, good food – you know the deal...

**Hospedaje Doña Goya** (Map p276; ☎ 7926 3538; hospedajedonagoya@yahoo.com; Calle Unión; dm/s/d US\$3.50/8/11, s/d with bathroom US\$11/13) This family-room guesthouse is one of the best budget



choices in town and often full as a result. The beds are comfortable, the water's hot and there's a roof terrace with a palm-thatched shelter and plenty of hammocks from which to enjoy lake views. The eight-person dorms are spacious and clean.

**Hospedaje Doña Goya 2** (Map p276; ☎ 7926 3538; hospedajedonagoya@yahoo.com; Calle Unión; dm/s/d US\$3.50/8/11, s/d with bathroom US\$11/13) Doña Goya's second effort is even better than her first – there's a definite jungle theme running through this one, with banisters made to look like climbing vines. Rooms are good sized and spotless, most of them with some sort of view.

**Hotel Mirador del Lago** (Map p276; ☎ 7926 3276; s/d with bathroom US\$6/8; Calle 15 de Septiembre) Compared to what else is on offer for these prices on the island, this is a good deal. Rooms are bare but functional and upstairs they catch good afternoon breezes.

**Hotel Santa Rita** (Map p276; ☎ 7926 3224; Calle 30 de Junio; s/d with bathroom US\$7/12) It's never going to be beautiful, but someone is at least trying with this place, keeping it clean and freshly painted. Smallish rooms with shared balconies and a couple of good hang-out areas.

**Hotel Casablanca** (Map p276; ☎ 5699 1371; Playa Sur; s/d with bathroom US\$7.50/13) The first hotel you reach coming off the causeway is one of the best in the budget game – simple, spacious rooms and a great terrace for lake-gazing.

**Hotel Petenchel** (Map p276; ☎ 7926 3359; Playa Sur; s/d with bathroom US\$7.50/13) Eight rooms set around a lush little courtyard just off the causeway. Rooms are spacious, with firm beds. In the event that

El Petén ever experiences a chilly night, have no fear – showers here are superhot.

**Hotel Casa del Lacandón** (Map p276; ☎ 7926 4359; Calle Unión; s/d US\$8/13) If you can get one of the upstairs rooms at the back, this is one of the best budget deals in town. Rooms have a couple of beds, a clothes rack (!) and windows with sweeping views of the lake.

**Mayab Hotel** (Map p276; ☎ 7926 4094; mcestra@gmail.com; Calle 30 de Junio; s/d with bathroom US\$12/16; ☎) Decent-sized rooms with cable TV and hot showers. The real bonus here is the upstairs balcony overlooking the lake and the back gate, leading directly to the shoreline.

There are two further budget hotels with respectable, fan-cooled rooms:

**Hotel Itzá 2** (Map p276; ☎ 7926 3654; Av La Reforma; s/d with cold-water bathroom US\$6/8)

**Hotel La Unión** (Map p276; ☎ 7926 3584; Calle Unión; s/d US\$8/13, d with view US\$16)

## Midrange

**Hotel La Mesa de los Maya** (Map p276; ☎ /fax 7926 1240; mesamayashotmail.com; Callejon El Crucero; s/d US\$15/20, with air-con US\$20/25; ☎) The Mesa's one of the stalwarts in the Flores hotel scene – it's been around (nearly) forever and they know what they're doing. Rooms are smallish, but well decorated, with good touches like reading lamps and pleasant paint jobs.

**Hotel Villa del Lago** (Map p276; ☎ /fax 7926 508; www.hotelvilladelago.com; Calle 15 de Septiembre; s/d US\$25/30; ☎) Stern and blockish from the outside, this place has a cool tiled interior that runs a little heavy on the potted plants and Grecian column work. Rooms are comfortable, with good furnishings and big ceiling

<b>INFORMATION</b>		Hotel Casona de la Isla.....17 B3	Food Stalls.....35 B2
Asociación Alianza Verde.....1 B2	Banrural.....2 C2	Hotel El Itzá 1.....18 A4	Jalapeños.....36 A2
Cincap.....(see 1)	Flores.Net.....3 B3	Hotel Isla de Flores.....19 B2	La Hacienda del Rey.....37 A4
Internet Petén.....4 B3	Martsam Travel.....5 A3	Hotel Itzá 2.....20 B3	La Luna.....38 B2
Mayan Princess Travel Agency.....6 A3	Post Office.....7 B3	Hotel La Mesa de los Mayas.....21 B3	La Villa del Chef.....39 A2
ProPetén.....8 C3	San Juan Travel.....9 B4	Hotel La Unión.....22 B1	Las Puertas.....40 C3
		Hotel Mirador del Lago.....23 D3	Restaurante & Pizzería Picasso.....41 C3
		Hotel Petén.....24 A3	Restaurante Peche's.....42 C4
		Hotel Petenchel.....25 C4	Suico Café.....43 C3
		Hotel Posada Tayazal.....26 B1	
		Hotel Sabana.....27 C1	<b>DRINKING</b> ☎
		Hotel Santa Rita.....28 A3	Adictos.....44 B4
		Hotel Santana.....29 A3	El Trópico.....45 B4
		Hotel Villa del Lago.....30 C3	
		Mayab Hotel.....31 A3	<b>TRANSPORT</b>
<b>SLEEPING</b> ☎			Boats to San Miguel & Arcas.....46 D1
Gran Hotel de La Isla.....10 B4			Buses to Santa Elena.....47 C4
Hospedaje Doña Goya.....11 B1			Embarcadero.....48 A3
Hospedaje Doña Goya 2.....12 B1			Embarcadero.....49 B4
Hostel los Amigos.....13 C3			Línea Dorada/Mundo Maya.....50 A4
Hotel Casa del Lacandón.....14 B1	<b>EATING</b> ☎	Café Yax-ha.....32 C3	
Hotel Casablanca.....15 C4		Capitán Tortuga.....33 A3	
Hotel Casazul.....16 C1		Cool Beans.....34 D2	

fans. Breakfast is available, there's a breezy upstairs terrace, and the staff can do your laundry, exchange books and book flights.

**Hotel El Itzá 1** (Map p276; ☎ 7926 3666; uniglob@guate.net.gt; Playa Sur; s/d US\$30/40; 🏠) The owners of this place must have been bleeding when somebody whacked up that monster hotel in front, killing all the lake views. Still, rooms here are clean and big – get one upstairs for the afternoon breezes.

**Hotel Sabana** (Map p276; ☎ /fax 7926 1248; Calle Fraternidad; s/d US\$30/40; 🏠 🚿) On the north side of the island, this is a larger, 28-room, less personal place with a small pool (featuring family-sized Jacuzzi) and a super chilled terrace area overlooking the lake. Rooms have bathroom, air-con and cable TV.

**Hotel Petén** (Map p276; ☎ 7926 0692; www.hotelesdepeten.com; Calle 30 de Junio; s/d US\$30/46; 🏠 🚿 📺) There's a bit of chintz going on here, but it's not overwhelming – rooms are cheerily decorated and there's a good-sized indoor/outdoor swimming pool downstairs in the small courtyard with tropical plants, a pleasant lakeside terrace and restaurant. Try to get a room on the top floor with a lake view: the interior ones can be a little gloomy.

**Hotel Casazul** (Map p276; ☎ 7926 1138; www.corpetur.com; Calle Fraternidad; s/d US\$35/45; 🏠) They're not kidding when they call this the blue house – there's shades of it everywhere, from the pleasing plantation-style balconies to the individually decorated, spacious and comfortable rooms. A couple have their own balconies and everyone can enjoy the 3rd-floor terrace.

**Hotel Casona de la Isla** (Map p276; ☎ 7926 0593; www.hotelesdepeten.com; Calle 30 de Junio; s/d from

US\$40/48; 🏠 🚿 📺) There are some pleasing nautical themes running through this place, augmented by the cheery blue and yellow paint job. The tile work in the lobby and stairs is worth a look in on its own. Rooms are clean and large and decorated with restraint. Rooms 31, 303 and 304 have windows facing right out to the lake and gorgeous sunsets.

**Hotel Santana** (Map p276; ☎ /fax 79263305; www.santana.peten.com; Calle 30 de Junio; s/d US\$40/50; 🏠 🚿 📺) We're going with 'eclectic' when it comes to describing the decor here – a mix of concrete, wood, thatch and wickerwork. It all hangs together somehow, though. Rooms are generously sized, and if you get one out the back you'll have a sweet little balcony looking over the lake onto Isla Santa Barbara.

### Top End

**Hotel Isla de Flores** (Map p276; ☎ 7926 0614; www.junglelodge.guate.com; Av La Reforma; s/d US\$50/70; 🏠) From the overload of white wicker furniture and grandfather clock in the lobby, you know this isn't any run-of-the-mill Flores hotel. Rooms are big and businesslike, with a few homey touches softening the effect. Many have little balconies with a view of the lake.

**Gran Hotel de La Isla** (Map p276; ☎ 7926 0686; www.hoteldelaisla.com; Playa Sur; s/d US\$70/80; 🏠 🚿 📺) Everything about this place is big, down to the lobby/dining-room windows overlooking the lake and the swimming pool out back. Rooms are well presented, with the touches you would expect, like individual reading lamps. Make sure you get one on the lakefront, so you can take advantage of the (oddy) skimpy balconies overlooking the water.

## CHICLE & CHEWING GUM

Chicle, a pinkish to reddish-brown gum, is actually the coagulated milky sap, or latex, of the sapodilla tree (*Achras zapota*), a tropical evergreen native to the Yucatán Peninsula and Central America. *Chicleros* (chicle workers) cut large gashes in the sapodillas' trunks, making a pattern of V-shaped cuts as high up as 9m. The sap runs from the wounds and down the trunk to be collected in a container at the base. After being boiled, it is shaped into blocks for shipping. The cuts can kill the tree, and thus chicle harvesting tends to result in the serious depletion of sapodilla forests. Even if the tree survives the first round of cuts, a typical tree used for harvesting chicle has a life span of just 10 years.

First used as a substitute for natural rubber (to which the sapodilla is related), by about 1890 chicle was best known as the main ingredient in chewing gum.

As a result of war research for a rubber substitute during the 1940s, synthetic substitutes were developed for chicle. Now chewing gum is made mostly from these synthetic substitutes. However, in the northern reaches of El Petén, *chicleros* still live in the forest for months at a time harvesting the sap for gum.

**SANTA ELENA****Budget**

**Hotel Continental** (Map p275; ☎ 7926 0095; 6a Av south of Calzada Virgilio Rodríguez Macal; s/d US\$5/9, with fan, bathroom & TV US\$9/12 (P) (☎)) A 51-room hotel with friendly reception staff, the Continental has a range of rooms on three floors along a courtyard painted in vaguely refreshing shades of blue and green. Private bathrooms are good and clean, but there's no hot water.

**Hotel San Juan** (Map p275; ☎ 7926 2146; 2a Calle; s/d from US\$6/8, with bathroom US\$9/11) Another cheap Santa Elena hotel, but less attractive.

**Hotel Posada Santander** (Map p275; ☎ 7926 0574; 4a Calle; s/d with bathroom US\$6/9.50) A simple, spotless and friendly family-run hostelry in a convenient but loud location. The rooms are definitely secure (there are bars on the windows and the TVs) and have cold-water bathrooms. The attached *comedor* (restaurant) serves good basic meals for US\$2.

**Hotel Sac-Nicté** (Map p275; ☎ 7926 0092, 7926 1731; 1a Calle; s/d from US\$9/11) The rooms here are tolerably clean and will do in a pinch. They all have private bathroom and fan, and those upstairs have small balconies from which you might just glimpse the lake. They'll pick you up free from the airport, where they have a desk.

**Jaguar Inn** (Map p275; ☎ 7926 0002; Calzada Virgilio Rodríguez Macal 8-79; s/d with fan US\$15/18, with air-con US\$18/20; (P) (☎)) Comfortable without being fancy, the Jaguar Inn has rooms with cable TV, bright bedspreads and hot-water bathrooms set along a garden patio. It's a better deal than most of the hotels around here, probably due to its inconvenient location, 150m off the main road near the airport – good if you have a vehicle.

**Midrange**

**Hotel Casa Elena** (Map p275; ☎ 7926 2239; 6a Av; s/d US\$27/30; (P) (☎)) Just south of the causeway, Casa Elena has nice, clean, air-conditioned rooms that are short on character but long on comfort. Each is equipped with hot-water bathroom, cable TV and telephone. Some rooms overlook Santa Elena's plaza, others overlook the big pool (with waterslide). There's a bar, restaurant and roof terrace.

**Top End**

**Hotel Maya International** (Map p 275; ☎ 7926 2083; www.villasdeguatemala.com; 1a Calle; s/d US\$50/70;

(P) (☎) (☎)) A wooden boardwalk snakes through lush vegetation to bring you to the airy thatched-roof reception area/restaurant here. There's wi-fi, espresso and staff dress in loose, flowing white cotton. This chic/savage vibe runs throughout the place, all to a very pleasing effect. A lot of the rooms don't have lake views, but all are well designed, with good use of tiles and tasteful, restrained decorations.

**Hotel del Patio-Tikal** (Map p275; ☎ 7926 1229; www.hoteldelpatio.com.gt; cnr 8a Av & 2a Calle; s/d US\$55/62;

(P) (☎) (☎)) There are touches of colonial charm going on at this two-story hotel a short walk from the lakeside. Rooms are spacious and feature tasteful furnishings and luxurious showers.

**Hotel Petén Espléndido** (Map p275; ☎ 7926 0880; www.petenesplendido.com; 1a Calle 5-01; s/d US\$100/110;

(P) (☎) (☎) (☎)) The most formal hotel in the region pulls out all the stops, with room safes, bathroom telephones, great balcony views and what may be the only elevator in all of El Petén. The rooms could be bigger, but they're definitely comfortable and there are a couple of good restaurants and a poolside bar to keep you happy. If you're flying in, you can hook up a free shuttle from the airport.

**Eating**

On the menu at many places is a variety of local game, including *tepesquintle* (agouti, a rabbit-sized jungle rodent), *venado* (venison), armadillo, *pavo silvestre* (wild turkey) and *pescado blanco* (white fish). You may want to avoid dishes that may soon jump from the menu to the endangered species list (for more on endangered species on menus, see p57).

**FLORES**

**Cool Beans** (Map p276; Calle 15 de Septiembre; mains US\$3-6;

(☎) lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) An earthy sort of place with a thatched roof and hammocks. Good coffee, decent breakfasts and tasty snacks are what's on offer here. You can just make out the lake by peering through the lush garden down the back. Be warned – the kitchen closes at 9:01pm sharp.

**La Villa del Chef** (Map p276; Calle Unión; mains US\$3-6;

(☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Go out the back (keep going) to reach the rustic little deck built out over the water in this newish place with a varied menu. You can choose from a good selection of Arabic, seafood, Guatemalan and international dishes. Don't miss the 6pm happy hour.

**Restaurante Peche's** (Map p276; Playa Sur; mains US\$3.50-4.50; ☎ 4am-10pm) Busy Peche's serves inexpensive plates of meat, rice, tortillas and salad – and it's open for early breakfast.

**Capitán Tortuga** (Map p276; Calle 30 de Junio; mains US\$3.50-7; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A long, barn-like place stretching down to a small lakeside terrace, 'Captain Turtle' serves large plates of a wide variety of tasty food – pizzas, steaks, chicken, pasta, salads, sandwiches, tacos – at medium prices. Big tour groups turn up here from time to time.

**our pick** **Café Yax-ha** (Map p276; Calle 15 de Septiembre; mains US\$4-5; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) Literally wallpapered with photos and articles relating to archaeology and Mayan sites, this café-restaurant serves up the standard range of dishes. What's really special here is the prehispanic menu items and Itza dishes – the spicy chicken with yuca (US\$4) comes recommended.

**Suico Café** (Map p 276; Calle 15 de Septiembre; mains US\$4-6; ☎ lunch & dinner) Japanese food in El Petén? Well, why not. The Japanese owners take a fair stab at all your faves (miso soup, tempura, sushi) and only come up short when ingredients are lacking. Definitely worth a look in.

**Restaurante & Pizzería Picasso** (Map p276; Calle 15 de Septiembre; pizza US\$4-6; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Still going strong after all these years, this Italian-owned pizzeria does the best pizzas in town, with artwork on the walls courtesy of you-know-who and a cool little courtyard area.

**Jalapeños** (Map p276; Calle Unión; mains US\$4-10; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Maybe you don't need any more Mexican food, but if you do, this is the place – airy and breezy, serving all your (Tex) Mex faves with a couple of international dishes thrown in. The zucchini chicken in creamy sauce with black olives (US\$7) is one good example.

**La Luna** (Map p276; cnr Calle 30 de Junio & Calle 10 de Noviembre; mains US\$7-11; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) In a class by itself, this very popular restaurant cultivates a classic tropical ambience, with potted palms to catch the breeze from the whirling overhead fans. The food is Continental and delectable, with innovative chicken, fish and beef dishes the likes of which you'll be hard pressed to find anywhere else in Guatemala. There are also good pasta and vegetarian options, such as falafel, salad and rice, for US\$4 to US\$5.

**Las Puertas** (Map p276; cnr Calle Central & Av Santa Ana; mains US\$8-9; ☎ 8am-late Mon-Sat) This popular

restaurant and bar has good, if pricey, food. There's live music some nights (mainly weekends). The *camarones a la oriental* (prawns served with vegetables and rice) are a treat. For something cheaper Las Puertas has 10 ways of doing spaghetti and nine types of salad. Round it off with a crepe (US\$2). Breakfasts (US\$3 to US\$4) are good here, too.

**La Hacienda del Rey** (Map p276; south end Calle 30 de Junio; mains US\$8-15; ☎ 4am-evening) This spacious two-story wooden affair, open to the air and invitingly strung with white lights, specializes in meat. It's one of the more atmospheric places to eat on the island (except for their terrible radio selection) They do big juicy steaks, Argentinean or American style. Steaks aren't cheap (US\$13 for a 16oz T-bone), but there's a range of tacos and snacks (US\$2 to US\$3) in case you're feeling like taking advantage of the US\$1 Tecate beer deal.

At the breezy northwest corner of the plaza, the **food stalls** (Map p276; Parque Central; tacos & burritos US\$1) are a good place to dine cheap on *antojitos* (snacks/light dishes).

## SANTA ELENA

**Restaurante Petenchel** (Map p275; 2a Calle 4-20; mains US\$3-7; ☎ lunch & dinner) This little place (and its sister across the road) is trying hard enough – there are checked tablecloths and a wide selection of dishes including Chinese, ceviches, pastas and steak.

**Restaurante Mijaro** (Map p275; 4a Calle; mains US\$3.50-4.25; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Cool off at this friendly *comedor* on the main street, which has fans not only inside but also in its little thatch-roofed garden area. It does good long *limonadas* (lime-juice drink) and snacks like sandwiches and burgers (US\$1.30 to US\$2) as well as weightier food.

**Restaurante El Puerto** (Map p275; 1a Calle 2-15; mains US\$5-8; ☎ lunch & dinner) With its lakefront position, this open-air beer barn-steak house serves up a mean steak and packs out weekends when the Cool Vibes (see Drinking) next door fires up.

For a splurge, try one of the two fancy restaurants overlooking the water at the Hotel Petén Espléndido (see p279).

## Drinking

Flores doesn't exactly jive at night but there are a couple of places to hang out. Flores'

little Zona Viva is a strip of bars along the Playa Sur, and nearly all of the lakeside restaurants in Santa Elena have afternoon happy hours, a great way to unwind and watch the sunset.

**Adictos** (Map p276; Playa Sur) If you're up for dancing, this was the place to be at time of writing.

**Cool Vibes** (Map p275; 1a Calle 2-25; ☎ 7pm-1am Thu-Sat) This open-air bar-dance club was Santa Elena's hotspot at time of writing. And it is kind of fun to be out shaking your thing in the fresh air, lakeside.

**El Trópico** (Map p276; Playa Sur) This is a popular place to start the night.

**Hotel La Unión** (Map p276; Calle Unión) The terrace overlooking the lake is a magnificent spot to watch the sun go down over a Cuba libre (US\$1) or a piña colada (US\$2).

## Entertainment

Locals gather in the cool of the evening for long drinks, snacks and relaxation in the Parque Central, where a marimba ensemble plays some nights.

**Café Yax-ha** (Map p276; Calle 15 de Septiembre; lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) There are occasional archaeological/cultural lectures here.

**Las Lecturas** (Map p276; cnr Calle Central & Av Santa Ana; movies US\$1.50; ☎ 8am-late Mon-Sat) Shows movies every night.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

The airport at Santa Elena is usually called Flores airport and sometimes Tikal airport. TACA is the only airline with regularly scheduled flights between here and the capital (US\$127/204 oneway/return). Two Belizean airlines, Tropic Air and Maya Island Air, each fly twice a day from and to Belize City, both charging US\$103 each way for the one-hour trip.

### BUS & MINIBUS

In Santa Elena, the following buses all stop at the main bus terminal:

**Fuente del Norte** (☎ 7926 0517),

**Transportes María Elena, Línea Dorada/Mundo Maya** (☎ 7926 1788)

**Transportes Rosita** (☎ 7926 1245)

Flores has a second office of **Línea Dorada/Mundo Maya** (☎ 7926 3649; Playa Sur), where its buses also pick up passengers.

Santa Elena's terminal is also used by the chicken buses of Transportes Pinita and Transportes Rosío and minibuses (or

microbuses) to El Remate, Melchor de Mencos, Poptún, El Naranjo and Sayaxché. Buses and minibuses to San Andrés and San José go from 5a Calle just west of the market. Buses of **San Juan Travel** (☎ 7926 0041) leave from its office on 2a Calle, Santa Elena.

Bus and minibuses departures include the following:

**Belize City** (four to five hours, 220km) Línea Dorada/Mundo Maya (US\$15.50) leaves at 5am and 7am, returning from Belize City at 2pm and 5pm. San Juan Travel (US\$20) goes at 5am, returning from Belize City at 9:30am and 4:30pm. These buses to Belize City all connect with boats to Caye Caulker & Ambergris Caye. It's cheaper but slower from Flores to take local buses to the border and on from there (see Melchor de Mencos).

**Bethel (Mexican border)** (US\$4, four hours, 127km) Fuente del Norte departs at 5am; Pinita goes at 5am, 8am, noon and 1pm. Returning, Fuente del Norte leaves Bethel at 4pm and Pinita leaves at 5am, noon and 2pm.

**Chetumal (Mexico)** (seven to eight hours, 350km) Via Belize City, Línea Dorada/Mundo Maya (US\$23) leaves at 6am, returning from Chetumal at 2pm. San Juan Travel (US\$25) goes at 5am, with departures for Flores from Chetumal at 9:30am and 4:30pm. Check Belizean visa regulations before you set off.

**Cobán** (US\$6.50, six hours, 245km) Transportes Rosío leaves the market bus stop at 10:30am. Or take a bus or minibus to Sayaxché, from where a bus leaves for Cobán at 10am. (See also the Shuttle Minibus section, p282.)

**El Naranjo (Río San Pedro)** (US\$4, four hours, 151km) Minibuses go about every hour, from 5am to 6pm.

**El Remate** (US\$2, 40 minutes, 29km) Minibuses go about hourly, 6am to 1pm, plus a few times between 1pm and 6pm. Buses and minibuses to and from Melchor de Mencos will drop you at Puente Ixlu junction, 2km south of El Remate.

**Esquipulas** (US\$11, 10 hours, 440km) Transportes María Elena goes at 6am, 10am and 2pm via Chiquimula (US\$9, nine hours).

**Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas** (US\$5.50, five hours, 178km) Transportes Rosío departs the market at 10:30am.

**Guatemala City** (eight to 10 hours, 500km) Fuente del Norte has 29 departures between 3:30am and 11pm, costing US\$10 to US\$12, except for the 10am and 9pm buses (US\$19) and the 2pm, 8pm and 10pm departures (US\$15). Línea Dorada/Mundo Maya has deluxe buses at 10am and 9pm (US\$30), plus an *económico* (US\$16) at 10pm. Transportes Rosita goes at 7pm (US\$8) and 8pm (US\$11).

**La Técnica (Mexican border)** (US\$6, five hours, 140km) Pinita leaves at 5am and 1pm; starts back from La Técnica at 4am and 11am.

**Melchor de Mencos (Belizean border)** (two hours, 100km) Minibuses (US\$3.50) go about every hour, 5am

to 6pm. Transportes Rosita buses (US\$2.50) go at 5am, 11am, 2pm, 4pm and 6pm. A Pinita bus (US\$3) goes at 8am. See p299 for more information on crossing the border here.

**Palenque (Mexico)** See Shuttle Minibus, below.

**Poptún** (two hours, 113km) Take a Guatemala City-bound Fuente del Norte bus (US\$3) or a minibus (US\$3.60), leaving about every 30 minutes, 5am to 6pm.

**Puerto Barrios** Take a Guatemala City-bound Fuente del Norte bus and change at La Ruidosa junction, south of Río Dulce.

**Río Dulce** (4½ hours, 212km) Take a Guatemala City-bound bus with Fuente del Norte (US\$8) or Línea Dorada (US\$11.50/US\$22 *económico/deluxe*).

**San Andrés** (US\$1, 30 minutes, 20km) Buses and minibuses depart about hourly, 5am to 5pm.

**San José** (US\$1, 45 minutes, 25km) Buses and minibuses depart about hourly, 5am to 5pm.

**Sayaxché** (US\$2, 1½ hours, 60km) Minibuses about every 30 minutes, 5am to 6pm; Pinita buses go at 11am, 2pm and 2:30pm.

**Tikal** See Shuttle Minibus, below.

## CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Several car-rental companies have desks at the airport, including the following:

**Hertz** (☎ 7926 0332)

**Nesa** (☎ 7926 0082)

**Payless** (☎ 7926 0455)

**Tabarini** (airport ☎ 7926 0277; Santa Elena ☎ 7926 0253)

**San Juan Travel** (☎ 7926 0041; sanjuant@internetdetelgua.com.gt; Flores Map p276, Playa Sur; Santa Elena Map p275, 2a Calle) rents 4WD vehicles, the cheapest being a Suzuki Jeep (US\$70 a day).

## SHUTTLE MINIBUS

**San Juan Travel** (☎ 7926 0041; sanjuant@internetdetelgua.com.gt; Flores Map p276, Playa Sur; Santa Elena Map p275, 2a Calle) operates shuttle minibuses to Tikal (US\$4/6 oneway/round-trip, 1¼ hours each way). They leave hourly from 5am to 10am and usually at 2pm. Most hotels and travel agencies can book these shuttles for you and the vehicles will pick you up where you're staying. Returns leave Tikal at 12:30pm, 2pm, 3pm, 4pm, 5pm and 6pm. If you know which round-trip you plan to be on, ask your driver to hold a seat for you or arrange a seat in another minibus. If you stay overnight in Tikal and want to return to Flores by minibus, it's a good idea to reserve a seat with one of the drivers when they arrive in the morning. Outside the normal timetable, you can rent a whole minibus for US\$35.

San Juan also does shuttles to Cobán (US\$20), Palenque (Mexico; US\$30) and Corozal (the border crossing for Bonampak, Mexico; US\$25).

On the Palenque run (in either direction) make sure you get a ticket, receipt or other documentation that proves you have paid for the whole trip from Flores to Palenque or vice-versa. Occasionally travelers find that the driver waiting on the far side of the Río Usumacinta to take them on to their destination attempts to extract an extra payment.

## Getting Around

A taxi from the airport to Santa Elena or Flores costs US\$2. Tuk tuks will take you anywhere between or within Flores and Santa Elena for US\$0.80. La Villa del Chef (see p279) rents mountain bikes for US\$6 for up to four hours and US\$8 for four to 12 hours.

## BOAT

Motor launches making tours around Lago de Petén Itzá depart from the Santa Elena end of the causeway. *Colectivo* (shared) boats to San Andrés and San José, villages across the lake, depart from San Benito, on the west side of Santa Elena and alongside the Hotel Santana in Flores (US\$0.40 if the boat is full; US\$8 for one passenger, private hire). You can also contract the *lancheros* for lake tours; bargain hard.

## AROUND FLORES

### Museo Santa Barbara

On a small island just to the west of Flores, this **museum** (Map p275; admission US\$1.50; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm) shows a collection of ceramics found in nearby archaeological sites. It's not a huge collection, but it is well presented – the boat ride over and just hanging out on the island are as much fun as the museum itself. To get there you can try haggling with any lakeside *lanchero* down by the Hotel Santana (where you might rent a boat for US\$14). If you want to scrimp it, you'll have to go to San Benito, where boats will take you for US\$2 per person.

### El Mirador & Tayazal

Boats (US\$0.25 per person) make the five-minute crossing to San Miguel village from beside Restaurante La Guacamaya on the northeast side of Flores whenever they have a boatload. San Miguel itself is a quiet, slow-

moving place. To reach the lookout point called El Mirador (1.75km west), walk 250m to the left along the shore from where the boat drops you, then turn up the street to the right, which passes the Iglesia Evangélica Príncipe de Paz. After 200m turn left, passing a football field on your right to reach a sign telling you that you are entering the Tayazal archaeological site, which is a set of chiefly Classic-era mounds scattered around this western end of the peninsula and largely overgrown by vegetation. Some 180m downhill beyond this sign, fork left following a 'Mirador' sign (the straight-on road leads to the **Playita**, a small lake beach). After 200m the track enters a clearing surrounded by low mounds with an upright rock carved with a skull in the middle. Fork right onto a single-track path passing the left side of the **skull rock** and winding on through the trees. After some 450m the track bends sharp left then forks: choose the right-hand path here and continue for some 230m, mainly downhill, till you see steps mounting the hillside on your right. The hillside is actually one of the **pyramids** of ancient Tayazal and on its summit wooden steps have been built up to a platform around a tree: this is El Mirador, with fine views of Flores and around Lago de Petén Itzá. The walk is best done in the morning, to avoid afternoon heat and the danger of being overtaken by dusk.

## Arcas

The **Asociación de Rescate y Conservación de Vida Silvestre** (Wildlife Rescue & Conservation Association; ☎ 5476 6001; www.arcasguatemala.com; Biblioteca Arcas, Barrio La Ermita, San Benito), a Guatemalan NGO, has a rescue and rehabilitation center on the mainland northeast of Flores for wildlife such as macaws, parrots, jaguars, monkeys, kinkajous and coatis that have been rescued from smugglers and the illegal pet trade. The rehabilitation center itself is closed to visitors but a Centro de Educación e Interpretación Ambiental (CEIA, Environmental Education & Interpretation Center) has been set up for visitors, with a 1.5km interpretative trail featuring medicinal plants and animal tracks, an area for viewing animals that cannot be returned to the wild, a beach and a bird observation deck. A boat leaves from beside Restaurante La Guacamaya, on the northeast side of Flores, at 4pm daily for tours of the

CEIA. It costs US\$7 per person for one or two people, US\$6 for three to five people and US\$4 for six or more. It's best to call the Arcas office in San Benito beforehand to confirm that the boat is going. You can also reach Arcas by walking 5km (about 45 minutes) east from San Miguel; tours for people who arrive independently between 9am and 3pm cost US\$2 each.

## Grutas Actun-Can

The **Actun-Can caves** (La Cueva de la Serpiente; Cave of the Serpent; admission US\$2; ☎ 8am-5pm) are of standard limestone. No serpents are in evidence, but the cave-keeper will turn on the lights for you and may give you the rundown on the cave formations, which suggest animals, humans and various scenes. Bring your own flashlight if you have one, and adequate shoes – it can be slippery. Explorations take about 30 to 45 minutes.

At the cave entrance is a shady picnic area. Actun-Can makes a good goal for a long walk from Santa Elena. To find it, walk south on 6a Av past the Telgua office. About 1km from the center of Santa Elena, turn left, go 300m and turn right at the electricity generating plant. Go another 1km to the site. A taxi from Santa Elena costs US\$3.

## Laguna Petenchel

**Hotel Villa Maya** (📍 in Guatemala City 2334 1818; www.villasdeguatemala.com; s/d/ US\$85/93; 📞 📺), on Laguna Petenchel, a small lake east of Santa Elena, is one of the best hotels in the area, with 36 double rooms in bungalows with bathroom, ceiling fan, hot water, beautiful views of the lake, and blissful quiet. There's a patio restaurant, tennis court, two swimming pools, two lagoons and a wildlife refuge. It's 4km north of the crossroads where the Guatemala City road diverges from the Tikal road, 8km east of Flores.

## San Andrés

This small town on the northwest side of the lake is home to two Spanish-language schools:

**Eco-Escuela de Español** (☎ 5940 1235; www.ecoescuelaespanol.org) This community-owned school emphasizes ecological and cultural issues and organizes environmentally related trips and volunteer opportunities; cost is US\$100 a week plus US\$75 for room and board with a local family.



**Nueva Juventud Spanish School** (☎ 5711 0040; www.volunteerpeten.com; Restaurant La Troja, San Andrés) Also environmentally oriented, this school is closely tied to a volunteer program that cares for the ecological park where the school is sited, and encourages volunteers to develop community projects. Classes cost US\$150 a week, with homestay included.

A few kilometers west of San Andrés, **Ni'tun Ecologde** (☎ 5201 0759; www.nitun.com; s US\$100-150 d US\$170-235; (P) (Q)) is a beautiful property, set on 350,000 sq meters of grounds where six species of hummingbird nest year-round. There are only four huts (although small houses is a better description) and the capacity for the whole place is 12 people, which may rise to 16 with planned construction. Accommodations are in the rustic/spacious vein, and from the little patio areas in front of the rooms you can just see the lake water's tinkling reflection. The room rates include airport transfers and breakfast. Bernie and Lore, who built and operate the lodge, are adventurers and conservationists who also operate Monkey Eco Tours, which offers adventure trips with transport in Land Cruisers. Portable showers, inflatable mattresses and crystalware are provided, and they employ specialized guides such as birders, archaeologists and biologists. Tours go to El Mirador, Río Azul, Ceibal, Dos Pilas

and Tikal, among other sites, with prices ranging from US\$90 to US\$200 a day.

For information on minibuses and buses to San Andrés, see p281.

## San José

San José, a town of about 3000 a few kilometers along the lake from San Andrés, is peopled by Itzá Maya, descendants of the Flores area's prehispanic inhabitants. It has one of the best beaches on the lake. The community-owned **Escuela Bio-Itzá** (☎ 7928 8056; www.bioitza.org) is part of an association working to keep Itzá traditions and language alive. Cost for the usual 20 hours of one-on-one Spanish classes is US\$200 per week if you live with a local family, or US\$125 if you camp and organize your own meals. Students can participate with the Itzá community on projects such as their medicinal plant garden and Itzá language academy.

San José is a special place to be on the night of October 31, when perfectly preserved human skulls that are housed in the church are paraded around town on a velvet pillow followed by devotees in traditional dress, carrying candles.

Throughout the night, the skulls make visits to predetermined houses, where blessings are sought, offerings made and a huge feast eaten.

## VILLAGE JUSTICE

Here's a sticky one for you: take it as given that the Guatemalan justice system is broken, perhaps beyond repair. Lawyers get shot in broad daylight on downtown streets and nobody saw anything.

Now translate that to the villages, where the police drop in every week or so to see that everything's OK.

Tired of living with known rapists, murderers, baby sellers and thieves in their midst, villagers often take justice into their own hands, rather than wait for a lengthy and often inconclusive court case.

The most extreme form of 'village justice' is the lynching – a mob grabs a criminal and strings them up from the nearest tree. And nobody saw anything.

But there are less extreme forms. Traditional Mayan society had its own set of punishments – mostly along the lines of public humiliation – shaving women's heads, tying them to a post half naked, making them walk through town on their knees carrying a heavy rock. Which is all fine up to this point – in fact the Guatemalan constitution guarantees the indigenous population the right to continue with their customs as long as they don't conflict with national law.

And *that's* where it gets sticky – these same criminals have been turning up at the offices of the Protector of Human Rights, claiming that their human rights have been violated.

So the choice boils down to this: an ineffective system, which doesn't deter and rarely catches criminals, or a more improvised approach, without formal process, meting out punishments that, to the outside world, seem cruel and unusual.

For information on minibuses and buses to San José, see p281. There is no regular boat service. Renting a boat from beside the Hotel Santana in Flores or Hotel Petén Espléndido in Santa Elena costs around US\$15 for the 30-minute crossing.

### Parque Natural Ixpanpajul

At **Parque Natural Ixpanpajul** (☎ 7863 1317; www.ixpanpajul.com; admission adult/child US\$25/15, campsites per person US\$5; 🕒 7:30am-6:30pm) you can ride horses, mountain bikes or tractors, or zip line your way through the jungle canopy. The big attraction is the Sky Way, a 3km circuit of stone paths and six linked suspension bridges through the upper levels of the forest. Early morning and late afternoon are your best times for wildlife viewing. It's 2km south down the Guatemala City road from its junction with the Tikal road, 8km east of Flores. You can get here by catching any Guatemala City-bound bus from Santa Elena, or else call the park's **shuttle service** (☎ 5897 6766; US\$5) to arrange transportation.

### EL REMATE

The closest decent accommodation to Tikal can be found in this enchanting village on the shores of Lago de Petén Itzá. It's a mellow little place – two roads, basically – much more relaxed and less built up than Flores. Most hotels here are set up for swimming in – and watching the sun set over – the lake.

El Remate is known for its wood carving. Several handicrafts shops on the lakeshore opposite La Mansión del Pájaro Serpiente sell local handicrafts and rent canoes, rafts and kayaks.

El Remate begins 1km beyond Puente Ixlú (also called El Cruce), the village where the road to Melchor de Mencos on the Belize border diverges from the Tikal road. El Remate is strung along the Tikal road for 1km to another junction, where an unpaved road branches west along the north shore of the Lago de Petén Itzá to the Biotopo Cerro Cahuí and beyond. Several more places to stay and eat are dotted along this road, which continues all the way to the villages of San José and San Andrés near the west end of the lake, making it possible to go all the way around the lake by road.

If you're stuck for cash, you can change US dollars and traveler's checks and Belize dollars, at low rates, at La Casa de Don David just north of the junction.

### EXPLORE MORE OF EL PETÉN

The Petén region is literally brimming with smaller, largely unexcavated archaeological sites. Some are hard to get to, some are right by the highway. Here are a few of the more accessible ones that you might want to check out:

- El Chal – right by the Poptún–Flores highway, this site with a ballcourt and some carvings is built on a ridge, with some good views.
- Ixcun – an hour's walk out of Dolores, this rarely visited site is made up of eight plazas. Its sister city, Ixtontón, is another 6km along the river.
- Ixlú – 2km south of El Remate on the shore of Lago de Salpetén.
- Machaquilá – some finely preserved stelae are left from this mysterious city.

With their newfound prosperity, Rematecos have built a *balneario municipal* (municipal beach) just off the highway; several cheap pensiones and small hotels have opened here as well.

### Sights & Activities

#### BIOTOPO CERRO CAHUÍ

The entrance to the 6.5 sq km subtropical forest reserve, **Biotopo Cerro Cahuí** (admission US\$2.50; 🕒 6:30am-dusk), is 1.75km west along the north-shore road from El Remate. The vegetation here ranges from *guamil* (regenerating slash-and-burn land) to rain forest. Trees here include mahogany, cedar, ramón, broom, sapodilla and cohune palm, and you'll also see many species of liana and epiphyte, these last including bromeliads, ferns and orchids. The hard wood of the sapodilla was used in Mayan temple door lintels, some of which have survived from the Classic period to our own time. This is also the tree from which chicle is sapped.

More than 20 mammal species roam the reserve, including spider and howler monkeys, ocelots, white-tailed deer, raccoons and armadillos. The bird life, of course, is rich and varied. Some 179 species have been identified. Depending upon the season and migration patterns, you might see kingfishers, ducks, herons, hawks, parrots, toucans, woodpeckers and the famous ocellated

(or Petén) turkey, a beautiful big bird resembling a peacock.

A network of loop trails starts at the road and goes up the hill, affording a view of the whole lake and of Laguna Salpetén to the east and Laguna Petenchel to the south. The one called Los Escobos (6km long – it takes about 2¼ hours) is good if you want to see monkeys. The guards at the entrance can give you directions.

The admission fee includes the right to camp or sling your hammock under small thatch shelters inside the entrance. There are toilets and showers.

The dock opposite the entrance is one of the best places to swim along the generally rather muddy shore of the lake.

### OTHER ACTIVITIES

Most El Remate accommodations can book you on five-hour **horseback rides** to Laguna Salpetén and a small archaeological site there (US\$18 per person) or two-hour boat trips for **bird-watching** or nocturnal **crocodile spotting** (each US\$8 per person). Casa Mobeago and Casa Yaikán do five-hour **walking tours** to Laguna Salpetén for US\$10 per person.

Ask around about **bicycle, kayak and canoe rental**. Casa Mobeago rents double kayaks for

US\$4/5/10 for one/two/four hours. Various places rent bicycles at US\$2/3.25/4.50 for two/four/24 hours, with a deposit of US\$30.

### Tours

The Hotel Mon Ami (opposite) and Hotel Sak-Luk (below) offer reasonably priced jungle treks to El Mirador, Yaxhá and Nakum.

**La Casa de Don David** (☎ 7928 8469; www.lacasadedondavid.com), just north of the junction, offers tours to Yaxhá (US\$15 to US\$20 per person), Uaxactún (US\$20 per person) and Ceibal (US\$35 to US\$40 per person). Prices do not include guides.

### Sleeping

#### ALONG THE MAIN ROAD

These establishments are listed in south-to-north order.

**Hotel Sak-Luk** (☎ 5494 5925; main road; dm/hammock/bungalow per person US\$2/3/4) This little slice of hippieheaven offers huts, dorms and hammocks in adobe constructions scattered around a lush hillside. There's a good restaurant offering Italian and vegetarian dishes and it can organize jungle treks and trips to the Biotopo Cerro Cahui.

**Posada Ixchel** (☎ 7928 8475; s/d US\$4/6.50, with bathroom US\$6.50/11) This friendly, family-owned

### A BIOLOGICAL POWERHOUSE

Rainforests are an amazing thing, and those of the Petén are no exception. Apart from providing a much-needed source of oxygen for the region, the Petén jungles play host to a staggering array of life forms.

This diversity is what sets a rainforest apart – the canopy is composed of hundreds of species of trees – ebony, sapodilla, mahogany and ramón to name just a few. They provide the moist, shady climate that's perfect for the mosses, fungi and microorganisms that thrive on the forest floor. In between, smaller shrubs and fruit-bearing trees live off the nutrients stored in this fecund base.

Plant life in the rainforests has a secondary purpose – every year new medicinal uses are discovered (some from age-old knowledge) for jungle plants, and many extracts are then synthesized and sold as pharmaceuticals.

All of this makes a wonderful habitat for animals, of course, and the Petén won't let you down on that score. Amongst the birdlife are toucans, motmots, scarlet macaws, ocellated turkeys, buzzards and hawks.

Larger animals are plentiful, too, although sometimes harder to spot. You'll definitely see (and hear) howler monkeys and coatis, and if you're patient you might get a glimpse of wild pigs. With your luck running hot, you'll be able to tick off ocelots, pumas and maybe even a jaguar. Jaguarundis are common and get around during the day – you're pretty much guaranteed to see at least one.

Throw in a few species of turtles, a plethora of frogs, 40 or so species of snake and the very occasional crocodile and you'll see that, while the Petén may be under populated in human terms, it's not such a lonely place after all.

## MOSQUITOES ARE MEAN AND EVIL

One of the joys of traveling in an area that has both dengue fever and malaria is that you can never completely relax. Dengue-carrying mosquitoes typically bite during the daytime; their malaria-carrying colleagues come out from dusk to dawn.

To avoid getting bitten, all the classic tactics hold true – wear light-colored, long-sleeved garments. Avoid the use of heavy perfumes and colognes. Stay inside around dusk and dawn and don't sleep near stagnant bodies of water.

Apart from slathering yourself in DEET, there are a few natural ways you can deter these pesky little suckers and a few natural remedies in case you do get stung.

One deterrent is to make yourself smell bad to them. Overloading on garlic or vitamin B will make your sweat smell terrible to mosquitoes (and possibly your travel companions) and they'll just steer clear. The Maya used the herb called *tres puntas* (jackass bitters in English) in much the same way. Another, slightly less offensive method is to boil basil leaves in water, then splash the water on. This has the advantage that you end up smelling like a pizza.

As far as relief from bites goes, there are various local remedies. One is basil again – crush the leaves and rub them on the affected areas. Another is *ix'can'aan* (*chichibe* in Spanish), which you can also crush and rub directly onto bites.

If you do happen to contract dengue or malaria, it's best to contact a doctor immediately – the former can be extremely uncomfortable and the latter fatal. The traditional remedy for these and other blood-related ailments was the *sorosí* plant, a blood purifier, ground up and made into tea.

place another 200m north has spotless rooms set around a stone cobbled courtyard. The comfy little private sitting areas out front of the rooms are a nice touch.

**Hotel Sun Breeze** (☎ 5807 1487; s/d US\$4/7) This is a pleasant little place down the lane toward the lake, nearly at the turnoff for the north road. The clean, bare rooms sport mosquito nets and share cold-water bathrooms.

**Hostal Hermano Pedro** (☎ 2332 4474; www.hhpedro.com; s/d with bathroom US\$7/14) Set in a great two-story wood-and-stone house 20m off to the right from the main road. The basic, spacious rooms here are how budget hotels should be – clean, simple and comfortable, with just a couple of frills. They offer guests free transport to Tikal.

**Hotel La Mansión del Pájaro Serpiente** (☎ 7928 8498; s/d US\$40/48; 📍) Dotted along a steep hillside and connected by winding stone paths, these cabins are more like little houses, with black-and-white tiled floors, lounge/sitting areas and spacious bathrooms. All have lake views, sport colorful textiles and netted windows. There's a gorgeous pool too, with hammocks under *palapa* shelters nearby, and a reasonably priced restaurant-bar.

## ALONG THE NORTH-SHORE ROAD

**Casa de Doña Tonita** (☎ 5701 7114; s/d US\$4/8) Just past Casa Mobejo, Doña Tonita's has four

simple rooms with two single beds each, in a two-story wood-and-thatch *rancho*. There's an inexpensive restaurant with vegetarian food available.

**ourpick Mon Ami** (☎ 7928 8413; www.hotelmonami.com; dm US\$5, d with bathroom US\$15-25) This place, 1200m from the main Tikal road, has a good balance of jungle wild and French sophistication. The cabins and dorms are just rustic enough, the gardens are full of local plant life and the restaurant (see p288) offers some of the best food for miles around.

**Casa Mobejo** (Casa Roja; ☎ 7909 6999; dm US\$7.50) Fairly bursting with character, this secluded little spot has a collection of two-story, open-walled thatched houses spread out over a hillside. Bathrooms are shared and beds have mosquito nets. Breakfast, snacks and sandwiches are served in a pleasant restaurant area dotted with curious sculptures and paintings. The friendly owner, Gonzalo, is an artist and sculptor who worked for 10 years restoring monuments at Tikal and other sites. There's a swimming dock across the road.

**Gringo Perdido Ecological Inn** (☎ 2334 2305 in Guatemala City; www.hotelgringoperdido.com; r per person with bathroom US\$40; 📍) Waking up here is like waking up in paradise, with no sound but the lake lapping at the shore a few steps from your door. The rooms have one double and one single bed, stone walls and floors, mosquito

nets and full-wall canvas roll-up blinds that can almost give you the sensation of sleeping in the open air. When there are only a few guests, the Inn doesn't switch on the generator, meaning no hot water and no cold drinks, but plenty of soothing, romantic candlelight. The Gringo Perdido is 3km along the north-shore road from the main Tikal road. Rates include dinner and breakfast.

**Hotel Camino Real Tikal** (☎ 7926 0204/09; www.caminoarealtikal.com.gt; s & d US\$150; 📞 📺 📺) Two kilometers further along the lake is the luxury Camino Real, the fanciest hotel in El Petén, with 72 air-con rooms with balconies, lake views and all the comforts. Two restaurants, a bar and a coffee shop keep guests happy, as do the Tikal and Cerro Cahuí tours, pool, kayaking, sailing, windsurfing and beach sports. This hotel is rather remote: check out its special packages, which include airport transfers.

## Eating

Most hotels have their own restaurants and there are simple *comedores* scattered along the main road.

**Las Orquideas** (pasta US\$4-6, mains US\$8-12; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Almost next door to Casa de Doña Tonita, Las Orquideas has a genial Italian owner-chef cooking up genuine Italian fare, with tempting desserts too.

**Restaurante Cahuí** (mains US\$4-6; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) While most people eat in their hotels here, this restaurant on the main road is a popular option. People come for the big, wholesome meals and stay for the lake views from the big wooden deck overlooking the water and the extensive wine and beer list.

**Mon Ami** (mains US\$5-8, crepes US\$2; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Further along the north-shore road (1200m from the main Tikal road), Mon Ami serves good French and Guatemalan food in a peaceful palm-thatched, open-walled area. Try the *carne al vino* with rice and tomato salad, or the big *ensalada francesa*.

## Getting There & Around

El Remate is linked to Flores by a public minibus service (see p281).

A minibus leaves El Remate at 5:30am for Tikal, starting back from Tikal at 2pm (US\$4 round-trip). Any El Remate accommodations can make reservations. Or you can catch one of the shuttles or regular minibuses passing through from Flores to get to Tikal. They normally charge US\$2.50 per person.

For taxis, ask at Hotel Sun Breeze or Hotel Don Juan. A one-way ride to Tikal or Flores costs about US\$18.

For Melchor de Mencos on the Belizean border, get a minibus or bus from Puente Ixlu, 2km south of El Remate.

## MACANCHÉ

Set on the banks of the lagoon of the same name, this little village is home to one of the finer accommodations options in the region, **El Retiro** (☎ 5751 1876; www.retiro-guatemala.com; campsites per person US\$20, cabins per person US\$30). Comfortable cabins are set on leafy grounds down by the water's edge. There's an excellent dock for swimming and a good restaurant here, as well as a snake house and walking trails through the ruin-dotted rain forest.

What's unique about the property (apart from the location) is the presence of a series of *chultuns* – holes carved into the ground rock with a circular capping stone. Their purpose remains a mystery, but educated guesses suggest they were used either for food storage or religious rituals.

The hotel offers boat tours of the lagoon, crocodile-spotting night tours (US\$40 per person) and jungle walks (US\$30 per person).

Any bus heading for the Belize border can drop you at Macanché village, from where it's a 2km walk to the hotel. Taxis are sometimes on hand in the village, or you can call and get picked up.

## TIKAL

Greening pyramids poke above the jungle's green canopy to catch the sun. Howler monkeys swing noisily through the branches of ancient trees as brightly colored parrots and toucans dart from perch to perch in a cacophony of squawks. When the complex warbling song of some mysterious jungle bird tapers off, the buzz of tree frogs fills the background and it will dawn on you that this is indeed hallowed ground.

Certainly the most striking feature of **Tikal** (☎ 2361 1399; www.parque-tikal.com; admission US\$7; 🍴 6am-6pm) is its steep-sided temples, rising to heights of more than 44m. But Tikal is different from Copán, Chichén Itzá, Uxmal, and most other great Mayan sites, because it is fairly deep in the jungle. Its many plazas have been cleared of trees and vines, its temples uncovered and partially restored, but as you walk from one building to another you pass

beneath the dense canopy of rainforest. Rich, loamy smells of earth and vegetation, a peaceful air, and animal noises all contribute to an experience not offered by other Mayan sites.

You can, if you wish, visit Tikal on a day trip from Flores or El Remate. You can even make a literally flying visit from Guatemala City in one day, using the daily flights between there and Flores airport. But you'll get more out of Tikal if you spend a night here, enabling you to visit the ruins twice and to be here in the late afternoon and early morning, when other tourists are fewest and the wildlife is more active.

## History

Tikal is set on a low hill, which becomes evident as you walk up to the Gran Plaza from the entry road. The hill, affording relief from the surrounding low-lying swampy ground, may be why the Maya settled here around 700 BC. Another reason was the abundance of flint, the valuable stone used by the ancients to make clubs, spear points, arrowheads and knives. The wealth of flint meant good tools could be made, and flint could be traded for other goods. Within 200 years the Maya of Tikal had begun to build stone ceremonial structures, and by 200 BC there was a complex of buildings on the site of the Acrópolis del Norte.

## CLASSIC PERIOD

The Gran Plaza was beginning to assume its present shape and extent by the time of Christ. By the dawn of the early Classic period, around AD 250, Tikal had become an important religious, cultural and commercial city with a large population. King Yax Moch Xoc, in power about AD 230, is looked upon as the founder of the dynasty that ruled Tikal thereafter.

Under Chak Toh Ich'ak I (King Great Jaguar Paw), who ruled in the mid-4th century, Tikal adopted a new and brutal method of warfare, used by the rulers of Teotihuacán in central Mexico. Rather than meeting their adversaries on the plain of battle in hand-to-hand combat, the army of Tikal used auxiliary units to encircle the enemy and throw spears to kill them from a distance. This first use of 'air power' among the Maya of Petén enabled Siyah K'ak' (Smoking Frog), the Tikal general, to conquer the army of Uaxactún; thus Tikal became the dominant kingdom in El Petén.

By the middle of the Classic period, in the mid-6th century, Tikal's military prowess and its association with Teotihuacán allowed it to grow until it sprawled over 30 sq km and had a population of perhaps 100,000. But in 553, Yajaw Te' K'inich II (Lord Water) came to the throne of Caracol (in southwestern Belize), and by 562, using warfare methods learned from Tikal, he had conquered Tikal and sacrificed its king. Tikal and other Petén kingdoms suffered under Caracol's rule until the late 7th century.

## TIKAL'S RENAISSANCE

A powerful king named Ah Cacau (682–734, also called Moon Double Comb or Lord Chocolate), 26th successor of Yax Moch Xoc, restored not only Tikal's military strength but also its primacy in the Mayan world. He conquered the greatest rival Mayan state, Calakmul in Mexico, in 695, and his successors were responsible for building most of the great temples around the Gran Plaza that survive today. King Moon Double Comb was buried beneath the staggering height of Templo I.

Tikal's greatness waned around 900, but it was not alone in its downfall, which was part of the mysterious general collapse of lowland Mayan civilization.

## REDISCOVERY

No doubt the Itzáes, who occupied Tayasal (now Flores), knew of Tikal in the late post-Classic period (1200–1530). Perhaps they even came here to worship at the shrines of old gods. Spanish missionary friars who moved through El Petén after the conquest left brief references to these junglebound structures, but their writings moldered in libraries for centuries.

It wasn't until 1848 that the Guatemalan government sent out an expedition, under the leadership of Modesto Méndez and Ambrosio Tut, to visit the site. This may have been inspired by John L Stephens' bestselling accounts of fabulous Mayan ruins, published in 1841 and 1843 (though Stephens never visited Tikal). Like Stephens, Méndez and Tut took an artist, Eusebio Lara, to record their archaeological discoveries. An account of their findings was published by the Berlin Academy of Science.

In 1877, the Swiss Dr Gustav Bernoulli visited Tikal. His explorations resulted in the removal of carved wooden lintels from Templos I and IV and their shipment to Basel,

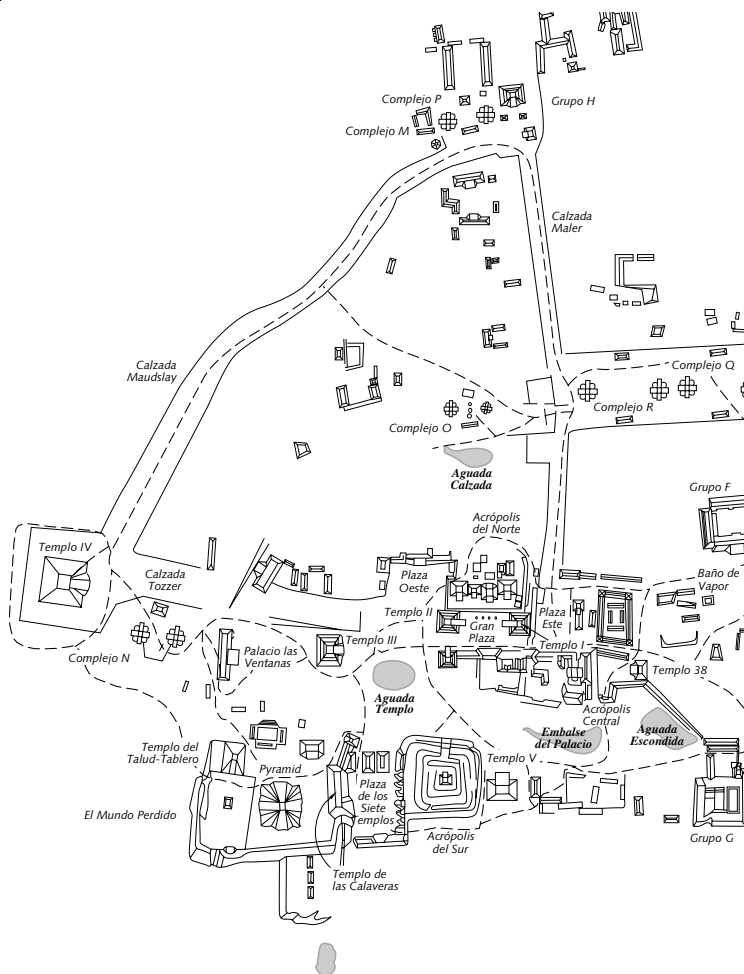
where they are still on view in the Museum für Völkerkunde.

Scientific exploration of Tikal began with the arrival of English archaeologist Alfred P Maudslay in 1881. Others continued his work, Teobert Maler, Alfred M Tozzer and RE Merwin among them. Tozzer worked tirelessly at Tikal on and off from the beginning

of the 20th century until his death in 1954. The inscriptions at Tikal were studied and deciphered by Sylvanus G Morley.

Since 1956 archaeological research and restoration have been carried out by the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania (until 1969) and the Guatemalan Instituto de Antropología y Historia. Since 1991, a joint

## TIKAL



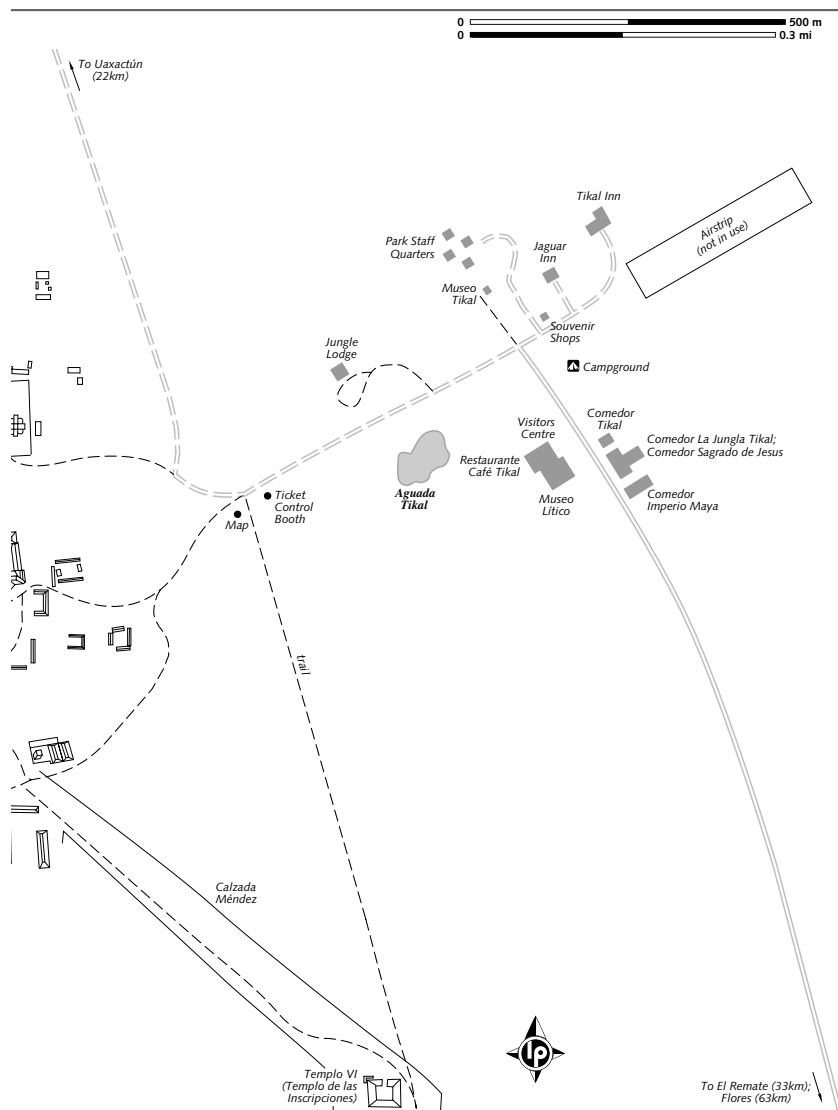
Guatemalan-Spanish project has worked on conserving and restoring Templos I and V.

In the mid-1950s an airstrip was built at Tikal. In the early 1980s the road between Tikal and Flores was improved and paved, and direct flights to Tikal were abandoned. The Parque Nacional Tikal (Tikal National Park) was declared a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1979.

## Orientation & Information

The 550 sq km Parque Nacional Tikal contains thousands of separate ruined structures. The central area of the city occupied about 16 sq km, with more than 4000 structures.

The road from Flores enters the national park 17km south of the ruins. The gate opens at 6am. Here you must pay a fee of US\$7 for





the day; if you enter after about 3pm, your ticket should be stamped with the following day's date, meaning that it will be valid for the next day too. Multilingual guides are available at the visitors center (US\$40 for a half-day tour for up to four people, plus US\$5 for each extra person). These authorized guides always display their accreditation carnet, listing the languages they speak. The visitors center sells books, souvenirs, print film, hats, insect repellent, sun block and other necessities.

Near the visitors center are Tikal's three hotels, a camping area, a few small *comedores*, a tiny post office, a police post, two museums and a disused airstrip. From the visitors center it's a 1.5km walk (20 to 30 minutes) southwest to the Gran Plaza.

The walk from the Gran Plaza southeast to the Templo de las Inscripciones is over 1km; from the Gran Plaza north to Complejo P, it's 800m; from the Gran Plaza west to Templo IV it's over 600m. To visit all the major building complexes, you must walk at least 10km, probably more, so wear comfortable shoes.

For more complete information on the monuments at Tikal, pick up a copy of *Tikal – A Handbook of the Ancient Maya Ruins*, by William R Coe, which is available in Flores and at Tikal for around US\$14. A book you're best off finding before you come is *The Lords of Tikal*, by Peter D Harrison, a vivid, cogent summary of the city's history. *The Birds of Tikal: An Annotated Checklist*, by Randall A Beavers, and *The Birds of Tikal*, by Frank B Smythe, also available at Tikal, are good resources for bird-watchers.

The ruins are open from 6am to 6pm daily. Tickets are checked at a booth on the approach track between the visitors center and the ruins. Seeing sunrise from Templo IV at the west end of the main site is possible from about October to March, but you need to leg it from this ticket booth!

It's a good idea to wear shoes with good rubber treads that grip well. The ruins here can be very slick from rain and organic material, especially during the wet season. Bring plenty of water, as dehydration is a real danger if you're walking around all day in this heat. Please don't feed the coatis (*pisotes*) that wander about the site.

The Jaguar Inn will exchange US-dollar cash and traveler's checks at a poor rate.

## Dangers & Annoyances

The number of guards and rangers at Tikal has been stepped up since several robberies and rapes happened there a few years ago. On our visit it seemed safe and secure enough, but when visiting the more isolated parts of the site, such as the Templo de las Inscripciones, it still pays to be on your guard and not to go alone. If in doubt, you can always ask a guard whether it is safe to go there.

## Sights

### GRAN PLAZA

The path comes into the Gran Plaza around the awesome **Templo I**, the Templo del Gran Jaguar (Temple of the Grand Jaguar). This was built to honor – and bury – King Moon Double Comb. The king may have worked out the plans for the building himself, but it was actually erected above his tomb by his son, who succeeded to the throne in 734. The king's rich burial goods included stingray spines, which were used for ritual bloodletting, 180 beautiful jade objects, pearls and 90 pieces of bone carved with hieroglyphs. At the top of the 44m-high temple is a small enclosure of three rooms covered by a corbeled arch. The sapodilla-wood lintels over the doors were richly carved; one of them was removed and is now in a Basel museum. The lofty roofcomb that crowned the temple was originally adorned with reliefs and bright paint. It may have symbolized the 13 realms of the Mayan heavens.

Visitors used to be allowed to make the dangerous climb to the top, but since (at least) two people tumbled to their deaths, the stairs have been closed. Don't fret, though, the views from **Templo II** just across the way are nearly as awe-inspiring. Templo II, also known as the Temple of the Masks, was at one time almost as high as Templo I, but it now measures 38m without its roofcomb.

Nearby, the **Acropolis del Norte** (North Acropolis), while not as immediately impressive as the twin temples, is of great significance. Archaeologists have uncovered about 100 different structures, the oldest of which dates from before the time of Christ, with evidence of occupation as far back as 400 BC. The Maya built and rebuilt on top of older structures, and the many layers, combined with the elaborate burials, added sanctity and power to their temples. Look especially for the two huge, powerful wall masks, uncovered from an earlier structure and now protected

by roofs. The final version of the acropolis, as it stood around AD 800, had more than 12 temples atop a vast platform, many of them the work of King Moon Double Comb.

On the plaza side of the North Acropolis are two rows of stelae. Though hardly as bowl-over as the magnificent stelae at Copán or Quiriguá, these served the same purposes: to record the great deeds of the kings, to sanctify their memory and to add power to the temples and plazas that surrounded them.

### ACRÓPOLIS CENTRAL

South and east of the Gran Plaza, this maze of courtyards, little rooms and small temples is thought by many to have been a palace where Tikal's nobles lived. Others think the tiny rooms may have been used for sacred rites and ceremonies, as graffiti found within them suggest. Over the centuries the configuration of the rooms was repeatedly changed, suggesting that perhaps this 'palace' was in fact a noble or royal family's residence changed to accommodate different groups of relatives. A hundred years ago, one part of the acropolis, called the Palacio de Maler, provided lodgings for archaeologist Teobert Maler when he worked at Tikal.

### PLAZA OESTE

The West Plaza is north of Templo II. On its north side (obscured by vegetation) is a large late Classic temple. To the southwest, across the Calzada Tozzer (Tozzer Causeway), is **Templo III**, 55m high. Yet to be uncovered, it allows you to see a temple the way the last Tikal Maya and first white explorers saw them. The Tozzer Causeway leading west to Templo IV was one of several sacred byways built in the temple complexes of Tikal, no doubt for astronomical as well as aesthetic purposes.

### ACRÓPOLIS DEL SUR & TEMPLO V

Due south of the Gran Plaza is the South Acropolis. Excavation has hardly even begun on this huge mass of masonry. The palaces on top are from late Classic times (the time of King Moon Double Comb), but earlier constructions probably go back 1000 years.

Templo V, just east of the South Acropolis, is 58m high and was built around AD 600. Unlike the other great temples, this one has slightly rounded corners, and one very tiny room at the top. The room is less than 1m deep, but its walls are up to 4.5m

thick. The view from the top is wonderful, giving you a 'profile' of the temples on the Gran Plaza.

### PLAZA DE LOS SIETE TEMPLOS

To the west of the Acrópolis del Sur is the Plaza of the Seven Temples. The little temples, all in a line and now most sprouting trees, were built in late Classic times. On the north side of the plaza is an unusual triple ballcourt; another, larger version in the same design stands just south of Templo I.

### EL MUNDO PERDIDO

About 400m southwest of the Gran Plaza is El Mundo Perdido (Lost World), a large complex of 38 structures with a huge pyramid in its midst. Unlike the rest of Tikal, where late Classic construction overlays work of earlier periods, El Mundo Perdido exhibits buildings of many different periods: the large pyramid is thought to be essentially Preclassic (with some later repairs and renovations); the Templo del Talud-Tablero, early Classic; and the Templo de las Calaveras (Temple of the Skulls), late Classic.

The pyramid, 32m high and 80m along the base, has a stairway on each side and had huge masks flanking each stairway, but no temple structure at its top. Each side of the pyramid displays a slightly different architectural style. Tunnels dug into the pyramid by archaeologists reveal four similar pyramids beneath the outer face; the earliest (Structure 5C-54 Sub 2B) dates from 700 BC, making this pyramid the oldest Mayan structure at Tikal.

### TEMPLO IV & COMPLEJO N

Complex N, near Templo IV, is an example of the 'twin-temple' complexes popular with Tikal's rulers during the late Classic period. These complexes are thought to have commemorated the completion of a *katun*, or 20-year cycle in the Mayan calendar. This one was built in 711 by King Moon Double Comb to mark the 14th *katun* of *baktun* 9. (A *baktun* equals 400 years.) The king himself is portrayed on Stela 16, one of the finest stelae at Tikal.

Templo IV, at 64m, is the highest building at Tikal and the second highest pre-Columbian building known in the western hemisphere, after El Tigre at El Mirador. It was completed about 741, in the reign of King Moon Double Comb's son. From the base it looks like

a precipitous little hill. Steep wooden steps will take you to the top. The view is almost as good as from a helicopter – a panorama across the jungle canopy. If you stay up here for the sunset, climb down immediately thereafter, as it gets dark on the path very quickly.

### TEMPLO DE LAS INSCRIPCIONES (TEMPLO VI)

Compared to Copán or Quiriguá, there are relatively few inscriptions on buildings at Tikal. The exception is this temple, 1.2km southeast of the Gran Plaza. On the rear of the 12m-high roofcomb is a long inscription; the sides and cornice of the roofcomb bear glyphs as well. The inscriptions give us the date AD 766. Stela 21 and Altar 9, standing before the temple, date from 736. The stela had been badly damaged (part of it was converted into a *metate* for grinding corn!) but has now been repaired.

### NORTHERN COMPLEXES

About 1km north of the Gran Plaza is **Complejo P**. Like Complejo N, it's a late Classic twin-temple complex that probably commemorated the end of a *katun*. **Complejo M**, next to it, was partially torn down by the late Classic Maya to provide building materials for a causeway, now named after Alfred Maudslay, which runs southwest to Templo IV. **Grupo H**, northeast of Complexes P and M, with one tall, cleared temple, had some interesting graffiti within its temples (we're not talking about the moronic modern scrawls now disfiguring them).

**Complejo Q** and **Complejo R**, about 300m due north of the Gran Plaza, are very late Classic twin-pyramid complexes with stelae and altars standing before the temples. Complex Q is perhaps the best example of the twin-temple type, as it has been partly restored. Stela 22 and Altar 10 are excellent examples of late Classic Tikal relief carving, dated 771.

### MUSEUMS

Tikal has two museums. The **Museo Lítico** (Museum of Stone; admission US\$1.30; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat & Sun), the larger of the two, is in the visitors center. It houses a number of stelae and carved stones from the ruins. Outside is a large model showing how Tikal would have looked around AD 800. The photographs taken by Alfred P Maudslay and Teobert Maler of the jungle-covered temples in various stages of discovery, in the late 19th century, are particularly striking.

The **Museo Tikal** or **Museo Cerámico** (Museum of Ceramics; admission US\$1.30; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat & Sun) is near the Jaguar Inn. It has some fascinating exhibits, including the burial goods of King Moon Double Comb, carved jade, inscribed bones, shells, stelae, ceramics and other items recovered from the excavations.

### Activities

#### BIRDING

As well as howler and spider monkeys romping through the trees of Tikal, the plethora of birds flitting through the canopy and across the green expanses of the plazas is sure to impress you. Around 300 bird species (migratory and resident) have been recorded at Tikal. Early morning is the best time to go birding, and even amateur bird-watchers will have their share of sightings here. Bring binoculars if you have them, tread quietly and be patient, and you will probably see some of the following birds in the areas specified:

- Tody motmots, four trogon species and royal flycatchers around the Templo de las Inscripciones.
- Two oriole species, keel-billed toucans and collared aracaris in El Mundo Perdido.
- Great curassows, three species of woodpecker, crested guans, plain chachalacas and three tanager species around Complejo P.
- Three kingfisher species, jacanas, blue herons, two species of sandpiper, and great kiskadees at the Aguada Tikal (Tikal Reservoir) near the entrance. Tiger herons sometimes nest in the huge ceiba tree along the entrance path.
- Red-capped and white-collared manakins near Complejo Q; emerald toucans near Complejo R.

In addition, look for several hawk species near the reservoirs, hummingbirds and ocellated turkeys (resembling a cross between a turkey and peacock) throughout the park, and several parrot species and Aztec parakeets while exploring the ruins.

#### TIKAL CANOPY TOUR

At the national park entrance, you can take a fairly expensive one-hour treetop tour through the forest by harness attached to a

series of cables linking trees up to 300m apart, with **Tikal Canopy Tour** (☎ 7926 4270; www.canopytikal.com; admission US\$25; 🕒 7am-5pm).

## Sleeping & Eating

The days when intrepid visitors could convince park guards (with a US\$5 'tip') to let them sleep atop Templo IV are over. If you are caught in the ruins after hours, you're likely to be escorted out for your own safety. Your best bet to catch some solitude at the ruins and get an early glimpse of the wildlife is to stay overnight and be at the ticket control booth at opening time.

Other than camping, there are only three places to stay at Tikal, all overpriced, and tour groups often have many of the rooms reserved. But staying here does enable you to relax and savor the dawn and dusk, when most of the jungle birds and animals can be seen and heard (especially the howler monkeys). The chances of getting a room depend a lot on the season. In the low season (from after Easter to late June, and from early September to Christmas), you will probably secure a room without reservation. At other times it's advisable to book. It's always advisable to arrive by early afternoon so that you have time to sort out any difficulties – and to get back to El Remate if everything fails. One way of ensuring a room is to become a group tourist yourself. Almost any travel agency in Guatemala offers Tikal tours, including lodging, a meal or two, a guided tour and transportation, and they needn't be prohibitively expensive.

**Jaguar Inn** (☎ 7926 0002; www.jaguartikal.com; campsites per person US\$3.25, hammocks per person US\$5, s/d US\$33/53; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Although the little duplex bungalows here are kinda jammed together, it still makes a decent and (relatively) cheap sleep in the park. Hammocks on the little porches are a bonus, but nobody's likely to get excited about paying US\$6 for an hour of internet. If you don't have a tent, you can rent one for US\$6.50 per person. The electricity goes off at 9pm.

**Jungle Lodge** (☎ 7861 0446; www.junglelodge.guate.com; s/d US\$35/40, with bathroom US\$69/86; 🍷 🍷) This largest and most attractive of the three hotels was built originally to house archaeologists excavating and restoring Tikal. It's by far the sweetest of the accommodation options in the park, with mostly self-contained bungalows well-spaced throughout the jungly grounds. There's a swimming pool, large garden

grounds, and a restaurant-bar with breakfast for US\$5 and lunch or dinner for US\$10.

**Tikal Inn** (☎ 7926 1917; www.tikalinn.com; s/d US\$40/60, bungalows US\$60/80; 🍷 🍷 🍷) If you're going to do it here, you may as well do it in style, and go with the bungalows. They're bright and spacious and set well enough apart to give you a bit of privacy, with little sitting areas out front. All the accommodations are simple but clean and quite large. Rates on the rooms in the main building drop substantially when the hotel decides it isn't high season. You can pay an extra US\$7.50 for the breakfast and dinner package.

There's no need to make reservations if you want to stay at Tikal's **campground** (campsite per person US\$4), opposite the visitors center. This is a large, grassy area with a clean bathroom block, plenty of space for tents and *palapa* shelters for hanging hammocks.

As you arrive in Tikal, look on the right-hand side of the road to find the little *comedores*: Comedor Imperio Maya, Comedor La Jungla Tikal, Comedor Tikal, Comedor Sagrado de Jesús and Tienda Angelita. Comedor Tikal seems to be the most favored one. These *comedores* offer rustic and agreeable surroundings and are run by local people serving huge plates of fairly tasty food at low prices. Chicken or meat dishes cost around US\$4.50, pasta and burgers a little less. All these places are open from 5am to 9pm daily.

Picnic tables beneath shelters are located just off Tikal's Gran Plaza, with soft-drink and water peddlers standing by, but no food is sold. If you want to spend all day at the ruins without having to make the 20- to 30-minute walk back to the *comedores*, carry food and water with you.

In the visitors center, **Restaurant Café Tikal** (mains US\$6.50-10) serves fancier food at fancier prices. *Lomito* (tenderloin of beef) and steaks are featured. Plates of fruit cost less. All the hotels also have restaurants.

## Getting There & Away

For details of transport to and from Flores and Santa Elena, see p281. Coming from Belize, you could consider taking a taxi from the border to Tikal for around US\$40. Otherwise, get a bus to Puente Ixlu, sometimes called El Cruce, and switch there to a northbound minibus or bus for the remaining 36km to Tikal. Note that there is little northbound traffic after lunch. Heading from Tikal to Belize,

start early in the morning and get off at Puente Ixlu' to catch a bus or minibus eastward. Be wary of shuttles to Belize advertised at Tikal: these have been known to detour to Flores to pick up passengers!

## UAXACTÚN

Uaxactún (wah-shahk-*toon*), 23km north of Tikal along an unpaved road through the jungle, was Tikal's political and military rival in late Preclassic times. It was conquered by Tikal's Chak Toh Ich'ak I (King Great Jaguar Paw) in the 4th century, and was subservient to its great sister to the south for centuries thereafter.

Uaxactún village lies either side of a disused airstrip, which now serves as pasture and a football field. Villagers make an income from collecting chicle, *pimienta* (all-spice) and *xate* in the surrounding forest. A recently started timber extraction operation is supposedly employing sustainable methods but critics have their doubts about this.

About halfway along the airstrip, roads go off to the left and right to the ruins. Village boys will want to guide you: you don't need a guide to find the ruins, but you might want to let one or two of them earn a small tip.

## Ruins

The pyramids at Uaxactún were uncovered and stabilized so that no further deterioration would result, but they were not restored. White mortar is the mark of the repair crews, who patched cracks in the stone to prevent water and roots from entering.

Head south from the airstrip to reach Grupo E, a 10- to 15-minute walk. Perhaps the most significant temple here is E-VII-Sub, among the earliest intact temples excavated, with foundations going back perhaps to 2000 BC. It lay beneath much larger structures, which have been stripped away. On its flat top are holes, or sockets, for the poles that would have supported a wood-and-thatch temple. The pyramid is part of a group with astronomical significance: seen from it, the sun rises behind Templo E-I on the longest day of the year and behind Templo E-III on the shortest day. Also look for the somewhat deteriorated jaguar and serpent masks on this pyramid's sides.

About a 20-minute walk to the northwest of the runway are Grupo B and Grupo A. At Grupo A, early excavators sponsored by

Andrew Carnegie simply cut into the sides of the temples indiscriminately, looking for graves. Sometimes they used dynamite. This unfortunate work destroyed many of the temples, which are now in the process of being reconstructed.

If you are visiting Uaxactún from Tikal, no fee is charged. But if you are going to Uaxactún without stopping to visit Tikal, you still have to pass through the Parque Nacional Tikal and will have to pay a US\$2 Uaxactún-only fee at the park entrance.

## Tours

Tours to Uaxactún can be arranged in Flores or at the hotels in Tikal. The Jungle Lodge has a trip departing daily at 8am and returning at 1pm, costing US\$60 for one to four people.

## Sleeping & Eating

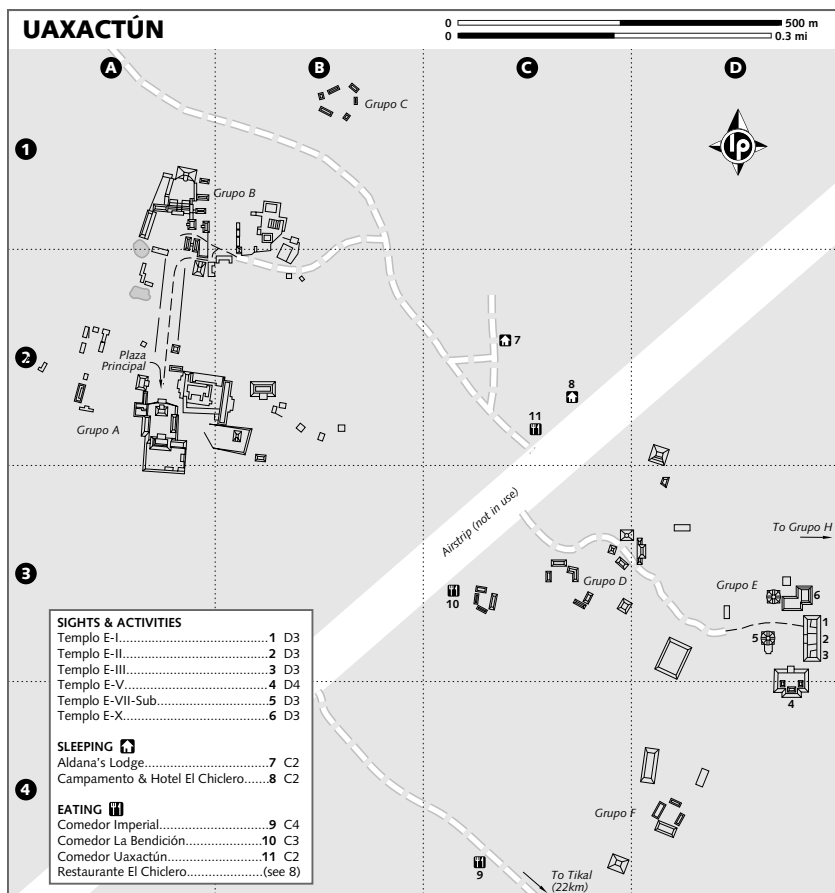
**Aldana's Lodge** (campsites per person US\$2.50, r per person US\$4) To the right off the street leading to Grupos B and A, Aldana's has alternative, cheaper accommodations, and also offers tours to other sites, but has erratic water supplies. Camping using Aldana's equipment costs US\$3 per person.

**Campamento, Hotel & Restaurante El Chiclero** (☎/fax 7926 1095; campsites US\$5, s/d US\$14/17) On the north side of the airstrip, El Chiclero has 10 small and very basic rooms, but with good mattresses and mosquito-netted ceilings and windows, and does the best food in town (US\$6 for soup and a main course with rice). Accommodation prices are very negotiable. Also here is a small museum with shelves full of Mayan pottery from Uaxactún and around. Neria, the owner, can organize trips to more remote sites such as El Mirador, Xultún, Río Azul, Nakbé and La Muralla.

A few basic comedores also provide food: Comedor Uaxactún, Comedor La Bendición and Comedor Imperial.

## Getting There & Away

A Pinita bus supposedly leaves Santa Elena for Uaxactún (US\$3) at 1pm, passing through Tikal about 3pm to 3:30pm, and starting back for Santa Elena from Uaxactún at 6am. But its schedule is rubbery and it can arrive in Tikal any time up to about 5pm and in Uaxactún up to about 6:30pm. During the rainy season (from May to October, sometimes extending into November), the road from Tikal to Uaxactún can become pretty muddy: locals say it



is always passable but a 4WD vehicle might be needed during the wet.

If you're driving, the last chance to fill your fuel tank as you come from the south is at Puente Ixlú, just south of El Remate. A taxi from El Remate to Uaxactún and back, including waiting time, should cost about US\$40; bargain hard.

From Uaxactún, unpaved roads lead to other ruins at El Zotz (about 30km southwest), Xultún (35km northeast) and Río Azul (100km northeast).

## YAXHÁ

A beautiful and quite large classic Mayan ceremonial site, **Yaxhá** (admission US\$1.80; ☎ 6am-5pm) may be familiar as it was used as the

setting for *Survivor Guatemala*. The site is 11km north of the Puente Ixlú-Melchor de Mencos road, accessed from a turnoff 32km from Puente Ixlú and 33km from Melchor de Mencos. The access road is unpaved. Yaxhá's setting, on a hill overlooking two sizable lakes, Laguna Yaxhá and Laguna Sacnab, makes it particularly worth visiting. It takes about 1½ hours to wander round the main groups of ruins, which are gradually being cleared and restored, though many mounds are still under vegetation. The high point (literally), towering above all else, is **Templo 216** in the Acrópolis Este (Eastern Acropolis), which affords magnificent views in every direction. On an island near the far (south) shore of Laguna Yaxhá is a separate,

**NOW WE'VE DUG IT UP, LET'S BURY IT AGAIN!**

In the bad old days, archaeology was all about getting in there, digging up as much as possible and carrying the loot off to some foreign museum (or auction house). The field has become a lot more conservation-minded lately, and an interesting debate has developed.

It's all got to do with erosion and the way that some sites are literally falling apart due to exposure to wind, rain and weather in general. Originally, these structures would have been covered in stucco, the stones thus protected from the elements. After falling into disuse, many sites have been covered by soil, which acts as a natural shield. Now, having been excavated, they lie exposed and every year takes its toll. Some archaeologists and conservationists are calling for structures to be buried again once they have been examined for archaeological purposes. Others argue that, without tourist revenue, governments will not be able to afford even what meager resources they now contribute to excavation projects.

Ironically, tourism has played a part in some of the major archaeological finds in this century. The hugely popular (and much maligned) sound-and-light shows that are installed at some of the more popular ruins are pretty much the only time that anybody does any kind of heavy work around the ruins, and there are many stories of lighting technicians falling through roofs and into previously undiscovered chambers.

Either way, regardless of whether you're a tourist, archaeologist or conservationist, the argument raises some interesting questions: What are the ruins for? Are they just tourist eye candy, or should they be left solely to people studying them for academic reasons? And if we are going to bury them again, who exactly is allowed to dig them up?

late Postclassic archaeological site, Topoxté, whose dense covering of ruined temples and dwellings may date back to the Itzá culture that occupied Flores island at the time the Spanish came. On the northern lake shore below the Yaxhá ruins is **Campamento Yaxhá**, where you can camp for free on raised platforms with thatched roofs and where you might be able to find a boatman to take you over to Topoxté.

**Campamento Ecológico El Sombrero** (☎ 7926 5529; www.ecosombrero.com; s/d US\$20/30, with bathroom US\$30/40; (P)), on the southern shore and 250m off the approach road, is an excellent place to stay. It has good-sized, neat and clean rooms in mosquito-netted bungalows overlooking the lake. There's a good restaurant here, with a small library on local archaeology, and *lancha* tours to Topoxté are offered (US\$20 for up to three people, US\$26 for four to nine people) as well as horse riding and day trips to Nakum and El Naranjo, other Classic period sites to the north and northeast of Yaxhá. You can call here in advance and the friendly owner will come pick you up from the bus stop.

Don't swim in the lakes, by the way – there are crocodiles!

Agencies in Flores (see p274) and El Remate (see p286) offer organized trips to Yaxhá, some combined with Nakum and/or Tikal. To get there independently get a Melchor de Mencos-

bound bus or minibus as far as the Yaxhá turnoff (and be prepared to walk the 11km to the site) – or find a taxi in El Remate, Puente Ixlú (about US\$30 round-trip) or elsewhere.

**MELCHOR DE MENCOS**

pop 12,200

Right on the Belize–Guatemala border, Melchor is your classic border town – plenty of moneychangers and suspect dudes hanging around, and not a lot to beautify it. The one exception is the **Río Mopan Lodge** (☎ 7926 5196; www.tikaltravel.com; s/d with bathroom from US\$16/20), the last (or first, depending on which way you're going) beautiful hotel you'll find in Guatemala. Set back from the road in lush, jungly grounds, you could be anywhere. The rooms are big, cool and well decorated, with balconies overlooking the Río Mopan. The Swiss-Spanish couple who run it offer trips to Tikal and other, lesser-known sites in the area. It's across the river from Melchor proper, in between the bridge and Guatemalan immigration.

**MEXICAN BORDER (CHIAPAS & TABASCO)****Via Bethel/La Técnica & Frontera Corozal**

The only route with regular transportation connections is via Bethel or La Técnica on the eastern (Guatemalan) bank of the Río

Usumacinta and Frontera Corozal on the Mexican bank. For details of bus services to and from Bethel and La Técnica and shuttle minibus services all the way through to Palenque, see p282. Guatemalan immigration is in Bethel: bus drivers to La Técnica will normally stop and wait for you to do the formalities in Bethel.

See below for information on river crossings: it's cheaper and quicker from La Técnica than from Bethel, but crossing at La Técnica means a longer bus journey on the Guatemalan side. Minibuses leave Frontera Corozal for Palenque at about 5am, 10am, noon and 3pm (US\$5, three hours).

If you should want to stay in the Usumacinta area, perhaps to visit the Mayan ruins at Yaxchilán on the Mexican side of the river, the riverside **Posada Maya** (☎ 7861 1799; s/d/tr US\$9/18/28), 1km outside Bethel, has a great location and comfortable thatched bungalows, plus tent and hammock shelters. Boats from Bethel to Yaxchilán cost from US\$15 to US\$25 per person for four to 12 people, round-trip.

### Other Routes

You can also cross into Mexico by boat down the Río de la Pasión from Sayaxché to Benemérito de las Américas or down the Río San Pedro from El Naranjo to La Palma. But there are no regular passenger services on either river and you will probably have to rent a boat privately for around US\$80 on the Río San Pedro or US\$100-plus on the Río de la

Pasión. Both trips take around four hours. La Palma has transportation connections with Tenosique, Tabasco, from where minibuses leave for Palenque up to 5:30pm. Benemérito has good bus and minibus connections with Palenque. Both Sayaxché and El Naranjo have bus and minibus connections with Flores (see p282).

A possible alternative on the Río San Pedro route is to get a boat from El Naranjo only as far as El Ceibo, on the border, for around US\$35. From El Ceibo there are a few buses on to Tenosique (US\$3, 1½ hours), the last one leaving about 5:30pm. Mexico has no immigration facilities at Benemérito or El Ceibo: you have to get your passport stamped at Frontera Corozal or Tenosique, or failing that, Palenque.

El Naranjo, Tenosique and Benemérito all have a few basic accommodations.

### SAYAXCHÉ

pop 10,500

Sayaxché, on the south bank of the Río de la Pasión, 61km southwest of Flores, is the closest town to nine or 10 scattered Mayan archaeological sites, including Ceibal, Aguateca, Dos Pilas, Tamarindito and Altar de Sacrificios (p300). Otherwise, for travelers it's little more than a transportation halt between Flores and the Cobán area.

Minibuses and buses from Santa Elena drop you on the north bank of the Río de la Pasión. Frequent ferries (US\$0.15 for pedestrians, US\$2 for cars) carry you across to the town.

### GETTING TO THE BELIZE BORDER

It's 100km from Flores to Melchor de Mencos, the Guatemalan town on the border with Belize. For information on bus services to the border and also on more expensive services going right through to Belize City and Chetumal, Mexico, see p282.

The road to the border diverges from the Flores–Tikal road at Puente Ixlú (also called El Cruce), 27km from Flores. It continues paved until about 25km short of the border. The stretch between Puente Ixlú and the border has been the scene of a few highway robberies.

There should be no fees at the border for entering or leaving Guatemala, and none for entering Belize. But travelers leaving Belize usually have to pay a US\$15 departure tax and a US\$3.75 protected areas conservation fee.

There are money changers at the border with whom you can change sufficient funds for immediate needs. Taxis run between the border and the nearest town in Belize, Benque Viejo del Carmen, 3km away, for around US\$2.50. Buses run from Benque to Belize City (US\$4, three hours) about every half-hour from 11am to 4pm. You might want to stop over at San Ignacio, 13km beyond Benque: there are many serviceable hotels and interesting things to do around San Ignacio. If you arrive in Benque early enough in the day, you may have sufficient time to visit the Mayan ruins of Xunantunich on your way to San Ignacio.



**Banrural** (☎ 9am–4pm Mon–Fri, 10am–1pm Sat), just up the main street from Hotel Guayacán, changes US-dollar cash and traveler's checks.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Yaxkin** (☎ 7928 6429; s/d with bathroom US\$7.50/15) Surprisingly big rooms in a brick and concrete wonderland 50m up from the boat landing. Try to get one away from the front as the street noise is formidable.

**Hotel Petexbatún** (☎ 7928 6166; s/d with bathroom US\$9/16) This is the second-best place. All rooms have fan and TV. Go one block up the street past the Hotel Guayacán, then three blocks to the right. It overlooks the Río Petexbatún.

**Hotel Guayacán** (☎ 7928 6111; s/d with bathroom US\$16/20; 🍷 🍴) Right on the south bank of the river in Sayaxché, the Guayacán is the best place in town, with good rooms equipped with solid wooden beds and tile floors. It also has the best restaurant, on a terrace overlooking the river. Chicken, fish or beef with salad and fries costs US\$4 to US\$6. Air-con costs an extra US\$4.

**Café del Río** (mains US\$3–5; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The most atmospheric place to eat in town is actually across the river on the big wooden dock built out over the water. Forget about the US\$0.50 return trip and enjoy the wholesome food, sweet breezes and icy beer.

**Restaurant Yaxkin** (mains US\$3–5; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A pleasant and clean family-run restaurant a couple of doors from Hotel Mayapán. It serves up good-value set lunches (US\$2.50) and does picnic boxes (US\$3) in case you're going somewhere.

## Getting There & Away

Southbound from Sayaxché, buses and minibuses leave at 5am, 6am, 10am and 3pm for Cobán (US\$7, five hours). Most if not all of these go via Raxrujá and Sebol, not via Chisec. Other minibuses and buses go just to Raxrujá (US\$3.50), about hourly from 7am to 3pm. For Chisec, you can change in Raxrujá or at San Antonio Las Cuevas. Vehicles may start from the southern riverbank or they may start from the Texaco station opposite Hotel Guayacán.

For river transportation, talk to any of the boatmen on the riverbank, or to **La Gaviota Tours** (☎ 7928 6461), with an office 200m to the left of where boats dock. A trip all the way down the Río de la Pasión to Benemérito de las Américas (Mexico), with stops at the

ruins of Altar de Sacrificios and Guatemalan immigration at Pipiles, should cost between US\$130 and US\$180.

## AROUND SAYAXCHÉ

Of the archaeological sites reached from Sayaxché, Ceibal and Aguateca are the most interesting to the amateur visitor. Ceibal is fairly well restored, Aguateca has an impressive location, and both are reached by boat trips along jungle-fringed rivers and/or lakes followed by forest walks.

### Ceibal

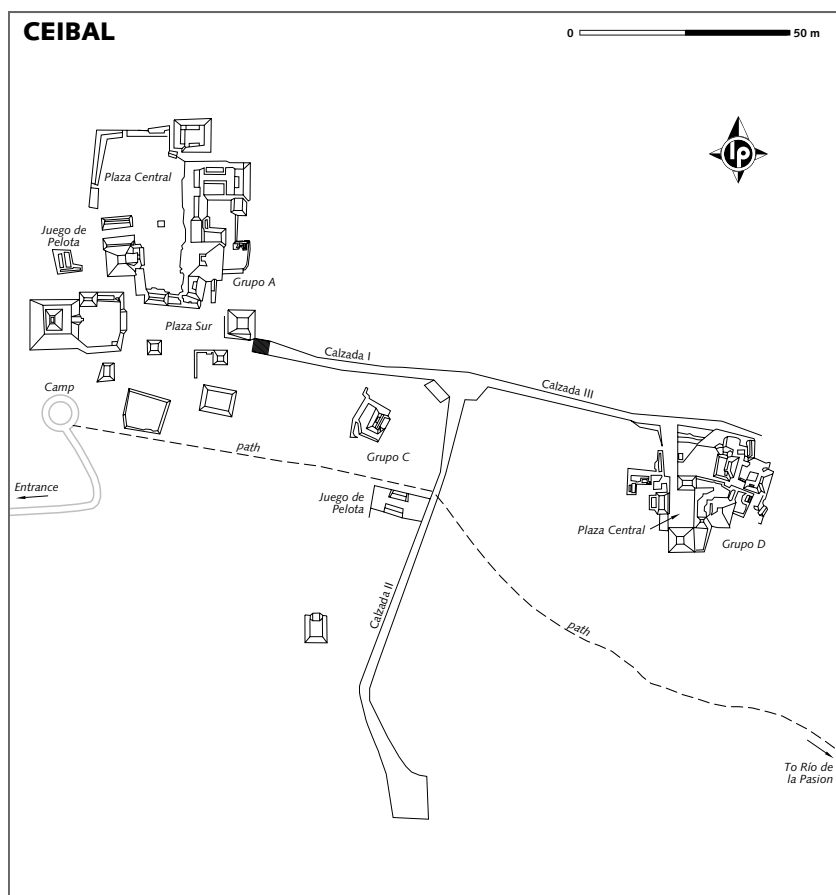
Unimportant during most of the Classic period, Ceibal (sometimes spelt Seibal) grew rapidly in the 9th century AD under the rule of the Putun Maya merchant-warrior culture from the Tabasco area of Mexico. It attained a population of perhaps 10,000 by AD 900, then was abandoned shortly afterwards. Its low, ruined temples were quickly covered by a thick carpet of jungle.

Some interesting carvings are on display here – one shows the presence of strangely dressed men with distinctly un-Mayan features, which has led to all sorts of wild speculation that foreigners once inhabited the area. Another shows a finely dressed king holding his war club upside down in a classic gesture of submission – believed to be a reference to the site's surrender to neighboring Dos Pilas.

Ceibal is not one of the most impressive Mayan sites, but the river journey to it is among the most memorable. A one-hour ride up the Río de la Pasión from Sayaxché brings you to a primitive dock. After landing, you clamber up a narrow, rocky path beneath gigantic ceiba trees and ganglions of jungle vines to reach the archaeological zone.

Smallish temples, many of them still (or again) covered with jungle, surround two principal plazas. In front of a few temples, and standing seemingly alone on paths deeply shaded by the jungle canopy, are magnificent stelae, their intricate carvings still in excellent condition. It takes about two hours to explore the site.

For information on tours to Ceibal, see p274. Otherwise, talk to any of the boatmen by the river at Sayaxché. For a round-trip including waiting time, they charge around US\$40 for one person plus US\$3 for each extra person. You should hire a guide to see the site, as some of the finest stelae are off the plazas



in the jungle. Most *lancheros*, conveniently, also serve as guides.

If you wish, you can get to Ceibal cheaper by land: get any bus, minibus or pickup heading south from Sayaxché on Hwy 5 (toward Raxrujá and Chisec) and get off after 9km at Paraíso (US\$0.80), from which a dirt track leads 8km east to Ceibal. You may have to walk the last 8km. In the rainy season check first that this stretch is passable.

#### LAGUNA PETEXBATÚN

Laguna Petexbatún is a 6km-long lake southwest of Sayaxché approached by an hour's *lancha* ride up the Río Petexbatún, a tributary of the Río de la Pasión, from Sayaxché. The lake, river and surrounding forests harbor many

birds, including kingfishers, egrets, vultures, eagles, cormorants and herons. Within reach of the waterways are five archaeological sites (Dos Pilas, Tamarindito, Arroyo de Piedra, Punta de Chiminos and Aguateca), and three jungle-hideaway accommodations close to the waters' edge. What we know of the history of these archaeological sites has mostly been unraveled by archaeologists since the late 1980s. Dos Pilas was founded about AD 640 by a prince who had left Tikal and later defeated Tikal in two wars, capturing its ruler Nuun Ujol Chaak (Shield Skull) in 679, according to inscriptions at Dos Pilas. Dos Pilas' second and third rulers carried out monumental building programs, waged wars of conquest and came to dominate most of the territory between

the Pasión and Chixoy rivers, but in AD 761 their vassal Tamarindito rebelled and killed the fourth ruler, causing the Dos Pilas nobility to relocate to the naturally fortified site of Aguateca, which was already functioning as a twin capital. Aguateca in turn was abandoned in the early 9th century, at around the same time as three defensive moats were cut across the neck of the Chiminos peninsula on the edge of Laguna Petexbatún. Archaeologists surmise that Punta de Chiminos was the last refuge of the Petexbatún dynasty founded at Dos Pilas.

The first landmark you reach, on the river a few kilometers before the lake, is **Posada Caribe** (☎ 7928 6114; posadacaribe@peten.net; s/d US\$50/60), with thatched bungalows. From here you can walk to the **Dos Pilas** ruins in about three hours, including stops at the lesser ruins of **Tamarindito** and **Arroyo de Piedra** en route. You can organize horses for this trip at Posada Caribe for around US\$8 each.

Just up from the western shore of the lake itself is the fairly comfortable **Petexbatún Lodge** (☎ 7926 0501; philippe\_petex@yahoo.fr; r per person with bunks US\$10, bungalows with bathroom US\$40), with mosquito-netted rooms and meals available if you ask in advance. Two minutes further south by *lancha* is the choicest of the three places to stay, **Chiminos Island Lodge** (☎ 2335 3506; www.chiminosisland.com; r per person incl 3 meals US\$75). This has just five lovely, large, comfortable, thatched bungalows set along forest paths, each with one double and two single beds, hot-water bathroom, fan, electric light, mosquito screens, balcony and lake view. Good food is served in an open-air restaurant and the lodge shares its promontory with the Punta de Chiminos ruins, where you can make out a ballcourt, stela and several mounds. Fat folders full of absorbing archaeological information and articles about the area are available to peruse as you chill out here.

### AGUATECA

If you have limited time and funds, this site, just off the far south end of the lake, is both the easiest reached and the most immediately impressive. It's a 1¼-hour *lancha* trip direct from Sayaxché. It's a five-minute walk up from the dock to the office of the rangers, who will guide you round the site in about 1½ hours (a tip of a few dollars is in order). The ruins are on a hilltop, defended by cliffs facing the lake and by a ravine. Pottery shards

dating from as far back as 200 BC have been found here. Carved stelae suggest that the city enjoyed military successes (including one over nearby Ceibal) up until about AD 735. It's fairly certain that rulers from Dos Pilas abandoned that city for the better-fortified Aguateca around AD 761, and that the city was finally overrun by unknown attackers around 790 – a wealth of arrowheads and skeletons have been found dating back to that time. There was no new building after that and the city was abandoned shortly afterwards.

There are two main groups, both in process of restoration: the Grupo del Palacio where the ruler lived, and the Plaza Mayor (Main Plaza) to its south, where glass fiber copies of several stelae showing finely attired rulers stand beside the fallen originals. The two groups are connected by a causeway. The rangers are usually happy to let people camp at Aguateca (bring supplies with you). They might even be willing to show you the way overland to Dos Pilas (11km northwest). Howler monkeys are much in evidence early and late in the day.

### DOS PILAS

This fascinating site is a mere 16 km from Sayaxché, but getting here is a serious undertaking. If you have the time, it's well worth considering for the fine carvings on display, particularly the partially excavated hieroglyphic staircase, with five 6m-wide steps, each with two rows of superbly preserved glyphs, climbing to the base of the royal palace near the main plaza.

The city began life as a breakaway from the Tikal group when that city was taken by Calakmul. Dos Pilas appears to have been governed by a set of very aggressive rulers – it clashed with Tikal, Ceibal, Yaxhilán and Motul all within 150 years, often ignoring the traditional 'war season,' which finished in time for the harvest.

Dos Pilas was virtually abandoned in 760 AD, but some farmers hung on into the 9th century when the city was overrun and subsequently evacuated.

A few caves nearby are thought to have been used for human sacrifices, having contained skeletons, altars and ceremonial bloodletting objects.

Many stelae at this site have been relocated to museums and replaced by crushed-rock and fiberglass replicas, in a pilot program designed to deter looters.

The best way to reach Dos Pilas is by tour from Sayaxché (p299) or by staying at the Posada Caribe (opposite) and organizing a tour there. Either way, you'll be up for about three hours of jungle trekking on foot or horseback from the Posada, passing the sites of Tamarandito (which also features a hieroglyphic stairway) and the smaller site of Arroyo de Piedra, which has a plaza and some well-preserved stelae.

### GETTING AROUND

Getting to all these places involves making your own arrangements with boatmen at Sayaxché, or taking a tour. A straightforward half-day return trip from Sayaxché to Aguaticca costs around US\$45 for one person plus US\$5 for each extra person. You could, for example, arrange to be dropped at one of the lodges afterwards and to be picked up the next afternoon after making a trip to Dos Pilas. Martsam Travel (see p274) offers tours to these sites, with camping at Aguaticca.

### REMOTE MAYAN SITES

Several Mayan sites buried in the Petén forest, of interest to archaeology buffs and adventurous travelers, are open for limited tourism. They're exciting not just because of the ruins but because of the jungle and its wildlife that you encounter en route. Few of these sites can be visited without a guide because of their remote location, the difficult jungle

terrain you must brave to get there and the lack of water (potable or otherwise), but several businesses in Flores, El Remate and San Andrés offer trips to these sites. Few of these tours offer anything approaching comfort, and you should be prepared for buggy, basic conditions. People reluctant to use a mosquito repellent containing DEET may want to reconsider taking one of these trips.

If you take a trip with an outfit that works with the local *Comités Comunitarios de Ecoturismo* (Community Ecotourism Committees) in the remote villages that serve as starting points for these treks, you will be participating in a considered program of low-impact, sustainable tourism and you will have a guide who is highly knowledgeable about local conditions. Freelance guides can lead tourists to some of these sites, which may save you some money, but they may have little concept of responsible tourism and little knowledge of what you are seeing. Nor is there any assurance, given the difficulty of these treks, that your freelance trip will come off successfully, and in case of failure, you'll have no claim to any money you may have paid up front.

### El Perú & Around

Trips to this site 62km northwest of Flores in the Parque Nacional Laguna del Tigre are termed La Ruta Guacamaya (the Scarlet Macaw Trail), because the chances of seeing

### THE LONG ROAD NORTH

Every year, thousands of Guatemalans pass through the Petén jungle. They're not ecotourists or archaeologists – they go in search of the American Dream.

Figures are obviously hard to nail down, but the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Guatemala estimates that between 6000 and 12,000 Guatemalans arrive in the United States each year. The Pew Hispanic Center estimates there are 320,000 Guatemalans living there illegally.

It's not easily done. Guatemalans pay US\$5000 to a *coyote* (people smuggler) to be taken on the hazardous journey up north. Rape, robbery and murder of illegal immigrants en route are commonplace.

It's not just Guatemalans, either – people from as far as Bolivia, Brazil and even China pass through here to take advantage of the long, relatively unpatrolled land borders.

Getting to the States may be the easy part. Once there, they're subjected to racist slurs – 'wet-back' or '*mojado*' (for having swum across the Río Grande) and 'beaner' or '*frijolero*' (for obvious reasons) and offered only the lowest-paying work. It's generally accepted that the economies of the entire west coast and much of Florida would collapse without the cheap labor supplied by undocumented immigrants. In 2006 the Bush administration started pushing for tighter border controls (including the construction of a fence along much of the US–Mexico border) alongside a Guest Worker Scheme, which critics say gives the US the best of both worlds – unlimited cheap (taxpaying) labor without the burdens associated with granting citizenship.

these magnificent birds are high, chiefly during their February-to-June nesting season. You normally journey by road to Paso Caballos (2½ hours from Flores) then travel by boat an hour down the Río San Pedro to El Perú, making various trips out from a camp in the area, including night-time observation of El Petén's endangered endemic crocodile, *Cocodrilo moreletti*. There are several important Classic-period structures at El Perú, including the Mirador de los Monos (Monkey Lookout). Despite its proximity to Tikal, archaeologists believe El Perú may have allied with Tikal's great rival Calakmul in Mexico.

Another destination in Parque Nacional Laguna del Tigre that is sometimes combined with El Perú trips is the **Estación Biológica Las Guacamayas** (Scarlet Macaw Biological Station) on the Río San Juan. This is a scientific station surrounded by rainforest, where among other things, scarlet macaws and white tortoises are observed.

A further site that may start to be combined with El Perú trips is **La Joyanca**, 20km west of El Perú, a Classic-period site where several structures have recently been restored and walking trails and information panels installed.

## Piedras Negras

On the banks of the Río Usumacinta, which forms the border with Mexico, these little-

visited ruins have been mercifully untouched by looters, despite their impressive size and wealth of carvings. Several of the finest pieces found here – including a carved throne – are now in the National Archaeological Museum in Guatemala City (see p79).

The entrance to the site is probably its most impressive aspect – black cliffs (from which it gets its name) loom over the river banks. A large rock protrudes, carved with a kneeling man making an offering to a female figure. A (now crumbling) stairway leads up the riverbank to the building complex 100m above.

The best-preserved buildings here are the sweat baths and acropolis complex, which incorporates rooms, courtyards and passageways. Other buildings show a mix of styles, often with Classic structures built on top of Preclassic ones.

It was here in the 1930s that part-time archaeologist Tatiana Proskouriakoff deciphered the Mayan hieroglyphic system, recognizing patterns between the glyphs and certain dates, events and people. Although her theory played out when she tested it at nearby Yaxchilán, it was not accepted by the wider archaeological community until the 1960s.

The original name of the city, Yokib' ('the entrance'), is believed to be a reference to a large cenote found in the center of the city.

## RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

Visitors to sites deep in the Petén forest need to be very conscious of their impact on the ecological balance. Observing a few basic guidelines and insisting your guides do the same will help protect this area. All nonorganic garbage should be carried out, human waste and toilet paper should be buried in a pit at least 15cm deep and 100m from a water source, and only dead wood should be used to build fires.

One issue of particular concern is the use of pack animals on these trips. Generally, a four-person expedition (two tourists, a guide and a cook) requires four mules or horses. Mules eat copious amounts of sapodilla tree leaves; nearly an entire mature tree will be stripped of its branches to feed four mules for one day. Multiply this over a three-day trip with four paying participants, and you begin to see the scope of the problem. If you can avoid using mules on your trip, do so. Otherwise, inquire about alternative food sources for the animals.

Another nagging problem is mud. There's lots of it between May and November (halfway up a mule's leg is the norm), and machete-wielding guides hacking trails around mud patches kills new forest growth. Walking around a mud patch also makes it bigger. Hiking in these muddy conditions is no treat anyway, so try to arrange your trip for the dry season.

Trekking in El Petén in a responsible way gets really tricky when tourists contract freelance guides. While the Comité guides are required to do courses pertaining to responsible tourism, independent guides won't necessarily adhere to ecotouristic ideals. Indeed, they're often unaware of rudimentary concepts of low-impact travel. In this case, it is up to you, the traveler, to ensure that basic tenets of responsible tourism are respected.

**LOCAL VOICES: NORA LÓPEZ – LABORATORY DIRECTOR, THE MIRADOR PROJECT**

One of the major archaeological excavations being undertaken in Guatemala is at El Mirador, a remote Mayan site in El Petén (see p306). This megacity has been buried in jungle for centuries, and its importance is only just starting to be understood. We caught up with Ms López to find out how the dig's going.

**What are you working on at the moment?**

It's the rainy season now, so pretty much the whole team is back in the lab, classifying and cataloging finds, looking for connections and similarities, establishing timelines. I'm also involved in bibliographical research.

**What's special about El Mirador?**

For one thing, it's huge. We're still mapping, but it looks like El Mirador occupied 23 sq km. Around the city were others like Nakké and Florida, connected by stone 'highways' that are up to 23km long. Altogether, we're looking at an area of around 2000 sq km. Another is that, because there wasn't much water near the site, hydraulic irrigation systems were used to grow crops needed to feed so many workers.

**What's a typical day like for an archaeologist?**

It depends. In the field, there's plenty of digging, note taking, and classifying. That all goes into the field report. Back in the lab, we wash everything and reclassify it. We use pottery finds to establish dating, so we classify it by color and material, frequency and chronology.

**What's the most exciting thing you've found?**

Plenty of little things. Small things contribute to the big picture. I'm interested in bones, so I like finding burials, even though it implies more work. Once a body is uncovered we have to work around the clock or else it can get damaged by weather or stolen by thieves.

**How do you see the relation between tourism and archaeology?**

It can be excellent, but it has to be managed. What you see at more popular sites is a lot of damage – crowds trampling things and not understanding what they're looking at. If you keep the groups small, visitors can be informed and educated. Mass tourism doesn't really do anything but provide photo opportunities.

Due to its remote location and the drug smuggling activity in the area, it's neither easy nor wise to visit Piedras Negras on your own. Martsam Travel (see p274) in Flores, Monkey Eco Tours, operating out of the Ni'tun Ecolodge (see p284) in San Andrés and Maya Expeditions (see p81) in Guatemala City can all organize trips here. The cheapest way to do it is to make your way to Bethel independently, then organize a tour with the Posada Maya (see p299).

**El Zotz**

Completely unrestored and barely excavated, the large site of El Zotz ('bat' in many Mayan languages) occupies its own *biotopo* abutting the Tikal National Park. The three major temples here are all covered in soil and moss, but you can scramble to the top of the tallest, the Pirámide del Diablo, for views of Tikal's temples, 24km to the west. If you're here around dusk, you'll see where the place gets its name, as thousands of bats come pouring out of nearby caves.

Tour operators in Flores (see p274) and El Remate (see p286) offer jeep/horse/trekking tours here, often incorporating Tikal – see those sections for details. Coming independently, it's a 30km (five-hour) trek (with the possibility of a ride in a *xate* truck) from Cruce Dos Aguadas, which is connected to Santa Elena by bus. You can also take the longer route from Uaxactún (p296). Camping is permitted near the site – talk to the guards at the Cecon station when you arrive and bring all supplies with you.

**Río Azul**

This medium-sized site (its population is believed to have peaked at around 5000) is located in the Parque Nacional Mirador-Río Azul, up near the corner where the Belize, Guatemala and Mexico borders meet. Once an independent city, it fell under the domain of Tikal in the early Classic period and became a key trading post for cacao from the Caribbean on its way to Tikal and Central Mexico. The city was overrun in 530 AD by

forces from Calakmul, then regained by Tikal during its resurgence in the late Classic era before being finally destroyed by the Puuc Maya from the Yucatán.

There are over 350 structures here, but most notable are the tombs, with vibrant red glyphs painted inside, as well as three round altars, with carvings depicting ritual executions.

Looting reached a frenzy point here during the 1960s and '70s – international treaties banning the trafficking in Mayan artifacts were precipitated, in part, by the volume of ceramics and other objects stolen from Río Azul – one archaeological team returned to the site after the rainy season to find 150 trenches dug in their absence.

We can only guess at the full extent of the treasures carted away, but some of the documented losses include jade masks, murals, pendants and other carved objects.

The tallest temple, AIII, a smaller replica of those found at Tikal, stands 47m high, high enough to give a panoramic view out over the jungle canopy.

There's no public transportation anywhere near Río Azul. If you've got a 4WD, you could make the trip in as little as five hours from Uaxactún. Walking or on horseback, it's more like four days. Tours here leave from Flores, Uaxactún and El Remate.

### El Mirador

This archaeological site is buried within the furthest reaches of the Petén jungle, just 7km south of the Mexican border. A visit here involves an arduous jungle trek of at least five days and four nights (it's about 60km each way), with no facilities or amenities aside from what you carry in and what can be rustled from the forest. The trip departs from a cluster of houses called Carmelita – the end of the line.

The metropolis at El Mirador, dated to 150 BC to AD 150, contains the largest cluster of buildings in any single Mayan site, among which is the biggest pyramid ever built in the Mayan world: El Tigre. This pyramid measures 18 stories high (more than 60m) and its base covers 18,000 sq meters – six times the area of Tikal's biggest structure, Templo IV. El Tigre's twin, La Danta (the Tapir), though technically smaller, soars higher because it's built on a rise. From atop La Danta, some 105m above the forest floor, virgin canopy stretches into the distance as far as your eye can see. The green bumps hovering on the horizon are other pyramids still buried under dense jungle. There are hundreds of buildings at El Mirador, but a major ongoing excavation has never been tackled, so almost everything is still hidden beneath the jungle. You'll have to use your imagination to picture this city that at its height spread over 16 sq km and supported tens of thousands of citizens.

Scholars are still figuring out why and how El Mirador thrived (there are few natural resources and no water sources save for the reservoirs built by ingenious, ancient engineers) and what led to its abandonment. It was certainly the greatest Mayan city of the Preclassic era.

Trips to El Mirador can include a couple of extra days to see Nakbé, another Preclassic site 13km southeast of El Mirador (and joined to it by an ancient causeway) and other sites. Trekking to El Mirador is not for the faint of heart. Conditions are rudimentary: there are no toilets, beds, cold beverages or bathrooms. The ants, ticks and mosquitoes never relent, the mud is knee-deep and the hiking is strenuous and dirty. That said, folks who make this journey will never forget it.