

# La Moskitia



The Moskitia, which spans most of eastern Honduras and across into Nicaragua, is the largest rainforest in Central America, indeed, the largest north of the Amazon Basin. It is a vast area of tropical rainforest, tortuous rivers and huge saltwater lagoons. It abounds with wildlife – monkeys, crocodiles and tapirs – and is also abundant with bird life, from toucans and macaws to egrets and herons. Manatees and jaguars are present too, though are very difficult to spot.

Five different ethnic groups – three indigenous, two of more recent extraction – have homes and communities in the Moskitia. Most live alongside the lagoons and rivers and live by fishing and small-time agriculture.

Travelers have long been drawn to the Moskitia's pristine natural beauty, cultural uniqueness and off-the-beaten-path quality. Fortunately, getting here is now easier, with regular flights and a more predictable overland route. Travel here hasn't changed much though – there are few roads, so you'll be getting around by boat, by foot, and by air, if you've got the nerve.

Visiting the Moskitia is not cheap, whether you come with a tour or on your own. Gas is almost twice as expensive here as in the rest of Honduras – over US\$5 per gallon at last check – and NGOs have worked hard to insure guides and boatmen are paid competitive wages.

All told, this is a true highlight in Honduras and one of the last frontiers in Central America, a region whose ecological riches have been severely trampled. Environmentalists say that La Moskitia offers one last chance to get it right. And gliding down the river in a dugout canoe, past mud houses backed by vine-heavy trees, you can't help but hope they – we – do.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Take a three-day hike up **Pico Dama** (p291) into the heart of the Reserva de la Biósfera del Río Plátano.
- Release baby turtles on a moonlit beach with the **Turtle Preservation Program** (p287) in the Garífuna village of Plaplaya.
- Paddle 10 days down the **Río Patuca** (p297) through the Tawahka indigenous reserve to the Caribbean Sea.
- Forget Venice – try a **pipante ride up the Río Plátano** (p291) instead. Taking poling canoes to new extremes, you'll travel upriver, through rapids, in search of wildlife and petroglyphs.
- Visit quiet **Miskito villages** like Rais Ta (p284) and Belén (p285), where children learn to swim before they walk and the soccer field doubles as an airstrip.





## HISTORY

La Moskitia was inhabited as many as 3000 years ago by Chibcha-speaking Amerindians who migrated here from present-day South America. Today's Pech and Tawahka indigenous groups are descended from those early migrants, and speak variations of Chibcha dialects. The pre-Hispanic population reached its peak between AD 800 and 1200, around the time groups to the west, especially the Maya, were in near collapse.

Christopher Columbus was the first European to reach La Moskitia, on his fourth and last voyage in 1502. Sailing east from the Bay Islands, he landed briefly near the mouth of a large river – which one is unknown, though it was likely the Patuca or the Sico – before rounding the cape (which he dubbed Cabo Gracias a Dios, or 'Thank God Cape', reportedly after weathering a fierce storm). But the unforgiving terrain and environment of La Moskitia prevented any serious exploration for over a century. A cursory exploration in 1564 was not followed until 1607 and 1609, and the first

church – the point of early expeditions – was not founded until 1610. However, that church, and another founded a year later, were both sacked and burned, and their occupants killed, by Tawahka Indians. It took another 80 years for Spanish missionaries (supported by Spanish troops) to gain a foothold in the jungle.

In the 1700s, Spanish influence waned as that of English pirates (and some Dutch and French) rose. The slow-moving Spanish galleons laden with precious metals and raw materials made easy targets for pirates, who found refuge in La Moskitia's lagoons and river inlets. The English made little attempt to convert the indigenous people to Christianity – one supposes the pirates were not themselves big church-goers – but rather formed alliances with them against the Spanish. In fact, it was arming one group with muskets that gave rise to the term *mosqueteros* and eventually 'Miskito' and 'Moskitia'.

Britain maintained control over eastern Honduras until 1786, when, through a treaty with Spain, it essentially traded the

Moskitia for present-day Belize. But having gained nominal control of the territory, Spain did little to exert any real influence there. The status of the colony was in constant flux: the Central American Federation came and went, and a meddlesome British government briefly recognized the Moskitia as a sovereign nation, before Honduras finally became an independent republic in 1838. Through it all, life in La Moskitia stayed relatively unchanged. Moravian missionaries began arriving in the late 1920s, setting up schools, clinics and churches. The Honduran government didn't take up true civic responsibility in La Moskitia until the 1950s, around the same time indigenous rights organizations began forming to focus on land rights and other issues.

In the 1980s, the Moskitia was used as a base for the Contra war, the US-supported effort to unseat the new Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Puerto Lem-pira had major military installations, as did many of the small border towns. Countless indigenous people, especially Miskitos, whose traditional lands spanned the Honduran–Nicaraguan border, were killed and displaced during the conflict.

## PEOPLE

With five distinct ethnic groups – Miskito, Pech, Garífuna, Tawahka, and ladino – the Moskitia is arguably the most culturally diverse region in the country. The single largest ethnic group in the region is the Miskito, whose present members arose from a mixing of a landed indigenous group and escaped African slaves, and later English

pirates. Historically, they occupied areas along the coast and around the Moskitia's three large lagoons, as well as along the Río Coco. They form the majority in all of the towns frequented by travelers, including Brus Laguna, Belén, Rais Ta, Ahuas, Wampusirpi, and a large part of Las Marías.

Another group, the Pech, once occupied large parts of what is now the Reserva de la Biósfera del Río Plátano, and as far south as the Sierra de Agalta mountains in Olancho and west to the Valle de Aguán. However, a longtime rivalry with the Miskitos along the coast and encroachment by ladino farmers in Olancho squeezed the Pech into the middle reaches of the Río Plátano, where they remain today. Even Las Marías, once a vital Pech village, now has a large number of Miskito residents thanks to migration and intermarriage. In 1990, about 40 Pech people moved from Olancho to Las Marías, in part to reestablish Pech presence in the area.

Even more isolated than the Pech are the Tawahka, who live mostly along the Río Patuca and number about 1000 people (see p296). They, too, once controlled large portions of present-day Moskitia, but are today concentrated in just five communities, the largest being Krausirpe, in the Tawahka Asangni Biosphere Reserve. The Tawahka were the last of the indigenous groups in the Moskitia to be contacted by Europeans, and fiercely resisted their intrusion. The first two missionary expeditions to the region, in 1610 and 1611, both ended when Tawahka Indians attacked and killed the interlopers and the soldiers accompanying them.

### LOCAL LORE: SEARCH FOR THE WHITE CITY

In 1519, Hernán Cortés first heard reports of La Ciudad Blanca (The White City), a glorious city named after elaborately carved white stones that were said to exist there. Stories of its immeasurable wealth in gold spurred Cortés to find the city, but, hidden deep in the jungles of La Moskitia, he never did.

Many Pech legends refer to The White City as the birthplace of gods and a city filled with golden idols. The basis of countless expeditions, these stories have been fueled by 'sightings' as early as 1544, when Cristóbal de Pedraza, the then bishop of Honduras, wrote to the king of Spain to tell him about an impressive metropolis that he had seen from a mountaintop in La Moskitia; his guides assured him, he related, that nobles there ate from plates of gold.

In modern times, pilots and hunters have reported seeing or stumbling upon this elusive city; expeditions to find it have increased considerably since the 1940s because of this. Many treasure-hunters, in fact, claim to have already discovered it. No proof or directional coordinates, however, have ever been revealed.

The Moskitia has a small number of Garífuna people, living along the coast in the towns of Plaplaya, Batalla and Irióna. Descended from Carib indigenous people and African slaves on the island of St Vincent, and then deported by Britain to Roatán in the late 1700s, the Garífuna did not reach the Moskitia until the turn of the 20th century. Nevertheless, Plaplaya is considered one of the 'purest' Garífuna villages in Honduras, isolated from many modern-day intrusions.

Ladinos, considered 'mainstream' Hondurans, have moved to La Moskitia in ever-increasing numbers, mostly drawn by the availability of land for farming and ranching. A great deal of controversy surrounds ladino occupation of Moskitia lands, especially in areas traditionally used by the region's indigenous groups. Environmentalists worry, too, that ladino clear cutting, to make room for cattle, is contributing to the erosion of the region's rivers and leading to flooding downstream.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

As in any large swath of rainforest or wilderness, travel in the Moskitia has a unique set of difficulties, dangers and annoyances.

First and foremost, never venture into the rainforest without a guide. Trails are faint and overgrown, and even experienced hikers can become hopelessly lost within a matter of minutes.

Traveling at night (by boat, truck or foot) can be dangerous, so avoid trying to do too much in any one day. Boats can break down, paths can be washed out, rivers can become impassable: you should always leave yourself several hours of daylight as a cushion in case problems arise. Remember that guides and boatmen – eager to please – may go along with an overly ambitious plan, assuming you understand the risks.

Likewise, avoid crossing Laguna de Ibans and especially Brus Laguna and Laguna de Caratasca late in the day – afternoon winds create large waves that can swamp or sink a boat. Though such incidents are rare, it's even rarer for boats to have lifejackets or radios in case of an emergency. Better to plan ahead so your crossings are in the morning, even if it means having to wake up extra early or 'losing' an afternoon along the way.

And remember, all plans in the Moskitia are provisional. Planes, boats, trucks and buses can all be delayed for hours or days. On the same note, you may well find you want more time than you planned for. Build flexibility into your itinerary to account for unexpected changes of either sort. Changing tickets or plans is usually fairly easy, as all the towns are connected by radio.

## TOURS

A prearranged tour is definitely worth considering, especially if your time (or Spanish speaking ability) is limited. Tours have the advantage of having all the transport and lodging planned ahead of time, something that can take a lot of time and energy for indy travelers. Most outfits offering tours to the Moskitia have good guides and track records – it's rare to get suckered into a total fiasco. The cost is higher, though not by as much as you might think. Going independently can be a terrific experience if you have the time, language skills, and, to a certain degree, the money, to take things as they come. Otherwise, a tour can take the guesswork out of going to the Moskitia, letting you sit back and enjoy it.

Recommended tour operators include the following.

**Jungle River Tours** (☎ 440 1268; [www.jungleriverlodge.com](http://www.jungleriverlodge.com); Banana Republic Guesthouse, Av Morazán, La Ceiba) Across from Hospital D'Antoni, offers multiday hiking and rafting trips.

**La Moskitia Ecoaventuras** (☎ 440 2124; [www.honduras.com/moskitia](http://www.honduras.com/moskitia); Hotel Plaza Caracol, Av 14 de Julio, La Ceiba) Run by Jorge Salverri, an expert birder and one of the most knowledgeable guides to the Moskitia. Tours range from five to 12 days and are cheap, though sometimes rough around the edges.

**La Ruta Moskitia** (☎ 443 1276; [www.larutamoskitia.com](http://www.larutamoskitia.com); La Ceiba) A nonprofit tourism initiative started by Rare Conservation and selected for the 'Green Travel' list of *Condé Nast Traveler* in 2006. Sort of 'tour-lite': you don't travel with a dedicated guide, but transportation is prearranged and you are told who to ask for in each town. Every penny goes to the guides, guesthouse owners and boatmen you use. The website includes a feature for people looking for others to form a group.

**Mesoamérica Travel** (☎ 557 8447; 8a Calle 709 at 32a Av NO, Col Juan Lindo, San Pedro Sula) Recommended among more upscale outfits.

**MC Tours** (☎ 551 8639; [www.mctours-honduras.com](http://www.mctours-honduras.com); Col Tara Local No 3 Adobe 30, San Pedro Sula) Another upscale outfit.

**Omega Tours** (☎ 440 0334; www.omegatours.hn; Omega Jungle Lodge, Calle a Yaruca Km 9) German owned and operated, offering highly recommended multiday rafting trips down the Plátano and Patuka rivers. It's located along the Río Cangrejal on the way to the town of Yaruca.

**Turtle Tours** (Caribbean Travel; ☎ 414 5368; www.turtle-tours.com; Av San Isidro, La Ceiba) German-run tour operator with an established reputation for small groups and professional service.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

All flights to the Moskitia depart from La Ceiba. At the time of research, Aerolíneas Sosa and Atlantic Airlines had daily flights to Puerto Lempira (US\$100 one way), while only Sosa flew to Brus Laguna (US\$90 one way) and only on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. There was no scheduled service to Palacios, though SAMI occasionally connects to and from La Ceiba through there.

**Aerolíneas Sosa** (☎ in La Ceiba 443 1894, in Puerto Lempira 433 6432, in Brus Laguna 433 8042; www.aerolineassosa.com; Av San Isidro btwn 8a & 9a Calles, La Ceiba; 🕒 7am-5pm Mon-Fri)

**Atlantic Airlines** (☎ in La Ceiba 440 2343; in Puerto Lempira 433 6016; www.atlanticairlines.com.ni; 11a Calle near Av República, La Ceiba; 🕒 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

**SAMI** (☎ in La Ceiba 442 2565, in Brus Laguna 433 8031)

### Overland

From the north coast, there are two slightly different land routes into the Moskitia, both ending at the sister communities of Rais Ta and Belén, from where you can arrange trips deeper into the rainforest. While Tocoa is the 'official' departure point of both routes, it's possible to make the trip in one long day from either La Ceiba or Trujillo.

From La Ceiba, there are ordinary buses to Tocoa from the main bus terminal from 4:30am to 5:30pm (US\$2.50, 2½ hours, every 30 minutes) while direct buses on their way to Trujillo pass the COTUC office on the main highway from 8:15am to 7pm (US\$3.75, 1½ hours, every 45 minutes). Though it takes longer, the ordinary bus gets you to Tocoa much earlier and is recommended. See p222 for more info.

From Trujillo, take the 5:45am bus as far as Corocito (US\$2, 30 to 45 minutes, every 45 minutes), where you can transfer

to either of the two options coming from Tocoa (see following).

Before setting off, check out **La Ruta Moskitia** (www.larutamoskitia.com) for up-to-date land and air information.

### VIA BATALLA

At the Tocoa bus terminal, ask for the next *paila a Batalla* – a modified pickup headed to Batalla, a small Garífuna town that was badly damaged in November 2005 by flooding on the Río Sico, caused by tropical storm Gamma and exacerbated by clear-cutting upstream (US\$21.50, four to five hours). They leave hourly from 7am to noon every day; try to get the early truck to be sure to reach Belén and Rais Ta before dark. You can catch the same trucks in Corocito, if you started in Trujillo.

At Batalla, *colectivos* (shared boats) usually wait for the arrival of the trucks. The boats make many stops – tell the driver you want to go to Rais Ta or Belén (US\$8, one to two hours). If you catch the 7am pickup in Tocoa, you should arrive by early afternoon.

This is the 'primary' route, but is occasionally suspended when storms wash out the roads into Batalla. In that case, the route via Irióna is a good alternative.

### VIA IRIONA

From Tocoa, big yellow buses with 'Tocoa-Irióna' painted on the front leave the bus terminal every morning, starting between 6:30am and 7:30am. The schedule varies so you'll have to ask when the next one leaves. The bus passes through Corocito – take the 5:45am bus from Trujillo to catch the first one. The bus to Irióna takes between four and six hours (US\$5). Arriving in Irióna around noon, get off the bus at the main pier and catch the next speedboat to Belén (US\$19, two hours).

The speedboats go via the ocean, instead of the lagoon, and may be cancelled if conditions are too windy or choppy. In that case, there's an alternative route via the inland channels. From Irióna, hire a motor boat to the town of Tocamacho (per person US\$5.50, 45 minutes). From there, you'll walk about an hour to the town of Grasspis, where you can catch another motor boat to Palacios (US\$11, 1½ hours). Finally, take a boat the rest of the way to Belén or Rais Ta

(*colectivo* US\$8, two to three hours; private US\$43, 1½ hours). The problem with this option is you may get stuck spending the night in Palacios, which can be unpleasant and even somewhat dangerous, so consider overnighting in Iriona and continuing the next morning.

### RETURNING

To return, an early morning boat – 3am to 4am – picks up passengers in Belén, Rais Ta, Cocobila, and Ibans daily. You can get off at Batalla (US\$8, one to two hours) for a 6am truck to Tocoa, or continue to Palacios (US\$8, one to two hours) and catch the 6am speedboat to Iriona, where the bus to Tocoa will be waiting. Either way, get off at Corocito if you're headed to Trujillo, or go all the way to Tocoa to catch an onward bus to La Ceiba.

### GETTING AROUND

Different seasons present different challenges in terms of getting around the Moskitia. The rainy season is probably the most difficult, especially November through January, as the rivers get swollen with debris and the trails and roads get muddy. Plus, getting caught in the rain while hiking or on a five-hour boat ride is no fun. During the driest months (February to April) some rivers may get too shallow in places to navigate.

### Air

Within the Moskitia, **SAMI** (✈ in Brus Laguna 433 8031, in Puerto Lempira 433 6016) has semi-regular flights to and among all the main towns: Puerto Lempira, Brus Laguna, Palacios, Belén/Rais Ta, Ahuas, Wampusirpi, and Barra Patuca. Using tiny propeller planes, these flights are not for the faint hearted, but can be a convenient way to cut your travel time. That said, the flights do not follow a regular schedule – planes arrive and depart any time between 7am and 4pm, with no advance notice, and you may end up waiting a day (or more) for your flight. Fares vary widely, but average from US\$30 to US\$60 each way. SAMI is at the Atlantic Airlines office in Puerto Lempira.

### Boat

Most transportation in and around the Moskitia is by boat. Way upriver, the most common boat is a *pipantes*, a flat-bottomed

boat made from a single tree trunk that's propelled by a pole or paddle. However, for longer trips or those on the lagoons, a *cayuco*, a wood planked boat with an out-board motor, is more commonly used.

There are two types of service: *expreso* is like a private taxi and can be fairly expensive depending on the route; and *colectivo*, which is like a bus following a set route picking up passengers as it goes. Prices are somewhat more manageable on *colectivo* services; common routes include Río Plátano to Brus Laguna (US\$11, 1½ hours) or Batalla to Rais Ta (US\$8, one to two hours).

### Truck

A single dirt road along the Laguna de Ibans runs from the town of Ibans west through Cocobila, Rais Ta, and Belén, and east to the town of Río Plátano (at the mouth of the same). Pickup trucks ply the route several times a day; the entire trip takes about an hour and costs US\$2.75.

## WESTERN MOSKITIA

The western portion of La Moskitia is no longer the major staging area for trips into the rainforest that it once was – that torch has passed to Rais Ta/Belén and Brus Laguna. Palacios is still the second largest town in the region, but air traffic has all but ended and the town has grown steadily less charming and more dodgy. With regular flights to Brus Laguna and improvements in the land route that make getting deeper into La Moskitia in a single day relatively easy, many people either skip this region altogether or just pass through quickly.

### IRIONA

This quiet Garífuna village occupies a picturesque stretch of coastline, with palm trees growing amid a loose collection of homes, some made of cement, others of traditional mud walls with thatched roofs. Halfway along the overland route to/from the Moskitia, most travelers spend only the time they need to catch an onward boat or bus from here.

### Sleeping & Eating

Iriona has just one hotel and it's pretty dodgy. The rooms are dark and the bathrooms don't

## THE MISKITO

The Miskito indigenous group – the namesake of La Moskitia, aka the Mosquito Coast – occupies coastal and inland areas in the state of Gracias a Dios and parts of Olancho. Although they are arguably the most ‘modernized’ of the ethnic groups in the Moskitia, most essentially still subsist as they have for centuries, through small-time agriculture and fishing.

How the Miskito came to be is not fully understood. Fairly dark skinned, the Miskito are almost certainly descended from an as-yet-unknown indigenous group and escaped or shipwrecked African slaves. The name definitely did not come from ‘mosquito’ as Paul Theroux led us all to believe, although its true origin is disputed. There was an early king named Miskut, and some argue Miskito is derived from a phrase meaning ‘people who follow Miskut’. A more widely accepted theory is that it comes from the English word ‘musket,’ which the Miskito were given (and quickly mastered) by British meddlers seeking to erode Spanish control of mainland Honduras. In fact, Miskitos probably have a fair amount of British blood, too. Some 30% of Miskito words come from English, including *landing*, *kitchen*, *work*, and the days of the week. Some say Miskito culture is so mixed – indigenous, African, English – that it lacks a core identity. Yet it may be their multi-ethnicity that has made the Miskito so well prepared to adapt to the many challenges and changes they face.

Traditional Miskito territory straddles the Nicaragua–Honduras border, marked by the Río Coco. Through the colonial and early independence periods – even to modern times – the Miskito passed back and forth freely, whether for family, fishing or farming. The border became intensely militarized, however, following the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, when US-funded Contras launched incursions from camps just across the border. The CIA recruited untold numbers of Nicaraguan Miskitos as guides, translators, foot soldiers, even platoon leaders, while the Sandinista government killed and imprisoned Miskitos they suspected of colluding with the Contras. The US seized upon the deaths as evidence that the Sandinistas would kill their own people to stay in power. Whether Miskito deaths amounted to a massacre, as the US claimed, or were ordinary casualties of war exaggerated by American propaganda, as the Sandinistas said, may never be officially determined.

Miskito people on both sides of the border have returned to a more ordinary existence, still surviving largely on fishing, small-time farming, and, increasingly, tourism. In both countries, but especially Honduras, Miskito men have been drawn to quick money as lobster divers, but hundreds have been crippled or killed by decompression sickness, stemming from a lack of proper training and the failure of boat owners and the government to enforce basic safety regulations.

appear to have been scrubbed in, well, ever. Better to stay at **Hospedaje Don Tino** (r US\$5) located in San José de la Punta, a friendly Garífuna village a kilometer or so west of Iriona. Located by the soccer field, the hotel has very simple but adequate rooms and a small **comedor** (mains US\$2-5; ☑ breakfast, lunch & dinner). It’s operated by the man who drives the Tocoa–Iriona bus, and he can probably drop you off there if it looks like you’ll have to spend the night.

### Getting There & Away

The main *muelle* (pier) is at the mouth of the canal, where it empties into the ocean. Arriving on the bus from Tocoa, ask the driver to drop you off right at the pier, since you pass it before entering Iriona proper. See p281 for more details.

## PALACIOS

Palacios was once the hub of travel into and out of La Moskitia, a vibrant Miskito town and the best jumping-off point for trips into the Reserva de la Biósfera del Río Plátano. It is no longer any of those things, and is in fact an increasingly dangerous place. Palacios has long been an important layover for South American drug traffickers, especially those from Colombia. At one time, major players had homes here, and huge speedboats moored alongside local canoes were a peculiar but not uncommon sight. Ironically, the situation worsened – at least for local people – when anti-drug efforts drove out the cartels, which at least had had a stabilizing influence. The city and region are still a major drug corridor, but Palacios has developed a distinctly tense and lawless

atmosphere (not to mention very loud), as smaller brokers jockey for dominance.

Unfortunately, the overland route to or from the Moskitia sometimes involves stopping or transferring boats in Palacios; if the weather or boat schedules don't cooperate, you may even have to stay the night here. This possibility should not deter travelers from visiting La Moskitia or from taking the overland route. As in other somewhat dodgy places, only a fraction of people have any problems, and most incidents can be traced to unnecessary risks, like staying out late or hitting up the local bars (or 'businessmen').

### Sleeping & Eating

The best and safest lodging in town is the **Hotel Río Tinto** (☎ 966 6465; r US\$8), located near the old airstrip. Rooms have private bathrooms and a view of the lagoon. The hotel is run by Doña Ana, a friendly and knowledgeable host who can help guests with travel arrangements, as well as day trips to the coastal Garífuna village of Batalla. Another option is the nearby **Hotel La Moskitia** (☎ 978 7397; r US\$21), more modern but with a somewhat dodgier clientele. Both hotels have small restaurants.

### Getting There & Away

**SAMI** (☎ in La Ceiba 442 2565, in Brus Laguna 433 8031) is the only airline with services to and from Palacios. There is no regular schedule, so it's essential to call or radio in advance. You may have to wait a day or more for a flight; there are more regular services from Belén and Brus Laguna.

*Lancha* (boat) is the most common mode of transport in and out of Palacios. There are several trips per day from Palacios to Belén, and at least one early morning speedboat trip to Irióna, from where you can catch the bus to Tocoa and Trujillo.

## AROUND LAGUNA DE IBANS

Laguna de Ibans is the smallest of the three lagoons in the Moskitia, and yet the one with the most tourist infrastructure. Along the low narrow strip of land that separates the lagoon from the ocean is a string of

classic coastal villages, comprising simple wood homes built on stilts, separated by patches of sandy grass or small plots of yucca and beans, and connected by small footpaths. Each village is a little different from the next, not only ethnically – Plaplaya is Garífuna, the rest are not – but also in look and feel. In each town, though, an easy atmosphere prevails, the kind that only seems possible in towns where everyone knows everyone else.

### RAIS TA

Everywhere you turn in this quiet Miskito village there's an image worth remembering: narrow dirt paths beneath a canopy of high leafy trees; the airstrip used as the soccer field (or is it the other way around?); and wood houses, most on stilts, scattered across the strip of land between the lagoon and the ocean.

### Sights & Activities

A few different excursions can be arranged in Rais Ta. These are by no means a *National Geographic* jungle expedition; they're mellow and easy, a chance to see some rainforest, talk with the guide, and get your shoes dirty. The Raista Eco Lodge (opposite) is the best place to make arrangements, whether or not you're a guest there. Visiting early morning is best, not only for animal spotting, but because by afternoon the lagoon gets windy and rough, making your return journey tougher (and a whole lot wetter).

A popular half-day trip is to **Paru Creek** (per person US\$10). Taking a *cayuco* across the lagoon, a guide leads you on a mild winding hike through the rainforest, checking out the multitudinous varieties of trees, flowers and insects. Two troops of howler monkeys live in this area, but spotting them is never guaranteed. You end up at Paru Creek, where the *cayuco* will be waiting. Shedding everything but your swimsuit – you may want to keep your shoes on too – you then float down the creek in inner tubes, the water clear and cold, the canopy swaying overhead, before returning to Rais Ta. Similar options are the **Brans Jungle Hike** and a trip to the community of **Banaka**, where you'll see ancient petroglyphs.

A new **butterfly farm** was in the works at the time of research, to replace one that



closed in 2003 due to a lack of funding. RARE helped organize a loan, and the assistance of the owner of Enchanted Wings butterfly farm in Copán, to reopen the farm.

### Sleeping & Eating

None of the guesthouses in Rais Ta have telephones, so it's all but impossible to make a reservation from outside La Moskitia. Within La Moskitia, ask your hotel owner to call by radio to the next town to let them know you're coming. All that said, it's very rare that every single room is filled, especially in Rais Ta. But if so, arrangements can surely be made with local families – ask one of the guesthouse owners for help.

**Raista Eco Lodge** (r with shared bathroom per person US\$10) Opened in January 2006, this new eight-bedroom wood lodge is run by Doña Elma, whose late husband, Eddie Bodden, was a longtime community leader and pioneer of eco-tourism in La Moskitia. Bodden drowned in a tragic boat accident on the lagoon in May 2005, but the new lodge is evidence that his family is taking up the torch. Rooms are rustic, but well built and comfortable, with sturdy beds, mosquito nets, and small porches; older rooms may also be available (per person US\$4 to US\$5). Some of the latrine toilets are gag-inducing, but there are several to choose from. You may encounter tour groups here, as it's the only place with enough rooms to house them. Doña Elma also cooks large tasty meals (US\$2 to US\$4).

**Doña Exy** (road to airstrip; r with shared bathroom per person US\$5) A huge bougainvillea bush greets visitors as they enter the humble grounds of this *hospedaje* (small hotel). The rooms themselves are basic – wood-plank walls with a tin roof and squishy beds – but clean. Meals are served upon request (mains US\$2.25). The on-site generator, which runs from 6pm to 9pm nightly, is a plus.

**Doña Mendilia** (on airstrip; r with shared bathroom per person US\$3) A beautiful and well-tended garden is the highlight of this huge old place, the 2nd floor of which houses the guestrooms. Each room has a foam bed with clean linens and is divided from the others by paper-thin walls. Located right on the airstrip, the rickety balcony has great views of the puddle jumpers making their high-speed landings just a few feet away –

very cool in a please-don't-crash-into-us sort of way.

**Doña Cecilia** (road to beach; r with shared bathroom per person US\$6) A cleared grassy lot with two simple buildings – Doña Cecilia's home and the guesthouse – this place has a handful of rooms for visitors. Accommodations are no-frills, but then again, that's pretty much standard around here. Meals, unfortunately, are not offered.

### Getting There & Away

There is a landing strip/soccer field at the eastern end of town that is the dividing point between Rais Ta and Belén. Half-way down one side of it is a small wood building that houses the **SAMI office** (☎ 6:30am-5pm Mon-Sat). Be sure to check in at 6.30am since flight departures change on a whim. Prepare to wait anywhere from half an hour to a day or two.

An early morning *colectivo* boat takes passengers from Rais Ta to Palacios, in time to catch the first speedboat to Irióna. For Río Plátano, a *colectivo* pickup truck passes every hour (US\$2.75, 45 minutes); another passes in the other direction at the same frequency, making stops in Cocobila, Ibans, and Plaplaya. For Brus Laguna, you can take a *colectivo* boat (US\$16, two to three hours) or hire an *expreso* (US\$80, two hours). You may have better luck finding a *colectivo* by taking the truck to Río Plátano first.

### BELÉN

Belén is essentially an extension of Rais Ta (and itself bleeds into the next town, Nuevo Jerusalén). The airstrip and tall water tower mark the division. Like its neighbor, Belén is quiet and bucolic, though more spread out and without Rais Ta's thick canopy of trees. Then again, Belén's lone lodging option is one of the area's best, and just steps from a beautiful windblown beach.

A community telephone and a couple of general stores are located a short walk from Pawanka Beach Cabins. There are no signs, but most are pretty self evident. When in doubt, locals are invariably happy to help. At some point, the town of Belén ends and Nuevo Jerusalén begins – the difference is imperceptible to most visitors, but worth mentioning as you may be directed there for services. Just keep walking – it's impossible to get lost!

The **teléfono comunitario** (community phone; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat) is in a large building, unmistakable for the antennae and satellite dishes on its roof. Rates are US\$0.25 to US\$0.50 per minute for domestic calls, US\$0.40 and up for USA and the rest of the world. Several **pulperías** (general stores; ☎ 7am-6pm Mon-Sat) sell basic groceries and snacks.

### Sights & Activities

A very nice walk – which Mario Miller of Pawanka Beach Cabins is likely to take you on as a matter of course – is from the cabins through Nuevo Jerusalén to the beach. Mario has numerous stories to tell about the town, various people and events, all in all presenting an interesting snapshot of the area. You can return via the beach, collecting shells and driftwood. Ships are often moored offshore; many are lobster ships, which Mario can also describe, having been a lobster diver himself. You can do the same trip on horseback – there's nothing quite like galloping on the beach with the wind in your hair. Ask Mario for details.

Mario can also arrange any of the hikes mentioned in Rais Ta (see p284) and has other outings in the works, including manatee-spotting and nighttime crocodile-spotting. None had been finalized at the time of research, but are worth asking about.

Most guests are treated to – or roped into, depending on your taste for these things – a bonfire on the beach with traditional music, singing and dancing by local community members. Of course, the foreigners are always pulled up to dance, usually several times over the course of the hour-long gathering. You can try feigning a sprained ankle, but it's easier to just go with the flow. The rough folksy songs, accompanied by a guitar and washboard, are the highlight of the evening. Kids often perform a dance that appears to be a Miskito version of 'London Bridge is Falling Down', which can be fun.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Pawanka Beach Cabins** (per person US\$10; meals US\$4) Too bad there are only two cabins here, because these are the nicest ones around. They're identical in design to the Yamari Cabañas outside Brus Laguna, with screen walls, mosquito nets, thick firm mattresses

and crisp linens. The ocean waves lull you to sleep at night, while Pico Baltimore, off in the distance, greets you in the morning. And Pawanka has real flush toilets and even a standup shower with shower head if you could use some creature comforts.

### Getting There & Away

A *colectivo* boat headed to Palacios passes Belén at around 3am to 3:30am (US\$8, two hours). The pier is about 10 minutes on foot to/from Pawanka Beach Cabins; the airport is about the same distance, toward Rais Ta. Mario can help arrange transport to Las Marías from here; the trip takes five to six hours (US\$190 round trip), and costs slightly more if you stay longer than two nights.

### COCOBILA

The tidiest of the towns on this stretch of coastline, Cocobila's brightly painted wood houses are spaced widely along the main road with large grassy lots between them. As you walk down the road, you can spot the ocean to one side and the lagoon to the other, as breezes push gently across the thin peninsula. There is precious little to do in Cocobila – it has none of the tourist infrastructure that other towns have – but for many travelers its refreshing change of pace is a perfectly good reason to visit. You can easily walk here and back from Belén or Rais Ta if you find yourself with a day or afternoon to kill – plan on 30 to 45 minutes walking each way – or stay a night or two in the simple *hospedajes*. The beach is scenically unkempt.

There is a basic medical clinic in town, **Clínica Privada Judith** (☎ 24hr); it is run by Judith Sandoval, a nurse trained in Tegucigalpa with over three decades of experience (her diplomas and licences are prominently displayed to prove it). Look for the green-and-white striped building on the main road.

There are two **community telephones** (per min national US\$0.50, USA US\$1.60, rest of world US\$2.15, incoming call per min US\$0.15; ☎ 7:30am-8pm Mon-Sat, noon-8pm Sun) located several hundred meters apart on the main road. One is in a private home next door to Hospedaje El Nopal (☎ 401 5060-2) and the other is at nearby Hospedaje & Comedor Ethelinda (☎ 433 8219).

## Sleeping & Eating

**Hospedaje & Comedor Ethelinda** (☎ 433 4219; per person US\$5.50) Walking from Rais Ta you'll pass this guesthouse first, comprising four very basic rooms at the back of a private home with a small comedor in front. Rooms have a single cot (you can request another to be added), wood floors, and slat windows looking onto the family's cluttered backyard. A new *servicio* (toilet) was in the works at the time of research, but until it's ready the latrine is across the street – bring a flashlight if you tend to wee in the wee hours, so to speak. The existing toilet's on a nice piece of property actually: you can see the beach through the wood slats and sea breezes keep it odor-free.

**Hospedaje El Nopal** (r US\$5.50) A couple of hundred meters further on is this small hotel with a huge nopal cactus in front – totally out of place in this tropical town, but thriving nonetheless. Rooms are clean and well kept, with cement floors, candles, even lace curtains. The latrine and shower – rainwater or well water, depending on the season – are out the back. The one big drawback here is the rock-hard beds. If no one is around when you arrive, ask for René or Ana at the wooden building across the street and just east of the hotel.

**Merendero Baltimor Payaska** (mains US\$2-3; ☎ breakfast & lunch) Across from the elementary school, this eatery is run out of a small wood-plank home. You can get a mean plate of fried chicken pretty much any day of the week. Tasty *baleadas* (flour tortillas smeared with beans and melted butter) and *pasteles* (small pastries stuffed with meat and veggies) are often served as well.

There are two *pulperías* between Hospedaje Ethelinda and Hospedaje El Nopal, both open roughly from 6am to 9pm daily.

## Getting There & Away

The nearest airport is in Belén, which you can walk to in 30 to 45 minutes. As with all the towns on this spit of land, a Palacios-bound boat passes around 3:30am (US\$8, two hours) and *colectivos* headed the other direction pass periodically through the day. Pickup trucks shuttling passengers between the towns of Ibans and Río Plátano, and points in between, pass every hour or two (US\$1 to US\$2.75).

## PLAPLAYA

pop 700

Plaplaya is Honduras' easternmost Garífuna community, a quiet disparate community spread out between the lagoon and a scenic ocean beach. Simple wood homes with thatched roofs and dirt floors are sprinkled along the narrow peninsula, connected by dirt paths that angle through small yucca plots. It is common to see women planting, harvesting, grating or compressing yucca, or in their homes standing before a hot wood-burning stove turning the flour into huge, slightly toasted, white *casabe* wafers.

Many consider Plaplaya to be the most traditional of Honduras' Garífuna villages. People here still live by fishing and yucca and banana cultivation, and have not suffered the outside encroachment or massive emigration, especially of young men, common in other communities. (Not that there is no emigration at all – many Plaplayans live and work in La Ceiba, the Bay Islands, San Pedro Sula and the United States.) The center of town has a growing problem with public drunkenness, but there are efforts afoot to ban cantinas, or to restrict them to certain hours. A visit to the turtle protection project is well worth doing, as is just walking around town and speaking with local people.

You can make national and international phone calls at **Pulpería Yohanna** (☎ 433 8221; per min domestic US\$0.10-0.45, USA US\$1, rest of world US\$2.40; ☎ 7am-noon & 1-7pm). It is located a five-minute walk west of Hospedaje Doña Sede.

## Sights & Activities

Visitors to Plaplaya should try to track down Doña Patrocinia Blanco, an extremely friendly and capable woman who lives in Barrio Berijales, west of the center. Doña Patrocinia happens *not* to be Garífuna, but moved to Plaplaya from Tegucigalpa more than 30 years ago after marrying a Garífuna man. Her house serves as the de facto visitors center, and she can help you to see (and participate in) *casabe* being made, Garífuna dancing, and the turtle project.

Plaplaya maintains a very successful **sea turtle preservation program** (☎ Feb-Sep), which brings many foreign tourists to the small town and is the source of no small amount of pride for local residents. The project was

**WHAT TO BRING**

Pack as you would for any outdoor excursion, including good shoes and lightweight rain gear. In addition, here are a few items that you'll appreciate having on any trip to the Moskitia.

**Heavy-duty plastic bags for your backpack** All that boat travel means you'll get at least one good soaking. Bring some extras to double-bag or replace ones that get torn.

**Ziploc bags** Same idea, for your camera, wallet etc.

**Wide-brimmed hat and sunscreen** You'll be spending a lot of time in an uncovered boat and the sun can be intense.

**Lightweight long-sleeve shirt and pants** Good for the sun, as well as mosquitoes.

**Insect repellent** Slather it on – mosquitoes and other buggers are active day and night.

**Flashlight and extra batteries** Most places you'll stay don't have electricity.

**Small bills** Bring more money than you think you'll need, and in small bills. It'll be a thick stack, but getting change (let alone extra money) can be impossible.

**Water bottle and purification tablets** Some guesthouses have jugs of purified water you can fill up from, but these are always good to have, especially on overnight trips in the rainforest.

**Toilet paper** You never know when you'll need it – an extra roll can go a long way.

**Malaria pills** Recommended in the Moskitia, and through the north coast of Honduras.

started in 1995 with the help of a peace corps volunteer, and protects up to 50 turtle nests every year. Four different species nest here: *caray*, *verde* (green), *caurama* (*Caretta caretta* or loggerhead) and *baula* (leatherbacks, the largest sea turtles in the world). Between February and September, travelers can accompany volunteers on nightly patrols, in search of new nests and turtles laying their eggs. The turtles are measured and the eggs removed to a large nursery, where they have 24-hour protection against other animals and poachers. In 65 days – usually between June and August – the eggs begin to hatch and visitors can help release them into the ocean. The project also goes to schools in various communities to educate children on turtle preservation. *Día de la Tortuga* (Day of the Turtle) is celebrated every year on May 22, in commemoration of the day, in 1995, when the project's first turtles were born.

There's not much to see or do outside of the nesting season, unfortunately. A sea-turtle mural at the local school is worth a peek, though.

**Sleeping & Eating**

**Hospedaje Doña Sede** (main rd; r with shared bathroom US\$6) This *hospedaje* offers three basic rooms with cement floors and a corrugated tin roof. Beds have mosquito nets and there is a generator on-site (which means rooms get electricity until 10pm) – both huge pluses. As with every hotel around, the bathroom is located in an outhouse; the

shower, in this case, is a hose with a pail. *Típica* meals are provided upon request (US\$2.25 to US\$3.25).

**Doña Vazilia** (on lagoon; r with shared bathroom per person US\$4) Just down the way from Doña Sede's place, this is a very simple, two-room structure with worn beds. The outhouse is pretty basic – prepare to hold your breath. Meals are provided upon request (US\$2.25).

**Pulpería Yohanna** (☎ 433 8221; 🕒 7am-noon & 1-7pm) A five-minute walk west of Doña Sede's, this place has a limited selection of pasta and canned foods, plus water, soda, and light snacks.

**Getting There & Away**

From almost any pier on the lagoon, you can wait for a passing collective boat to go east to Belén (US\$8, 45 minutes) or to any of the points along the way, including Ibans, Cocobila, and Rais Ta. The boat to Palacios (US\$3.25, 45 minutes) passes around 4am.

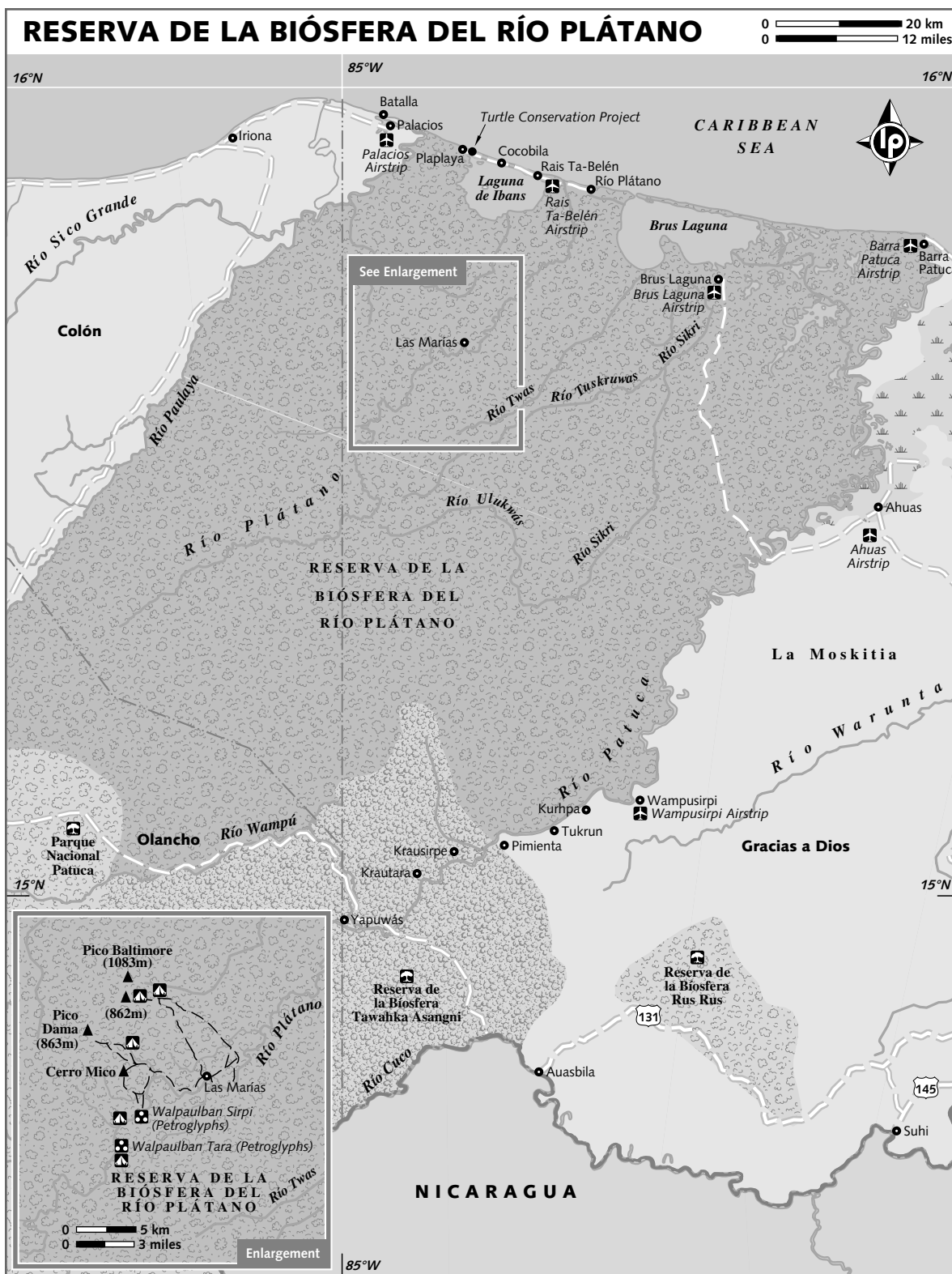
**RESERVA DE LA BIÓSFERA DEL RÍO PLÁTANO**

The Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve is surely the most magnificent nature reserve in Honduras. A World Heritage site established jointly in 1980 by Honduras and the UN, it is home to abundant bird,

mammal and aquatic life, including a number of exotic and endangered species in the river and surrounding jungle. The best time of year for travelers to visit is between November and July, and the best time for seeing birds is between February and March, when many migratory birds are in the area.

### LAS MARÍAS

Las Marías occupies a broad patch of rain-forest formed by a loop in the Río Plátano. It is a town of mixed ethnicity, with around 100 Miskito and Pech families living in relative harmony. The Pech population had declined significantly, but the arrival of several families from upriver in Olancho has



reinvigorated the normally reticent group. Men and women from both communities participate in the guide program – if your guide is Pech, they'll likely let you know.

### Orientation

Two of the main *hospedajes* – Doña Diana and Doña Rutilia – are side-by-side along the river, and are some of the first houses in Las Marías you'll reach coming upriver; many travelers stay at these places for convenience's sake. A path leads from behind Doña Diana's up a small rise to a third guesthouse – Doña Justa – that is definitely worth checking out. One of the town's two *pulperías* is a short distance from the entrance to Doña Justa's. Continuing on the path you'll reach the center of town – so to speak – a grassy and little-used airstrip with the clinic on one side and another guesthouse, Hospedaje Don Ovidio, on the other. The path meanders on, over a bridge, and past two churches and a fourth guesthouse (Don Luís), before reconnecting with the river near the put-in for *pipante* trips upriver. The path forms a loop – touted as the 'Village Trail' – that makes for a pleasant walk if you have some free time. Bring a flashlight if there's any chance you'll be out past dusk – when it gets dark it gets *dark*.

### Information

There isn't much in the way of services here. There's no running water or electricity, and there is only one phone in town (see Hospedaje Doña Rutilia, opposite). For medical emergencies, you'll receive treatment at the **Clínica de Salud** (center of town; ☎ 7:30am-3pm Mon-Fri, emergencies 24hr), which is staffed by two nurses with a meager medical supply.

### Dangers & Annoyances

Walking around town, stay on the trail and do not venture on your own into the forest – this is still the jungle, after all. At night, do not leave anything outside, even laundry. While just about everyone you meet in Las Marías is gracious and friendly, modern shoes, clothes and electronics – so far beyond the means of most residents – make tempting targets.

### Tours

Sometime after you arrive, most likely in the early evening, you will be visited by

the current *sacaguía*, or head guide. Elected every six months, the *sacaguía* is responsible for greeting newly arrived visitors, helping you determine what tours you'd like to take, and assigning the necessary guides. The *sacaguía's* fee is US\$3.75 per group per tour, which you typically pay on the spot. They'll probably also ask for a small donation for trail maintenance and the like; it's not required, but a couple of dollars is definitely appreciated.

Prices for a given tour depend on the number of guides required – the Cerro de Zapote tour requires just one guide for one day, while Pico Dama takes three guides for three days. On any tour, the lead guide is paid US\$11 per day, while secondary guides receive US\$8 per day. You are not required to pay for the guides' food or supplies, but a 10% tip is customary for good service. The cabins en route to Pico Dama and Cerro Baltimore cost US\$3.75 per person per night. Ask the owner of your guesthouse in Las Marías about stowing gear you won't need on your hike. It should be perfectly fine, but do put a lock on your rucksack, and bring along especially important items, like your passport, plane tickets and cash. This can start to add up – all told, a Pico Dama trip costs almost US\$100 – so be sure you bring enough cash, always in small bills. Neither the prices nor the number of required guides is negotiable.

Finally, 8am is the standard departure time, which, after introductions, gathering up gear, walking to the boat or the trailhead, and explaining one thing or another, can easily turn into 9am – way too late for bird- or animal-spotting. If you're up for it, tell the *sacaguía* you want to start at 5:30am or 6am; with any luck you'll be on your way no later than 7am and have a better chance of seeing creatures. See boxed text, opposite, for more details.

The only informal tour in town is the **Crocodile Tour** (per group US\$16) – a two-hour twilight walk around a crocodile-infested lagoon. Sounds a little edgy, but no one has gotten hurt so far. Plus, the photo opps are excellent. Stop by Hospedaje Doña Justa to set it up.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hospedaje Doña Justa** (center of town; r with shared bathroom per person US\$5) This is a thatch-roofed

building with several airy rooms overlooking a huge flower garden. Each room is well-kept and has decent beds with mosquito nets. There's a big patio with lots of hammocks, perfect for whiling away an afternoon with a book. Meals are prepared upon request (mains US\$2 to US\$3).

**Hospedaje Doña Rutilia** (on the river; r with shared bathroom per person US\$6) Twenty-one beds distributed in several private rooms make up this rambling guesthouse. Some beds have outright mattresses (as opposed to

foam cushions) and rooms are relatively clean. The only generator and telephone in town are here too – both pluses if you need, or just like to have, these modern conveniences. Breakfast, lunch and dinner (US\$2.50 to US\$3) are also offered.

**Hospedaje Doña Diana** (on the river; r with shared bathroom per person US\$5) Two plank wood buildings overlooking the Río Plátano house four private rooms here. Each has a couple of foam beds with mosquito nets and is kept reasonably clean. Meals can be prepared

### INTO THE WILD: TOURS FROM LAS MARÍAS

There are half a dozen different tours available from Las Marías, of varying lengths and difficulty. Some involve rigorous hiking, others only moderate; some have lots of boat time, others none at all. If you're up for it, Pico Dama and Cerro Baltimore are truly terrific hikes, and afford the best chance of seeing birds, animals, and primary forest (which is why you came, right?). Cerro Mico and Cerro de Zapote are good if you want something less strenuous. The one-day petroglyph tour is very popular, especially with groups, but involves an awful lot of boat time, especially considering you just spent five hours on a *cayuco* to get here and will spend another five to return.

**Pico Dama** (3 days; 3 guides; difficult) The toughest tour starts with a two-hour *pipante* ride upriver, then a mild three- to four-hour hike through primary and secondary forest to a cabin with simple beds and an area for camping (linens and mosquito nets can be rented in Las Marías for US\$2.25 per night). Day Two is a steep three- to four-hour hike through thick vegetation to the base of Pico Dama's distinctive rock pinnacle. Views are spectacular, and the bird and animal life abundant throughout. You return to camp that afternoon, and hike out the following day. For an even longer trip, add the second half of the Cerro Mico tour with a stop at the lower petroglyphs.

**Cerro Baltimore** (2 days; 2 guides; moderate to difficult) This hike begins from Las Marías with a rolling five- to seven-hour hike through primary and secondary forest, teeming with wildlife. You overnight at a rustic camp-house then wake up early to climb the summit – a two-hour hike with incredible views of Laguna de Ibans and the Caribbean Sea beyond. Return to Las Marías on the same day via a different route.

**Cerro Mico** (2 days; 3 guides; moderate) This tour begins as the petroglyph tours do, making your way by *pipante* and foot to Walpaulban Sirpi. Camp along the river or stay at a nearby *hospedaje*, and the next day climb Cerro Mico – which is not called 'Monkey Hill' for nothing – returning on a different path to the river where the *pipante* is waiting to take you downstream to Las Marías. You could add a day to this trip by continuing upriver to Walpaulban Tara, the second set of petroglyphs.

**Cerro de Zapote** (1 day; 1 guide; moderate) This up-and-back hike is essentially the first part of the Cerro Baltimore trip. Starting from Las Marías, you hike through fairly flat terrain, with only one steep hill before turning back. This hike has good bird-watching opportunities without having to stay the night outside of Las Marías – be sure to start early!

**Walpaulban Sirpi** (1 day; 3 guides; easy) Las Marías' most popular tour begins with a two-hour *pipante* ride upriver before disembarking at the beginning of the Kuyuzqui trail. A moderate 1½- to two-hour hike includes stopping at a new observation tower (still under construction when we hiked by) – the support beams were hand cut, and it took 50 men to carry each one up. Birds and animals are relatively rare, owing to the foot traffic and because you get here relatively late. After seeing the petroglyphs and lunching by the river, you return to Las Marías.

**Walpaulban Tara** (2 days; 3 guides; easy) Start out as the Walpaulban Sirpi tour does, but rather than return, camp or stay the night at the nearby *hospedaje*. The next day is similar, continuing upriver in the *pipante*, with short hikes along the way. Return to Las Marías in the afternoon.

upon request (US\$2 to US\$3) and are served on the porch outside your room; it's convenient and pretty, but, unfortunately, can attract roaches.

**Hospedaje Don Ovidio** (center of town; r with shared bathroom per person US\$5) This is a thatch-roofed building with several private rooms, all with squishy beds and no window screens (lather on the bug repellent). The bathroom facilities are a serious highlight: there's a toilet seat and the outdoor shower is attached to the main building. Meals are prepared upon request (mains US\$2.15).

**Hospedaje Don Luís** (toward the river; r with shared bathroom per person US\$5) The *hospedaje* of last resort in town, the rooms here are on the wrong side of clean and the beds are so saggy, you might as well sleep on the floor. The cement bathroom with ceramic toilet bowl would be a plus if you didn't have to push pigs out of the way to get to it.

**Hospedaje Wehnatará** (r with shared bathroom per person US\$4) Located a 35-minute canoe trip up-river, this is an alternative place to stay if you want to explore the petroglyphs, Cerro Mico or Pico Dama. It offers two rooms in a wood building that overlooks the river. Accommodations are basic but adequate. All meals are prepared upon request (US\$2.25).

**Pulpería Yehimy** (center of town; ☎ 5am-6pm Mon-Sat) Basic foodstuffs and medicines are sold at this tiny bodega.

### Getting There & Away

An *expreso* from Rais Ta to Las Marías has a fixed price of US\$190 (five to six hours) – ouch. There are no *colectivos*, though you can often join up with other travelers, or even a tour group, to share the cost. The fare is for a round-trip, with two nights at Las Marías included. The boatman waits in Las Marías, so after the second night it'll cost you an extra US\$8 per night.

## BRUS LAGUNA & AROUND

The name Brus Laguna (pronounced 'Bruce', as in Springsteen) comes from 'Brewer's Lagoon', after the pirate Bloody Brewer who used it as his hideaway. Today, Brus Laguna (the town) is tucked into a sheltered corner of Brus Laguna (the lagoon) and is one of

two towns in La Moskitia receiving regular flights from La Ceiba (the other is Puerto Lempira).

### BRUS LAGUNA TOWN

pop 4195

Brus Laguna is a dusty, one-road town, notable mainly for the thrice-weekly Sosa flights that land at its narrow dirt airstrip. Most people go straight from the airport to the boat dock, bound by motorboat for Rais Ta or even straight to Las Marías. However, if you're not crunched for time, consider spending a night at Yamari Cabañas (p294), a new set of cabins outside of town, built on a broad grassy savannah. There is also world-class flat fishing in and around the lagoon, including snook, grouper and record-size tarpon.

### Orientation & Information

Brus Laguna has one main drag, a wide dirt road that extends uninterrupted from the pier to the airport, several kilometers away. Just about everything you need is on or near the main road, within a few blocks of the pier. If you're ever unsure, just ask the first person to pass – locals are very friendly, and every year more accustomed to backpack-toting foreigners in their midst.

**CESAMO** (☎ 443 8082; ☎ 7:30am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) is the only medical center in town; services are very basic, but there is always a doctor and nurse on staff. It's located in a blue-and-white building next to the **police** (☎ 443 8015; ☎ 24hr). On the other side of the main drag is **Hondutel** (☎ 7:30am-3:30pm Mon-Fri), where you can make national and international calls.

### Sleeping & Eating

Stay in town if you're here just to catch a flight; otherwise, the best accommodations are a short boat ride away (see Yamari Cabañas, p294). A third hotel was being built in town when we passed through, and may be worth asking about when you arrive.

**Hotel La Estancia** (☎ 433 8043; main st; r/tw US\$14/16, with shared bathroom US\$8/11) This is an out-and-out hotel in the middle of the bush. OK, it's not exactly a fancy hotel and Brus Laguna isn't exactly the bush, but La Estancia is a far cry from roughing it. Rooms are clean, if a bit worn, and have a fan and even cable TV. Second-floor rooms get a nice breeze too. From the main dock,



take the first left; it's located just a few doors down on your right.

**Laguna Paradise** (☎ 433 8039; r/tw US\$11/16) Located over Pulpería Vanesa, this is a decent option if La Estancia is full. Beds are a little saggy and the cement walls and floors could be better kept, but it'll do for a night or two. All rooms have fans, cable TV, and private bathrooms – a welcome change after you've spent a few weeks wearing the same two T-shirts and bathing in a river.

**Cafetería Doña Nohemy** (main st; mains US\$2.25-3.25; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The only restaurant in town, Doña Nohemy will feed you every day of the week as long as you're not picky about what you get. Just be sure it's freshly made – items sit around until they're eaten. Scrambled eggs and sandwiches are safe bets.

**Pulpería Vanesa** (main st; ☎ 6am-7pm) The biggest *pulpería* in town, this place also has the best variety of goods. Apart from lots of foodstuffs, you will also find mosquito repellent, mosquito nets, rain gear, and batteries (but no sunblock, unfortunately). It's a good place to shop if you've forgotten something from home.

## Entertainment

Brus Laguna has a **movie theater** (admission US\$0.25; ☎ 7pm daily, 1pm, 3pm & 7pm Sun) – sort of.

It's a digital projector connected to a DVD player, with a dozen or so plastic chairs set up in a private house on the main drag. (It's run by the same family that operates the bus to the airport, in fact.) Most movies are dubbed in Spanish and action-oriented: *King Kong*, yes, *Capote*, no.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

At the time of research, **Aerolíneas Sosa** ([www.aerolineassosa.com](http://www.aerolineassosa.com)) had flights from La Ceiba to Brus Laguna (US\$89 one way, one hour) at 10am on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, returning from Brus Laguna the same days at 11am. You can reserve and purchase Sosa tickets (cash only) at the **general store** (☎ 433 8042; ☎ 6am-7pm Mon-Sat, to noon Sun) near the main pier. They're small planes, so it's recommended you make reservations well in advance (and double-check fares and schedules while you're at it).

**SAMI** (☎ 433 8031; ☎ 6:30am-5pm Mon-Sat) has even smaller planes – taking six to nine passengers – and serves towns within the Moskitia, including Puerto Lempira (US\$44 one way), Ahuas (US\$30), Belén (US\$30), Wampusirpi (US\$53), and Palacios (US\$33). The ticket office accepts cash only and is at a bodega several blocks up the main drag from the pier. Flights leave anytime between

## CANNON ISLAND

In the southwest corner of Brus Laguna (the lagoon) is Cannon Island, a small island that has seen its fair share of history. British marines occupied the islet in the 1700s and fortified it with cannons, which, still there, gave the island its name.

Later, it was a temporary camp for around 250 Scottish settlers who arrived in 1822 and 1823, lured by tales of fertile lands, pliant natives, even government jobs in a newly formed nation called Territory of Poyais. It was all an elaborate self-indulgence of Scottish adventurer Gregor MacGregor (what a name!), who evidently believed he had been given sovereign rights to some 34,500 sq km at the mouth of the Río Negro by the Miskito king. The settlers soon realized the folly of their situation and ensconced themselves on Cannon Island, refusing to venture into what was then unconquered indigenous territory. They were eventually evacuated by British ships from present-day Belize, but not before disease and despair had taken root – at least one settler committed suicide and 180 died of various causes stemming from the ordeal. MacGregor managed to escape blame – survivors even defended him in the British press – and he concocted several similar schemes before retiring to Venezuela, where he died in 1845.

More recently, Cannon Island became known among anglers for its snook and tarpon flats. Record tarpon have been landed here, including several 200-pounders. A fishing camp opened on the island in 1995, but has since changed hands, and disputes over leasing rights have stalled its reopening. Some tours include a stop here to check out the cannons and a small museum created by the original fishing camp operators. Some tour guides and boat drivers can arrange a brief stop on the island. You may need to negotiate a fee.

7am and 2pm (Monday to Saturday only); plan on waiting around all day, and cross your fingers the wait's not two or three days. The flight may make a few stops along the way, depending on where you and the other passengers are headed.

Brus Laguna's airport – a narrow dirt strip with a kiosk on one side for passengers to wait under – is several kilometers from town. A small school bus ferries passengers to and from all Sosa flights (per person US\$2.75 – ouch!), while the SAMI guy usually takes passengers there in his pick-up (and charges the same).

### BOAT

Motor boats carry passengers from the town pier to various points in and outside the lagoon. *Colectivos* from Brus Laguna to Belén leave the main pier between 5am and 6am daily (per person US\$16, three hours). An *expreso* for the same trip costs around US\$80 for up to six people.

You can also arrange a boat straight from Brus Laguna to Las Marías. The trip takes five to six hours and costs around US\$185 roundtrip, including two nights in Las Marías. The boat holds up to eight people, but costs the same if there are only two. To stay longer in Las Marías, it's US\$11 per night. It's important you hire a reliable boat driver, as the trip across the lagoon and up the Río Plátano can be tricky. Juan Membreno and 'El Chele' are recommended, or ask the Woods (see Yamari Cabañas, below) for more suggestions.

Whether you're headed to Rais Ta/Belén or Las Marías, you may be able to get a ride (for a fee) with a tour group; there's likely to be one on the plane from La Ceiba. If you go the same day, don't dally, as wind and waves on the lagoon grow dangerously strong in the afternoon.

### OUTSIDE BRUS LAGUNA

An hour's boat ride from Brus Laguna, **Yamari Cabañas** (per person US\$10) are two rustic but very comfortable wood cabins built on stilts on a broad grassy savannah. The grassy expanse is bisected by a long meandering creek, and studded here and there with clusters of small tique palms. It is an unusual landscape – you almost expect a giraffe to appear – certainly not what most people would expect when they plan a trip to La Moskitia. And there's

nothing else out here, save a few ranchers and the occasional cow. The cabins are operated by Macoy and Dorcas Wood, a serious but friendly couple who will go out of their way to make your stay pleasant.

A visit to Yamari Cabins typically includes a long walk through the savannah. If the water is high, you can float back down the creek to the cabins on inner-tubes. When the water is low, there's still a great little swimming hole a few meters from the cabins. At night, Macoy can take you in the boat to go crocodile-spotting.

The cabins themselves are thatch-roofed, with four individual beds apiece and mosquito nets hanging down. The mattresses are surprisingly thick – the sort you'd find in a good hotel – and the linens fresh and clean. But what makes the cabins lovely is their screen walls, which let in all the sounds and sights around you. Sunsets and sunrises are sublime, accompanied by the songs of countless birds. Meals (US\$4) are served in a separate building.

The cabins are about an hour by motorized *cayuco* from Brus Laguna, and transportation is included in the price. Macoy or Dorcas meet you at the airport or pier, and accompany most guests, along with a guide and a cook, for their stay at Yamari. Do not simply make your own way there – not only do few boatmen in town know the way, the cabins are opened only when the Woods (who live in Brus Laguna proper) are expecting guests.

## RÍO PATUCA

Honduras' second-longest river stretches 500km from its headwaters in Olancho to the Caribbean Sea. It passes through the pristine Patuca National Park, the Tawahka Asangni Biosphere Reserve, and along the edge of the Reserva de la Biósfera del Río Plátano. Most travelers reach this remote area by plane, to Ahuas or Wampusirpi, though week-long rafting expeditions starting in Olancho are possible – and tempting – too.

### AHUAS

pop 1553

Ahuas is the largest town along the Río Patuca, which is not to say it's huge: about 1500 people live here, mostly Miskito. It is

a quiet place a few kilometers from the river itself, with wood homes, a few churches and an airstrip. It also has a **hospital** that is run by volunteer doctors from abroad and considered one of the best in the region. Ahuas used to be the main jumping off point for trips into the Tawahka region, but the travelers who make it here – very few indeed – now tend to fly all the way to Wampusirpi, and start upriver from there.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Mi Estrella** (r US\$6) Upstairs rooms here are cheaper, yet nicer, with more air and light. The mattresses are extremely thin, however, and tall travelers may have some overhang. Meals (US\$2 to US\$3) are served upon request.

### Getting There & Away

**SAMI** (✈ in Brus Laguna 433 8031, in Puerto Lempira 433 6016) is the only airline with services to Ahuas. Virtually all flights come from Brus Laguna (US\$30) or Puerto Lempira (US\$33). There is no fixed schedule, and as with all SAMI flights you may have to wait a day or two before getting on a plane.

Boats from Barra Patuca stop in Ahuas to load and unload cargo, and either continue upriver to Wampusirpi, or turn around and go back. You may be able to talk your way onto one of those boats, though they have no fixed schedule or prices. Note that the river is a solid hour's walk from the town itself.

## WAMPUSIRPI

pop 1509

An appealingly rustic little town, Wampusirpi is of Tawahka origin, but most of its residents are now Miskito. They live simple though somewhat precarious lives, surviving on small plots of rice, beans, bananas, and yucca, supplemented by fish from the Patuca River and whatever small game they can hunt down in the surrounding hills. Wampusirpi proper is a collection of wooden homes on stilts – the river and a nearby lagoon are prone to flooding – while some 23 smaller communities (some just a cluster of homes) are scattered nearby.

Wampusirpi is by no means a tourist town, though townspeople are accustomed to a trickle of foreign missionaries, service workers and travelers. A number of people

pass through on their way to Tawahka, further upriver. It's easy to spend a day or more quietly exploring the town, meeting local folks and soaking up the small-town atmosphere.

There are no formal services in Wampusirpi, save a small *centro médico* (health center) on the road between town and the airport. The lagoon is used by children for swimming and by women for laundry. A thick pipe drawing a good flow of cold spring water is used for bathing and for drinking. You may be able to find bottled water at one of the *pulperías* in town – locals drink straight from the pipe – but it's essential travelers in this area carry plenty of water purification tablets or a small bottle of chlorine. See p326, for more info.

February to March is the best and driest time of year to come. During the rainy season, especially June and July, the paths get extremely muddy and the mosquitoes are especially voracious. No matter what time of year, a pair of good boots is a must; if you only brought flip-flops, a pair of rubber boots runs at about US\$7 in the small market here, or in any Moskitia town.

### Sleeping & Eating

At least three families rent rooms in their homes to travelers and volunteers. None of the houses have signs, but anyone in town would be able to point you in the right direction. All are very basic, with cots and latrine toilets. One guesthouse, known as **La Cabaña** (r US\$5), is in the middle of town and has large-ish rooms. The others are near the *punte roto* (broken bridge) at the far end of the main road, near the lagoon. The one on the right as you approach charges US\$4 per person, and the hosts can help you arrange transport up- or downriver. Some travelers have reported staying at the **Catholic Mission** (dm US\$2), which has dorm-like lodging.

There are no *comedores*, per se, but you should be able to arrange a meal at your guesthouse or another home in town, just by asking around. The Catholic Mission may have a kitchen guests can use, provided you pay for the gas.

### Getting There & Away

As usual, **SAMI** (✈ in Brus Laguna 433 8031, in Puerto Lempira 433 6016) has the only air service to Wampusirpi. Flights typically come from

Brus Laguna (US\$53) or Puerto Lempira (US\$49), usually stopping at Ahuas on the way in or out.

Wampusirpi's grass airstrip is a 15-minute walk outside of town. Trucks meet arriving planes, charging US\$0.50 for a ride into town. SAMI has a small office on the road into town where you can buy and confirm tickets.

Boats, mostly carrying cargo, come and go occasionally and you may be able to convince a passing captain (and pay him enough) to give you a ride upriver to Krausirpe in the Tawahka region, or downriver to Ahuas and Barra de Patuca, on the ocean. A more reliable, and more expensive, alternative would be to negotiate with a local boatman for a trip of a certain time and distance, depending on your designs and his availability.

## TAWAHKA REGION

Further up the Río Patuca, and deep in the rainforest, are the towns of Krausirpe and Krautara. Both are considered Tawahka communities, though Krausirpe, like Wampusirpi, has a growing Miskito population. Krautara is smaller and more isolated, and remains 100% Tawahka.

Community leaders in Krausirpe have tried to establish eco-tourism programs like the ones in Las Marías and elsewhere in the Moskitia, though with little lasting success. Whether this is due to a lack of infrastructure or experience, the remoteness of the area, or reticence on the part of ordinary Tawahka – or some combination of these factors – is not entirely clear. But as tourism in La Moskitia grows, it stands to reason that the Tawahka region will slowly open to foreign visitors as well.

### THE TAWAHKA

Honduras' smallest ethnic group is the Tawahka indigenous people. By most accounts there are only about 1000 Tawahka people in Honduras (another 8000 or so live in Nicaragua). They are also the most isolated of Honduran ethnic groups, living in a handful of communities along the Patuca and Wampú rivers, including Krausirpe (the largest), Krautara, Yapawas, Kamakasna and Parwas. They were the last of Honduras' indigenous groups to be contacted by European explorers, and also the last to be converted to Christianity.

The Tawahka live much as they have for centuries, through fishing and subsistence farming, growing mostly plantains, rice, beans and yucca. European colonizers introduced them to panning for gold, which remains a source of extra income for some. The Tawahka are also adept hunters, using trained dogs – only a quarter of households own a gun of any sort – to capture armadillos, peccaries, and tapirs. But the Tawahka are perhaps best known for their production of enormous dugout canoes. Made from a single mahogany log, the canoes can measure a remarkable 10m long. The Tawahka rarely use their impressive creations, though – most are sold downriver.

The Tawahka language – called *twanka* – is still widely spoken. However, it has been deeply infiltrated with Miskito and subsequently English (since almost a third of Miskito words come from English). More alarming is the illiteracy rate: a study of one typical community found 96% of men, and 100% of the women, could not read. Few children attend school beyond the third grade.

Accustomed to isolation, the Tawahka have seen their ancestral lands severely reduced by the encroachment of mainstream farmers, ranchers and timber harvesters in the Río Patuca area. In 1999 – after much foot dragging – the Honduran government approved the creation of the Reserva de la Biosfera Tawahka Asangni, setting aside 250,000 hectares of traditional Tawahka territory. A victory for the Tawahka people was a victory for the environment as well. The reserve accounts for just 2% of Honduras' landmass, but contains a whopping 90% of its mammal species. It borders three other protected areas – the Reserva de la Biosfera del Río Plátano to the north, the Río Patuca National Park to the south, and the Bosawas National Park in Nicaragua to the east – and together they form a key nexus in the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, spanning all seven Central American countries.

The Tawahka were for many years referred to as Sumo, a term you still read and hear occasionally. It was the name Miskitos used when describing their upriver neighbors to European explorers. But it was almost certainly pejorative – the Miskito and Tawahka have historically been rivals, and some say the name was Miskito for 'inferior.' True or not, today it is considered very un-PC.

## Sights & Activities

By far the best way to see the Tawahka region – and the Moskitia rainforest as a whole – is on a seven- to 10-day rafting expedition down the Río Patuca. That trip, and a similar one down the Río Plátano, are among the most adventurous to be had in Honduras, and unforgettable ways to experience La Moskitia in its full glory. The Patuca trip starts near the town of Catacamas in Olancho and takes you right through the Tawahka Asangni Biosphere Reserve, with stops along the way, including Krausirpe. Omega Tours and La Moskitia Ecoaventuras, both based in La Ceiba, offer recommended trips down the Patuca and Plátano rivers. See p280 for more info.

In Krausirpe, it's possible to arrange **hikes** through the rainforest, which has abundant birds and wildlife (though spotting them, as always, can be tough). Local guides can also take you to nearby **caves** and **petroglyphs**. Lorenzo Macling, a local resident and leader, is a good source of information and assistance.

## Sleeping

There is a rural medical center in Krausirpe where travelers can ask to stay the night. There is no fee, but the doctors and staff certainly appreciate small donations. Krautara has no formal accommodations or guesthouses, but you can ask around for a room or a place to camp.

## Getting There & Away

Without a doubt, the best way to visit the Tawahka region is on a seven- or 10-day rafting trip down the Río Patuca. The trip takes you right through the Tawahka Asangni Biosphere Reserve, with stops along the way, including in Krausirpe.

If you have the time and money, a rafting trip down the Río Patuca (see above) is hard to beat. If you're already in La Moskitia – those trips start in Olancho – you can visit the region by catching a boat upriver from Barra Patuca, Ahuas or Wampusirpi. There are no fixed prices or schedules – you may have to wait several days in any of those towns before a boat (with room for passengers) passes by. You also can catch a flight on SAMI to Ahuas or Wampusirpi from Puerto Lempira or Brus Laguna, and take a boat from there.

# LAGUNA DE CARATASCA

Laguna de Caratasca is by far the largest of La Moskitia's lagoons; if you include the cluster of smaller lagoons around it, the area practically amounts to an inland sea, complete with tides, waves and powerful currents. The lagoon is curiously shallow, however, averaging just 3m deep. Manatees, birds and other wildlife abound, especially in those areas isolated from human encroachment and poaching. Puerto Lempira is the largest town on the lagoon (and in La Moskitia) and there are a handful of other places around the lagoon worth visiting as well.

## PUERTO LEMPIRA

pop 5110

Puerto Lempira is situated on the inland side of the Laguna de Caratasca. Connecting with several sub-lagoons, the lagoon is very large but not deep.

It is the largest town in La Moskitia, which is not to say it has, for example, paved roads. (It doesn't.) Still, it has much more of a big-town feel than any other place in the region, with a church, parque central, cars, city blocks, restaurants, Internet access and a bank.

Most travelers come (or leave) by plane, making for the biggest and busiest of the airports in La Moskitia. Some are on their way to or from Nicaragua's back door, via the town of Leimus on the Río Coco. For some, Puerto Lempira is an unavoidable stop in their quest for more and more remote adventures. Others welcome the return, however brief, to the trappings of modernity.

If you stay, there are at least two interesting side trips, doable in a day, but more pleasant as overnight excursions – Mistruk (p299) and Kaukira (p300).

## Information

**Banco Atlántida** (☎ 8am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30-11:30am Sat) No ATM, but the teller can exchange traveler's checks and issue credit card advances on Visa cards. Often has long lines.

**Cyberphone** (☎ 419 0024; near Hotel Flores; Internet per min US\$1.30; ☎ 8:40am-10:30pm) Calls to USA (per minute US\$0.25) and Europe (per minute US\$0.30 to US\$0.40) too.

**Hondutel Centro Comunitario** (☎ 433 6270; to USA per minute US\$0.15; 📞 6:30am-10pm). Calls to other parts of the world start at US\$0.50. It's situated a half-block west of park.

**Hospital Puerto Lempira** (☎ 433 6078, emergency 433 6978; 📞 24hr) Located 1.5km southwest of town. From the airport, go roughly 10 blocks west until you cross a small concrete bridge. Turn left (south) and continue another 750m. If in doubt, ask any passerby.

**Immigration office** (☎ 433 6055; 📞 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) Located on the 2nd floor of a commercial building, a half-block from Calle Principal on the same street as Hotel El Gran Samaritano.

**Pharmacy** (📞 24hr) Located inside the hospital.

### Dangers & Annoyances

As a port town and La Moskitia's largest town, Puerto Lempira is somewhat edgier than other places in the region, but not overly so. Most problems have something to do with alcohol, or sometimes drugs. Avoiding drugs and drunks altogether is the best way to stay safe.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Yu Baiwan** (☎ 433 6348; s/d with fan US\$16/19, with air-con US\$19/24; 📞) Puerto Lempira's best hotel is also its best value, considering that the other hotels in town charge only a few dollars less for significantly inferior rooms. Here you get plenty of space, firm beds, clean linens, cable TV, and friendly service. The original nine rooms are all on the ground floor, while a rather grand curving stairway leads to nine new rooms being built on the 2nd floor. To get here, look for a narrow cement passageway

off Calle Principal, a half-block from the pier.

**Hotel El Gran Samaritano** (☎ 433 6482; s/tw with fan US\$14/16, with air-con US\$19/24; 📞) The 2nd-floor lobby of this small hotel is bright and airy, but the rooms are decidedly less so, with just a small window high on the wall to let in sunlight. Rooms are clean and come with cable TV, though, so it's not a bad option if the Yu Baiwan is full or you're really pinching pennies. You'll find it 1½ blocks west of Calle Principal.

**Hotel Flores** (☎ 433 6421; s/d/tr US\$15/21/27; 📞) A half-block from the parque central east of Calle Principal, the Hotel Flores has somehow cultivated a reputation for being the best hotel in town, and is sometimes even full with visiting business people. Barring the existence of a secret luxury wing off-limits to inquiring guidebook writers, however, the hotel's stuffy rooms and vaguely smelly bathrooms don't justify the price or the hype. Service can be a bit gruff to boot.

**Restaurante Lakou Payaska** (mains US\$5-8; 📞 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Miskito for 'lake breezes,' the Lakou Payaska gets plenty of them – and strong – on its 2nd-floor open-air dining area a few steps from the lagoon. Operated by (and opposite) Hotel Yu Baiwan, this is easily the most reliable meal in town, if not the most creative. Chicken, beef, lobster, and conch are served with the standard accompaniments, and sometimes a serving of loud country music. The main restaurant is out the back of the bar-snack joint that faces the street and is decidedly less appealing.

### GETTING TO NICARAGUA

Getting to Nicaragua is easier than it used to be, thanks mainly to changes on the Nicaraguan side. From Puerto Lempira, trucks leave once a day for the town of Leimus along the Río Coco (US\$11, 7:30am, four to five hours). You can pick up the truck outside its owners' house – three blocks west and two blocks south of the pier – or on parque central, near Banco Atlántida. Look for a large truck with a canvas covering. In Leimus, you pass Honduran immigration on one side of the river, and Nicaraguan immigration on the other. A new road means you can board a bus right there for Puerto Cabezas (five hours).

Before the new highway was built, you had to take a boat or 4WD downriver to Waspán to clear Nicaraguan immigration and catch a bus to Puerto Cabezas. That remains an alternative, if there are no buses from Leimus or the immigration office there is closed.

It costs US\$7 to enter Nicaragua, US\$3 to enter Honduras; neither is supposed to charge an exit fee, but occasionally officials ask for a nominal one. Trucks return from Leimus to Puerto Lempira twice daily, around 7am and 4pm.

### THE MORAVIAN CHURCH

The Moravian Church, a Christian sect formed in present-day Czech Republic during the 1400s, has played an influential role in the Moskitia since its arrival in 1928. At that time, and well into the 1950s, the Honduran government paid little attention to conditions in the remote Moskitia province. Early Moravian missionaries found communities with no clinics, no schools, and no prospects for either. Poverty levels in the Moskitia were then – and remain today – some of the highest in the Americas, but have been significantly alleviated by Moravian efforts and programs.

The church opened the Moskitia's first health clinic in 1946 in Ahuas, and it remains the best medical center in the region. Other clinics followed in Kaukira and Ocotales. Moravian-run schools in Brus Laguna and Ahuas offer kids a chance to study beyond elementary school, a rarity in this part of the country, where children rarely attend school beyond the third grade and illiteracy is sky high. In the process, the Moravians have converted many thousands of Miskitos. The church began with a single congregation in Brus Laguna and today boasts nearly 100 congregations and over 22,000 members.

The Moravian Church in the Moskitia experienced a bitter split in 1999 when one of its ministers undertook a 40-day fast that resulted in spontaneous dancing and speaking in tongues. Believing he'd had a revelation, the minister introduced fasting to members of his congregation, which resulted in harsh disapproval from traditionalists in the church. 'Reformed' and 'traditional' factions formed, and disagreement soon spread to other matters. Most notably, the reformists condemned the use of pre-Christian rites, which had long been accepted in the traditional church. The conflict resulted in an official split in the church, and many communities now have two Moravian congregations.

### Getting There & Away

The most reliable plane service to/from Puerto Lempira is on **Aerolineas Sosa** (☎ 433 6432; www.aerolineassosa.com; ✈ 8:30am-5:30pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat & Sun), which has a large office facing the airstrip, and another in town, located 2½ blocks west of the parque central past the Hondutel office. **SAMI/Air Honduras** and **Atlantic Airlines** (☎ 433 6016; ✈ airport 6am-5pm, ice-cream shop 8am-6pm) share counter-space and a telephone at the airport, or you can buy tickets for either at an ice-cream shop a block and a half from the pier.

Atlantic has flights to Tegucigalpa (US\$171) at 8am on Tuesday and Friday, while both Sosa and Atlantic have flights to La Ceiba (US\$100) at 8am daily from Monday to Saturday. SAMI serves destinations inside the Moskitia, including Ahuas (US\$33), Wampusirpi (US\$49), Brus Laguna (US\$45), Belén (US\$50), and Palacios (US\$57). Departure times vary, but you should be able to catch a flight from Puerto Lempira to any of those towns within a day or two. Note that prices and schedules change frequently and unexpectedly – always call ahead.

A taxi into town from the airport is US\$2.25, or you could walk it in about 20 minutes.

You can usually rent a bike from one of the repair shops along the main drag – look for handwritten 'Se repara bicicleta' signs, especially near the pier. You'll have to negotiate a price, probably between US\$5 and US\$8 per day.

A small number of travelers take the overland route between Puerto Lempira and Puerto Cabezas, in Nicaragua. See boxed text, opposite, for details on getting to and from the border.

### MISTRUK

A great day-or-two trip from Puerto Lempira is to Mistruk, a tiny Miskito community 18km south of town along the banks of the Laguna de Tansing. About 400 people live there, mainly by agriculture and fishing. The beach is grainy and attractive, shaded by tall, long-armed almond trees, with a long pier to avoid walking in the shallows. The water here is clear and fresh (not salted), a nice change from most of the Moskitia's rivers.

A handful of wooden **bungalows** (r US\$16-22), spaced well apart along a pleasant freshwater beach, are popular with visiting tours and service groups. The bungalows have two pretty good beds apiece, private bathroom with flush toilets, wood floors, and high thatched roofs. Sunlight coming

through the walls by day means mosquitoes by night – bring a mosquito net or plenty of bug spray. Solar panels charge batteries. There's not much to do here but relax on the beach and strike up conversations with local kids and boatmen.

A bike is by far the best and most pleasant way to get here. The well-maintained dirt road winds through expansive grassland with a thin sprinkling of spindly pine trees; there are no major climbs, just a few mild rollers to keep it interesting. Follow the road past the airport out of Puerto Lempira – anyone can point you in the right direction. At 13km, the road splits, left to Leimus and the Nicaraguan border, right to Mistruk. In another 3km, you'll reach a simple wood gate, which you can easily open or go around, and the town is a short distance further. The bungalows are big enough to store a bike or two inside, which is probably the smart thing to do. Bikes can be rented in Puerto Lempira (see p299). Taxis regularly take locals and visitors to Mistruk, charging US\$32 for the round-trip, including time at the beach.

## KAUKIRA

Red and blue macaws can sometimes be seen flying around this medium-sized town, tucked away on the northeast side of Laguna de Caratasca. A nice beach is about a 15-minute walk from town, but the town is better known for its bird-watching, wildlife and *pesca deportiva* (sport fishing). Ralston Haylock (☎ community telephone 433 6081) can arrange excursions of just about any kind and length, and maintains a simple lodge for overnight trips. He's a fount of information and lore, and also speaks excellent English.

From Puerto Lempira, *colectivo* boats leave the main pier at around 10am to 11am (US\$4, 1½ hours). Getting back the same day can be tricky, however, as the boats 'live' in Kaukira; they leave every morning between 5am and 6am, but if there aren't enough passengers, they may not make an afternoon run. Ask the boat driver in Puerto Lempira – or Ralston by phone – about an afternoon service the day you're thinking of going. You may need to hire an *expreso* boat, which runs around US\$55 each way.