

Colón Province



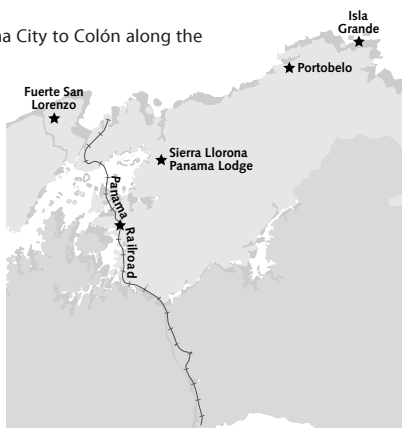
The mere mention of Colón sends shivers down the spines of travelers and Panamanians, but there is more to the province than its notorious capital. Stretching along the Caribbean coast from Veraguas Province in the west to the Comarca de Kuna Yala in the east, Colón Province is mostly undeveloped and virtually inaccessible, but steeped in a rich, accessible history.

During the colonial era, gold and silver bound for Spain were stored at the Caribbean coastal towns of Nombre de Dios and Portobelo. These were once the world's wealthiest cities, attracting scores of pirates. In 1572 the English privateer Francis Drake sailed into Nombre de Dios and plundered its riches before reducing the city to ashes. In 1739 Portobelo was sacked by Admiral Edward Vernon, forcing Spain to finally abandon the Panama crossing in favor of sailing around Cape Horn. Today, the ruined city of Portobelo and the nearby fortress of Fuerte San Lorenzo stand as testaments to the faded glory of the Spanish empire.

The provincial town of Colón has also long passed its zenith. Although the city itself is an urban jungle racked by violent crime, the surrounding area is home to everything from pristine beaches and lowland rainforests to colonial splendors and modern engineering marvels. Within the span of a few days, you can snorkel in Caribbean waters, spot tropical birds on private reserves, stumble across ruins and admire the massive locks on the lesser-known side of the canal. And of course, it's worth mentioning that the luxury train connecting Panama City to Colón is arguably one of the greatest rail journeys in the Americas.

HIGHLIGHTS

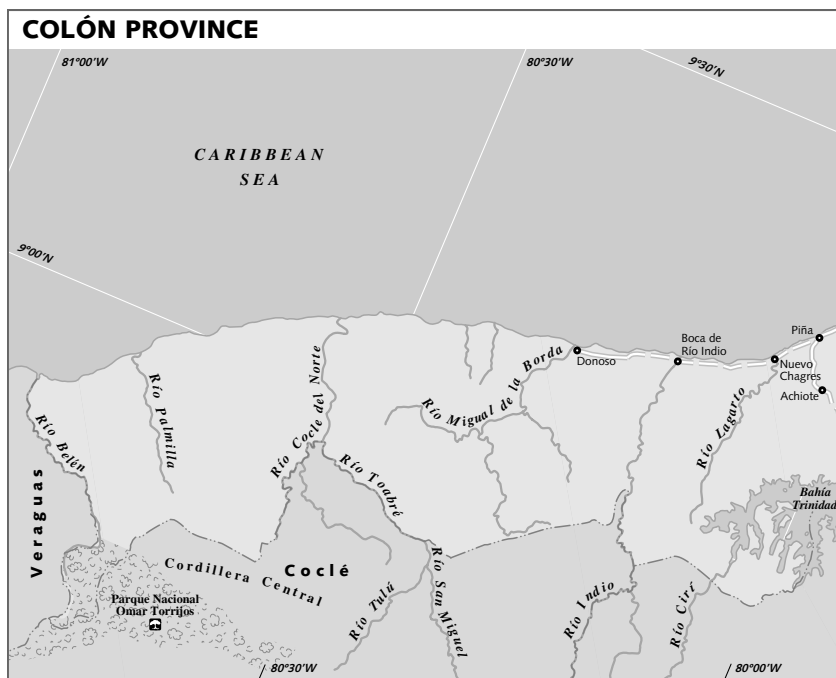
- Traveling in a 1st-class luxury car from Panama City to Colón along the historic **Panama Railroad** (p246)
- Exploring the hallowed ruins of **Portobelo** (p250), once the Caribbean's greatest port
- Living out your *Pirates of the Caribbean* fantasy at the historic fort of **Fuerte San Lorenzo** (p249), a historic Spanish fort that once stood guard over the Caribbean
- Soaking up the natural beauty and laid-back vibe of **Isla Grande** (p254), a picture-perfect gem of a Caribbean island
- Birding in the lowland forests surrounding **Sierra Llorona Panama Lodge** (p247), one of the country's premier birding destinations



■ POPULATION: 205,000

■ AREA: 4890 SQ KM

■ ELEVATION: SEA LEVEL TO 979M



COLÓN

pop 45,000

Simply put, Panama's most notorious city is a sprawling slum of decaying colonial grandeur and desperate human existence. Prior to 1869, the Panama Railroad connecting Panama City and Colón was the only rapid transit across the continental western hemisphere. However, once the US transcontinental railroad was established, Colón became an economically depressed city almost overnight. Although the city was temporarily reinvigorated during the construction of the Panama Canal, the city's economy collapsed following the canal's completion as there was simply not enough work for the thousands of suddenly unemployed laborers.

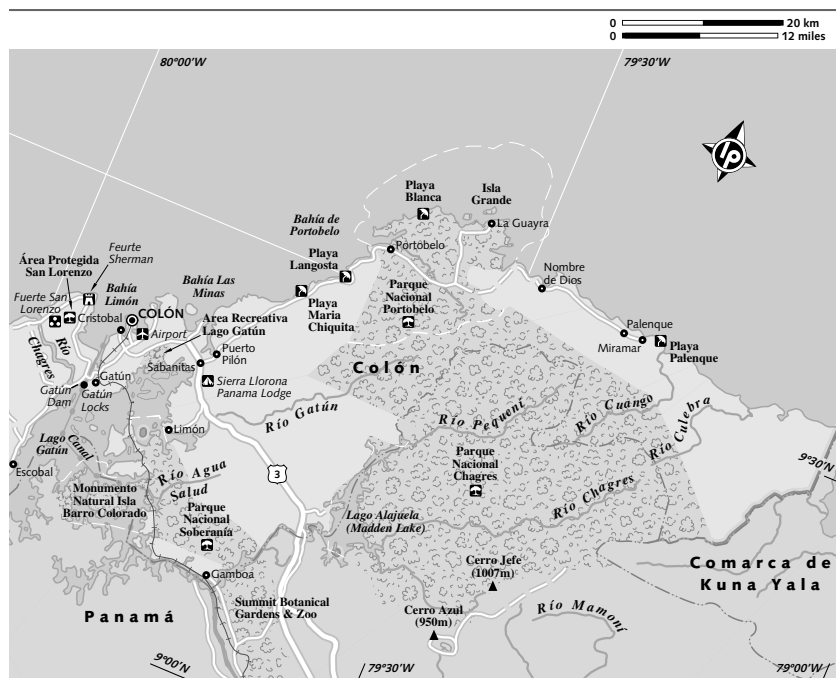
In 1948 the Zona Libre (Free Zone) was created on the edge of Colón in an attempt to revive the city. Today, the 482-hectare Zona Libre is the largest free-trade zone in the Americas. It links producers in North America, the Far East and Europe with the Latin American market and is home to more than 1600 companies and several dozen banks. Unfortunately, none of the US\$10 billion in

annual commercial turnover seems to get beyond the compound's walls and the Zona Libre exists as an island of materialism floating in a sea of unemployment, poverty and crime.

History

The discovery of gold in California in 1848 sparked the need for a transcontinental railroad. At the time, most Americans lived on the east coast of the US, and traveling to California via Panama was cheaper and quicker than going across the US. The isthmus route was also less dangerous than traveling through the USA's vast heartland, which was home to hostile indigenous groups. Gold-seekers took steamships from the eastern seaboard to the mouth of the Río Chagres, walked the historic 80km Sendero Las Cruces trade route to the Pacific coast, and then boarded ships bound for California.

In 1850 the city of Colón was established as the Caribbean terminus of the Panama Railroad. It was initially called Aspinwall in honor of William Aspinwall, one of the founders of the Panama Railroad. In 1890, however, the government of Colombia changed the name of



the city to Colón and dubbed the surrounding province Cristóbal.

Following the completion of the Panama Railroad in 1855, Colón became a boom town almost overnight. With scores of Americans passing through the city on a daily basis, Colón attracted entrepreneurs and business-people looking to cash in on the gold-rush fever. Unfortunately, the Panama Railroad became insignificant following the completion of the US transcontinental railroad in 1869 and Colón faded into obscurity less than 20 years after its founding.

At the peak of Colón's economic depression in 1881, the French arrived to start construction of an interoceanic canal, but the city was burnt to the ground four years later by a Colombian hoping to spark a revolution. In the years to follow, Colón entered a second golden age as the city was entirely rebuilt in the French colonial architectural style that was popular at the time. Rivaling Panama City in beauty and wealth, life in the Canal Zone was pleasurable and highly profitable.

The French abandoned their efforts eight years later when the monetary costs proved

too great, and yellow fever and malaria had killed 22,000 workers, but the US was quick to seize the opportunity. For the next 25 years, the sleepy backwater town of Colón was transformed into a vibrant provincial capital as workers from around the world arrived by the shipload. However, immediately following the completion of the canal in 1914, the sudden lack of employment caused Colón's economy to disintegrate and the city spiraled into the depths of depravity almost overnight. Today, most of the colonial city is still intact, though the buildings are on the verge of collapse, with countless squatters living inside them.

Orientation & Information

Colón sits on a former island that juts into the Bahía Limón (Lemon Bay), though it was linked at its southernmost tip to the mainland via landfill in 1852.

The city is reached via two major roads on the southern side of town. The roads become Av Amador Guerrero and Av Bolívar at the entrance to the town and run straight up the grid-patterned city, ending near Colón's northern waterfront.

tainment' opened on the east side of Colón. It's a rather modest affair, but it does have a good selection of restaurants and souvenir shops.

Sleeping & Eating

There's no shortage of hotels in Colón, but most are in seedy areas and have serious security issues. The hotels listed below are mentioned because they have 24-hour security guards.

There are plenty of places to eat in Colón, but for safety reasons, it's recommended that you eat either in your hotel or at Colón 2000.

Meryland Hotel (☎ 441 7128; cr Calle 7 & Av Santa Isabel; s/d US\$40/45; P ♻️ 🚰) This modern business hotel, complete with pseudo-Spanish colonial decor, is located in a comparatively safe part of Colón, especially since it fronts an attractive city park. The fairly standard-issue rooms have air-con, cable TV and private hot-water bathrooms, though you're paying more for security than luxury. There's also an on-site bar-restaurant, which saves you the trouble of having to leave the hotel at night.

Hotel Washington (☎ 441 7133; Calle 2; s/d US\$50/60; P ♻️ 🚰 🚰) The Hotel Washington bills itself as the grand dame of Colón's hotels – and indeed it once was grandé – but today its fading colonial elegance is in desperate need of a makeover. Erected in 1870 at the request of US President William Taft, the Washington has hosted dignitaries from around the world, though today it caters more to wholesale shoppers. Still, the hotel's popularity makes it a safe bet, and the amenity-laden rooms are sweetened by the on-site bar, restaurant, casino and swimming pool.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Aeroperlas (☎ 315 7500; www.aeroperlas.com) has five weekly departures to Colón from Albrook airport in Panama City. The 15-minute flight costs US\$35 each way.

BUS

From Panama City, a regular bus service to Colón (US\$2.50, two hours, every 30 minutes) departs from the Albrook Bus Terminal.

Colón's Terminal de Buses is at the intersection of Calle Terminal and Av Bolívar. It serves towns throughout Colón Province, including:

Escobal (US\$1; 1hr; hourly)

La Guayra (US\$2.50; 1½hr; hourly) In La Guayra, you can catch the boat to Isla Grande.

Nombre de Dios (US\$3; 1½hr; hourly)

Portobelo (US\$1.50; 1hr; hourly)

The same buses can be boarded at Sabanitas, the turnoff for Portobelo, thus avoiding a trip into Colón.

TRAIN

For information on the Panama City-Colón railway, see the boxed text on p246.

Getting Around

While in Colón, it's not a good idea to walk around more than you have to. Fortunately, taxis congregate at the bus station, train station and the Zone Libre, and fares across the city are usually around US\$1.

AROUND COLÓN

Gatún Locks

The **Gatún Locks** (admission free; ☎ 8am-4pm), just 10km south of Colón city, raise southbound ships 29.5m from Caribbean waters to the level of Lago Gatún. From there, the ships travel 37km to the Pedro Miguel Locks, which lower southbound ships 9.3m to Lago Miraflores, a small body of water that separates the two sets of Pacific locks. The ships are then lowered to sea level at the Miraflores Locks.

Not only are the Gatún Locks the largest of the three sets, but their size is simply mind-boggling. In his superlative book, *The Path Between the Seas*, David McCullough notes that if stood on its end, a single lock would have been the tallest structure on Earth at the time it was built, taller by several meters than even the Eiffel Tower. Each chamber could have accommodated the Titanic with plenty of room to spare.

The amount of concrete poured to construct the locks at Gatún – 1,820,000 cu meters – was record setting. To put things in perspective, consider that this amount of concrete could be used to build a wall 2.4m thick, 3.6m high and 213km long. The concrete was brought from a giant mixing plant to the construction site by railroad cars that ran on a circular track. Huge buckets that were maneuvered by cranes carried the wet concrete from the railroad cars and poured it into enormous steel forms. The forms themselves were moved into place by locomotives. This protracted process continued virtually uninterrupted

RIDE THE PANAMA RAILROAD

One of the best ways to fully appreciate the extent of the canal is to travel from Panama City to Colón along the historic Panama Railroad. The rails fell into disrepair during the best-forgotten days of the Noriega regime, but in 1998 the Panama government partnered with Kansas City Southern, an American-based railway holding company, to create the **Panama Canal Railway Company** (PCRC; ☎ 317 6070; www.panarail.com). The primary purpose of the joint venture was to reestablish the Atlantic–Pacific rail link and create a profitable alternative to the Panama Canal trade route. Starting in 2001, PCRC also introduced a passenger service that included a fully operational vintage train.

Aimed at foreign travelers and businesspeople looking to relive the golden age of railway travel, the vintage train features exotic wood paneling and blinds, carpeted interiors, glass-domed cars and open-air viewing decks. The hour-long ride runs parallel to the canal and sometimes traverses thick jungles and rainforests. There are daily departures (one-way/round trip US\$22/US\$38) from Panama City at 7:15am and Colón at 5:15pm. Note that the Panama City terminus is actually located in the town of Corazal, which is a 15-minute cab-ride from the capital.

While you're sipping a hot cup of coffee and admiring Panama's scenic interior, consider for a moment this list of mind-blowing trivia.

- Peaking at US\$295 a share, the Panama Railroad was the highest-priced stock on the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) in the mid-1800s.
- With a total construction bill of US\$8 million, the Panama Railroad was, at the time, the most expensive railroad per kilometer ever built.
- Despite being only 76km long, the Panama Railroad required 304 bridges and culverts.
- During the first 12 years of its operations, the Panama Railroad carried over US\$750 million in gold and silver, and collected a quarter of one percent on each shipment.
- In 1913 the Panama Railroad hauled 2,916,657 passengers and transported 2,026,852 tons of freight across the isthmus, which was the heaviest per-kilometer traffic of any railroad in the world.
- An estimated 12,000 laborers died during the construction of the Panama Railroad, particularly from malaria and yellow fever.
- Disposing of the dead was such a problem that the Panama Railroad administration started pickling the bodies in barrels and selling them to medical schools...
- ...the proceeds of which were used to build a hospital in the Panama Canal Zone.

until the Gatún locks were completed after four years.

From an intelligently placed viewing stand situated opposite the control tower, you can watch the locks in action. The whole process takes about two hours, though it's probably the most interesting stage of the Canal transit and the English brochure does a good job of clearly describing what you're watching.

Buses to the Gatún Locks leave the Colón bus terminal hourly (US\$1.25, 20 minutes). If you arrive by taxi, however, you can stop here before heading on to Gatún Dam – another 2km away. A taxi ride from Colón to the locks and dam and back should cost no

more than US\$15 per party – agree on a price before leaving.

Gatún Dam

The Gatún Dam, which was constructed in 1908 to shore up the Río Chagres and to create Lago Gatún, was the world's largest earthen dam until the Fuerte Peck Dam was built in Montana (USA) in 1940. And, until Lake Mead was formed by the 1936 completion of the Hoover Dam on the Nevada–Arizona (USA) border, Lago Gatún was the world's largest artificial body of water. In fact, when Lago Gatún was created, it submerged 262 sq km of jungle, entire villages (the people were relocated prior) and large sections of

the Panama Railroad. Today, power generated by the dam drives all the electrical equipment involved in the operation of the Panama Canal, including the locomotives that tow ships through the locks.

Although the sight of the dam is impressive enough, it's especially worth coming out here if the spillway is open – millions of gallons of water rushing out is quite the sight. Prior to heading out, ask the guard at the entrance to the Gatún Locks to tell you if the spillway is open.

If you arrive at the Gatún Locks by bus, then it's a leisurely 30-minute walk to the dam. To get there, cross over the bridge spanning the Gatún Locks, turn left and follow the road for approximately 2km. Again, a taxi ride from Colón to the locks and dam and back should cost no more than US\$15 per party.

SIERRA LLORONA PANAMA LODGE

our pick **Sierra Llorona Panama Lodge** (☎ 442 8104; www.sierrallorona.com; s/d/ste with 3 meals & walking tours US\$95/138/158, 5-person campsite weekday/weekend US\$45/75; **P** **☎**) is located on a 200-hectare rainforest reserve that is home to no less than 213 species of tropical birds. It's something of a legend amongst the international birding community.

The extensive gardens surrounding the lodge are home to numerous varieties of hummingbirds, though the prize sightings are usually spotted along the series of walking paths that crisscross the reserve. Two of the best walking trails, La Poza and El Colibri, are each 4km in length and contain several ground-level observation platforms. More difficult treks, including the network of trails known as Los Nances, cross a variety of mountainous terrain and boast stunning views of the Caribbean Sea, the Canal Zone and the city lights of Colón.

Another advantage to staying at Sierra Llorona is the lodge's proximity to some of the country's top birding hot spots. After you've finished exploring the surrounding reserve, it's easy and affordable to organize private tours to nearby Parque Nacional Soberanía (p110) and the Área Protegida San Lorenzo (p249).

Guests stay in one of a handful of rooms, which are perched around an outdoor swimming pool and offer rustic stylings that are refreshingly absent of modern conveniences. In fact, there are no air-conditioners or TVs

on the entire property, though the mountain breezes keep the rooms cool and there's no need for TV when you have the rainforest on your doorstep.

Another accommodation option is the well-equipped and easily accessible campsite, which is located within the reserve. The 5-person pitches surround a thatched-roof rancho complete with composting toilets, showers and washing facilities, and there's no shortage of charcoal stoves and fire pits.

Although it's possible to arrange for a pickup from the airport in Panama City, Sierra Llorona can be easily accessed if you have your own vehicle. From Panama City, follow the Transisthmian Hwy towards Colón, and take the Santa Rita Arriba turnoff, which is just a few kilometers before the Sabanas turnoff. Once on this road, just follow signs for the lodge, which is approximately 4.5km from the Transisthmian Hwy. Note that during the rainy season, you will need a 4WD to make it up this road.

FUERTE SAN LORENZO & ÁREA PROTEGIDA SAN LORENZO

Centered on the ruins of the crumbling Spanish colonial fortress of Fuerte San Lorenzo, the 9653-hectare Área Protegida San Lorenzo also includes the former US military base of Fuerte Sherman, as well as 12 different kinds of ecosystems including mangroves, marshlands, semideciduous forests and humid rainforests. Since the departure of the US military in 1999, the area has slowly been recolonized by native fauna, though the future of the San Lorenzo protected area remains uncertain.

As part of the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, San Lorenzo protects and fosters species migration between the continents, a fact that is being touted by conservation biologists and ecotour operators alike. On the other hand, locals see the area as unoccupied land, and everyone from poachers and loggers to slash-and-burn farmers have already started encroaching on the reserve.

Fortunately, conservation and tourism may win out in the end, due in part to the massive quantities of unexploded ordinance (UXOs) that were left in the area by the US military. For decades, the jungles surrounding Fuerte Sherman were used for target practice and survival training, though America's hasty exit from Panama in 1999 didn't leave much time for cleaning up shop.

Today, most travelers set their sights on the ruins of Fuerte San Lorenzo, but there are plenty of opportunities here for jungle exploration. The secondary forests of the protected area are rich in bird life and there's no shortage of mountainous trails and waterfall-fed ponds to discover.

History

Following the destruction of Nombre de Dios by Sir Francis Drake in 1573, the Spanish hoped to stave off further ransacking and pillaging by fortifying the Caribbean coast. Of principal concern was the Río Chagres, which flowed inland to the town of Venta de Cruces (near the modern town of Gamboa), and then linked up with the trade route leading to the city of Panamá. In 1595, by order of Phillip II of Spain, Fuerte San Lorenzo was built into the side of a steep cliff near the river mouth. Fuerte San Lorenzo, Portobelo and Panamá, the 'three keys' of the Americas, became known as the strategic hearts of the Spanish trade empire.

Once it was established, Fuerte San Lorenzo was under constant pirate attack. In 1596, only one year after its completion, San Lorenzo was seized by the English privateer Sir Francis Drake. Although it was later recovered and rebuilt with greater fortifications, San Lorenzo was again assaulted, this time by Sir Henry Morgan in 1671. Captain Morgan (of the spiced rum fame) succeeded

in overpowering its guns and sailing up the Río Chagres. A few months later, Morgan burnt Panamá to the ground, pilfered its riches and sailed back to England with galleons laden with Spanish treasure.

In 1680 a new fortification was built on the highest part of the cliff, but this was no match for British Admiral Vernon, who destroyed San Lorenzo yet again in 1740. In 1761 the Spanish once again rebuilt San Lorenzo, and the decision to abandon the overland trade route in favor of sailing around the Cape Horn meant that the fort didn't suffer further attacks. As a result, Fuerte San Lorenzo was abandoned by Spain in 1821 when Panama became independent. The fort was subsequently used as a Colombian prison, a post office for inbound English mail and a campsite for gold miners en route to California.

In order to defend the Panama Canal Zone, the US military built Fuerte Sherman in 1911 with the purpose of defending the Atlantic side of the canal. Although post-WWII changes in war technology meant that the fortifications were rendered obsolete, the area surrounding the fort became an important jungle warfare training center. In 1963 these operations came under the responsibility of the US-army-run 'School of the Americas' in nearby Fuerte Gullick but five years later the 'Jungle Operations Training Center' became an independent entity. Fuerte Sherman subsequently became the main jungle operations school for the US

SU CASA EN ESCOBAL

Community-based tourism provides travelers with an opportunity that's so grassroots it's almost an adventure. But, hey, that's why you're traveling in the first place, right?

The tiny fishing village of Escobal lies on the banks of Lago Gatún and is inhabited mostly by the descendants of former canal builders and farmers who were displaced with the flooding of the Río Chagres. Escobal also contains one of the most densely diverse populations in Panama – residents are as likely to be the descendants of Haitians, Jamaicans or Colombians as they are Panamanians.

Although Escobal would otherwise be off the tourist radar screen, a community-based tourism program commenced here in 2001 with the help of the US Peace Corps. Today, Escobolians, who are renowned for their kindness and warm spirits, are literally opening the doors of their houses to foreigners. For a few dollars a night, you can be assured a bed, a fan and a simple breakfast as well as the chance to interact with locals in a relaxed and authentic environment. While in Escobal, it's also easy to hire local guides to take you fishing or boating on Lago Gatún, as well as horseback riding or birding in the nearby rainforest.

If you're interested in arranging a home-stay, contact the program coordinators, **Saturnino Díaz and Aida Gonzalez** (☎ 434 6017, 434 6106). If you show up in Escobal unannounced, you can find Saturnino and Aida at the Restaurante Doña Nelly, which they own. Although you needn't be fluent, it's helpful to have a good command of Spanish before arriving.

army and was used as a training center for Vietnam-bound Special Forces.

On June 30, 1999, under the Torrijos–Carter treaties, Fuerte Sherman, nearby Fuertes Davis and Gullick, and the Área Protegida San Lorenzo were handed back to the Panamanian Government following the abandonment of the Canal Zone by the US military.

Orientation

Fuerte San Lorenzo and the Área Protegida San Lorenzo are located west of the city of Colón and northwest of Lago Gatún. The ruins of San Lorenzo are located 9km south-east of Fuerte Sherman on the Caribbean coastal highway and lie along the northwestern boundary of the protected area. Although there is no official entrance to the reserve, there is a visitors center in the village of Achioté, which is located along the northeastern edge of the reserve between the villages of Piña and Escobal. Fuertes Davis and Gullick, which are home to two of the area's hotels, are located on the Cuatro Altos turnoff of the Transisthmian Hwy.

Sights

FUERTE SAN LORENZO

This fort (www.wmfpanama.org in Spanish; admission free; ☎ 8am–4pm) is perched at the mouth of the Río Chagres on a promontory west of the canal. Despite its violent history, much of San Lorenzo is well preserved, including the moat, the cannons and the arched rooms. The fort also commands a wide view of the river and bay far below, which was one of the reasons why the Spanish chose to fortify the site. Together with Portobelo, Fuerte San Lorenzo was declared a Unesco World Heritage site in 1980.

Like its contemporary fortresses at Portobelo, San Lorenzo was constructed of blocks of cut coral and armed to the teeth with row upon row of cannons. If you inspect the cannons closely, you'll notice that some of them are actually British-made, which bespeaks the time in the 17th century when Sir Francis Drake and his pirate brethren occupied the fort.

There's no bus service to the fort, but you can take a taxi here from Colón for about US\$20. If you're driving, go to the Gatún Locks, continue past the stoplight near the northern entrance to the locks and then follow the signs directing you to the dam, 2km away.

Drive over the dam and follow the 'Fuerte San Lorenzo' signs. These will lead you to the entrance of Fuerte Sherman where you'll be asked to show identification. Once you've done this, you will be allowed to proceed the remaining 9km to Fuerte San Lorenzo.

ÁREA PROTEGIDA SAN LORENZO

The **San Lorenzo protected area** (www.sanlorenzo.org.pa) is renowned for its bird-watching, but hikers and trekkers alike will be more than satisfied with guided romps through its dense secondary forest. You can also take some lovely walks to waterfalls and natural ponds, visit organic shade-grown coffee farms and hike to splendid lookouts with views of the protected area and the Río Chagres.

The protected area is best explored with a guide and this can be easily arranged at the **Centro El Tucán** (☎ 628 9000; ☎ 8am–4pm Mon–Fri), a community learning and visitors center that lies on the edge of the reserve. Guides generally charge US\$15 per group for a two-hour hike, though longer and more difficult treks can also be arranged. El Tucán also has an excellent documentation center on the flora and fauna, human ecology and history of the area.

The visitors center is located in the village of Achioté, 13km north of Escobal, on the edge of the reserve. Since there is no public transportation to the town and there are few taxis in the area, Achioté is best accessed by private vehicle.

Sleeping

The helpful staff at the Centro El Tucán can arrange homestays in Achioté for a small, negotiable price. There are also opportunities for unofficial camping within the confines of the reserve, though you will need to be self-sufficient.

You can also bed down for a night or two in the former den of dictators, namely Building 400 of the notorious School of the Americas; see the boxed text on p250.

Another unusual option is the **Davis Suites Panama Canal** (☎ 473 0639; www.davis.ste.iwarp.com; d from US\$55; ☎ ☎ ☎), which is housed in a converted US military building smack-dab in the middle of the now-abandoned Fuerte Davis. Needless to say, the entire compound is stark, utilitarian and unsurprisingly militaristic, but there is a certain appeal to bedding down in the former belly of the beast. The friendly

SWEET DREAMS IN THE DEN OF DICTATORS

The borders of the San Lorenzo protected area are home to Fuerte Espinar, which was known as Fuerte Gullick prior to the US handover. Within this compound is the infamous Building 400, which was the former home of the School of the Americas.

Established in 1949, the School of the Americas trained more than 34,000 Latin American soldiers before moving to Fuerte Benning, Georgia, in 1984. The school was created to keep communism out of Latin America, which quickly translated into teaching Latin American soldiers how to thwart armed communist insurgencies.

The school graduated some of the worst human-rights violators of our time, including former Argentine dictator Leopoldo Galtieri, who 'disappeared' thousands during Argentina's Dirty War of the 1970s, and El Salvador's Roberto D'Aubuisson, who led death squads that killed Archbishop Oscar Romero and thousands of other Salvadorans during the 1980s.

In a bizarre twist of capitalism and ill-humor, a Spanish hotel chain has converted Building 400 into a giant resort hotel, namely the **Meliá Panamá Canal** (☎ 470 1100; www.solmelia.com; d from US\$80; 📍 🚗 📺 📶). Not too surprisingly, the Meliá's staff has painted over all evidence that the hotel has ever been anything but an upscale fun center.

The US\$30-million hotel features luxurious guest rooms with all the trimmings, a cluster of outdoor and indoor pools complete with swim-up bars, and a formal restaurant overlooking the shores of Lake Gatún. In a bid to keep their clientele busy (and to keep them from snooping around too much), the Meliá offers a wide range of tours including fishing and kayaking expeditions on the adjacent lake, organized tours to the canal and Fuerte San Lorenzo, and day-hikes and night safaris in the Área Protegida San Lorenzo.

In the past, most overnight guests at Building 400 arrived via military convoy or Blackhawk chopper. Of course, today it's recommended that you arrive via private vehicle; take the Cuatro Altos turnoff on the Transisthmian Hwy and follow signs for the hotel.

staff can help you arrange tours and guided hikes as well as a hot meal (there aren't too many restaurants in these parts). Fuerte Davis is located on the Cuatro Altos turnoff of the Transisthmian Hwy (follow the signs) and is best accessed by private vehicle.

Getting There & Away

As there is no public transportation to either Fuerte San Lorenzo or the Área Protegida San Lorenzo, this area is best explored by private vehicle. It is however possible to take a taxi to Fuerte San Lorenzo from Colón, though taxis are uncommon as you get closer to the reserve.

PORTOBELO

pop 4000

Although today it is little more than a sleepy fishing village on the shores of the Caribbean, Portobelo was once the greatest Spanish port in Central America. Gold from Peru and treasures from the Orient entered Panama City and were carried overland by mule to the fortresses at Portobelo. During the annual trade fair, galleons laden with goods from Spain arrived to trade for gold

and other products from the New World. However, much like Nombre de Dio, Panamá and Fuerte San Lorenzo, Portobelo was the target of constant attacks at the hands of English privateers. Considering that the city was destroyed several times throughout its history, it's remarkable that so much of the colonial fortresses still stand.

Today Portobelo is an economically depressed town, and the majority of its inhabitants make their living from either fishing, tending crops or raising livestock. Their homes are situated among the ruins of the colonial fortifications, half of which retain some of their original form, half of which are meager piles of cut stone and coral. However, the city bursts to life every October 21 for the Festival de Cristo Negro (Festival of the Black Christ), one of the country's most vibrant and spiritual celebrations.

Portobelo also attracts dedicated Scuba divers, especially since there are no less than 16 major dive sites in the adjacent waters. Although visibility can't compare to more traditional Caribbean diving destinations, few people leave here unhappy as there is an excellent variety of underwater attractions,

including a 110-ft cargo ship and a C-45 twin-engine plane.

History

'Puerto Bello,' the Beautiful Port, was named by Columbus in 1502, when he stopped here on his fourth New World voyage. Since it was common at the time to abbreviate Spanish names, the beautiful port quickly became known as simply 'Portobelo.'

Portobelo consisted of no more than 10 houses when the celebrated Italian engineer Juan Bautista Antonelli arrived in 1586 on a mission to examine the defensibility of the Caribbean. After noting how well Portobelo's bay lent itself to defensive works, King Felipe II ordered that Nombre de Dios be abandoned and Portobelo colonized. However, it wasn't until after Nombre de Dios was completely destroyed by Sir Francis Drake in 1596 that the transfer took place.

The city of San Felipe de Portobelo was founded in 1597 and its 200-year history was riddled with numerous invasions at the hands of English privateers and the Royal Navy. Portobelo was first attacked in 1602 by the English pirate William Parker, but it was the infamous Sir Henry Morgan who sacked the city in 1671.

However, not all of the invasions were the product of superior tactics or numbers. In 1679 the crews of two English ships and one French vessel united in an attack on Portobelo. They landed 200 men at such a distance from the town that it took them three nights

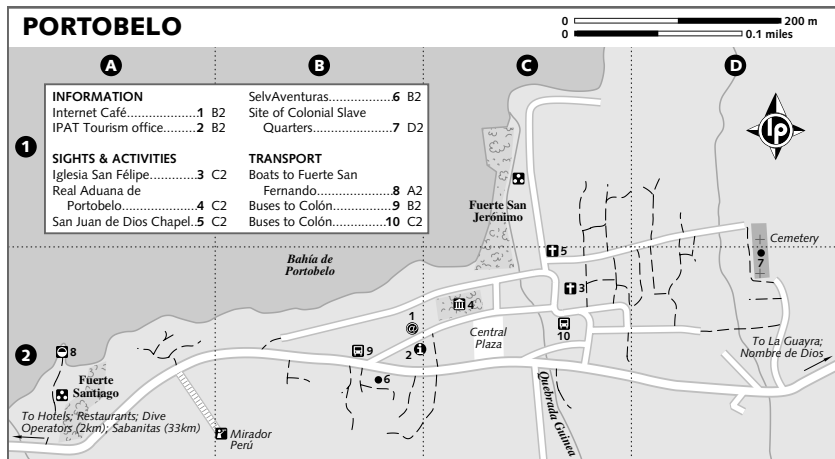
of marching to reach it. As they neared Portobelo, they were seen by a farmer, who ran ahead to sound the alarm, but the pirates followed so closely behind that the town had no time to prepare. Unaware of how small the buccaneer force was, all the inhabitants fled.

The pirates spent two days and nights in Portobelo, collecting plunder in constant apprehension that the Spaniards would return in great numbers and attack them. However, the buccaneers got back to their ships unmolested and then distributed 160 pieces of eight to each man. At the time, one piece of eight would pay for a night's stay at the best inn in Seville.

Attacks on Portobelo continued unabated until the city was destroyed in 1739 by an attack led by Admiral Edward Vernon. Although Portobelo was rebuilt in 1751, it never attained its former prominence and in time became a virtual ruin. Later, much of the outermost fortress was dismantled to build the Panama Canal and many of the larger stones were used in the construction of the Gatún Locks. There are, however, still considerable parts of the town and fortresses left and today Portobelo is protected as a national park and as a Unesco World Heritage Site.

Orientation & Information

Portobelo consists of about 15 square blocks of mostly run-down homes and businesses beside a paved, two-lane road. That road intersects with the Panama City-Colón road at the town of Sabanitas, 33km to the west.



East of Portobelo, the road forks after 9km. The right branch of the road extends 14km further east to Nombre de Dios; the left branch extends 11km to the hamlet of La Guayra, where you can hire boats to Isla Grande (p254).

The **IPAT tourist office** (☎ 448 2200; 🕒 9am-5pm), just off the main road through town, has a small display of paintings focusing on the Congo in the back room (only Spanish is spoken). Across the street from the tourist office is an **internet café** (per hr US\$1.50; 🕒 8:30am-4pm Mon-Fri).

Sights

FORTS

To defend his bullion and galleons from pirates, King Felipe II ordered forts to be constructed at Portobelo based on Antonelli's recommendation. In 1601 Fuerte San Felipe and Fuerte San Diego were built near the mouth of the bay, but were subsequently destroyed by Admiral Vernon in 1739. In the years to follow, **Fuerte San Fernando** was built on top of these ruins, though sadly much of the fort was later taken down by American engineers, who used its walls to create the breakwater protecting the northern end of the Panama Canal. Still, it's a scenic spot worth visiting and boats can be hired from the water's edge (US\$2 per person round-trip) to bring you across the bay to the fort.

As you approach the town from the west, the first fort you'll see is **Fuerte Santiago**, which was also built after Vernon's attack. Several of its walls are 3m thick and made entirely of cut coral. Known to the Spaniards as 'reef rock,' coral was extensively used as a building material since it's tough as granite yet light as pumice and it can easily be shaped with a saw. The ruins at Fuerte Santiago include officers' quarters, artillery sheds, a sentry box, barracks and several watchtowers.

Fuerte San Jerónimo, closer to the center of town, was the largest fortress ever built to protect the bay. If you're short on time, San Jerónimo is more complete and makes for a better visit than Santiago. Facing the mouth of the bay are 18 cannon embrasures, some of which remain exactly where the Spanish troops left them when they returned home in 1821 – the year Panama declared its independence from Spain. Beyond the impressive gateway of San Jerónimo are the remains of the officers' quarters, barracks and a guardroom.

On a hill overlooking Santiago and much of the bay is a small but well-preserved watchtower called **Mirador Perú**, which was built at the same time as Fuerte Santiago. There are steps carved into the hillside to reach the lookout and the views of the coastline from here are expansive. Unfortunately for the Spanish, however, the views weren't good enough to save their city from being repeatedly sacked by the English.

REAL ADUANA DE PORTOBELLO

The handsome, two-story **Royal Customs House of Portobelo** (admission US\$1; 🕒 8am-4pm) was originally built in 1630 to serve as the *contaduría* (counting house) for the king's gold. It was in this building that the treasure brought across the isthmus was recorded and stored until it could be placed on galleons and sailed to Spain. According to early records, no less than 233 soldiers were garrisoned in this building alone.

The customs house consists of two main rooms, which are now used as permanent exhibition halls. One room displays dozens of purple velvet robes, which are placed on the statue of the Black Christ every October when thousands of devotees descend on Portobelo to worship the icon (see opposite). Among the donors are boxer Roberto Duran and salsa star Ismael Rivera. The other room contains replicas of Spanish-colonial rifles, sketches of Portobelo's forts, 20th-century black-and-white photos of the town and a few dozen rusty cannon balls.

Before leaving, don't forget to visit the building's 2nd floor, which features an intriguing collection of photos and drawings of the Spanish-colonial fortresses that exist throughout Latin America. Also, don't overlook the bronze cannon at the entrance – it was recovered from a sunken galleon and bears a Spanish coat of arms as well as the date of manufacture (1617).

Activities

DIVING & SNORKELING

It's not Belize or the Bay Islands, but if you're an avid scuba diver, you'll have a good time here. In addition to the famous sunken cargo ship and military plane, the waters around Portobelo are also home to soft coral-laden walls, off-shore reefs and rock gardens. The good news is that you'll probably see several pelagic animals including nurse sharks, black-

tip reef sharks and eagle rays. The bad news is that you probably won't see them very well, especially if it has been raining. Generally speaking, you can expect about 10m of underwater visibility, but don't be surprised if it gets as low as 3m. Fortunately, scuba diving along this stretch of the Caribbean is fairly cheap and a bad day of diving is always better than a good day of work.

There are two dive operators in Portobelo, both located along Sabanitas–Portobelo road, about 2km west of town. A third operator, Jimmy's Caribbean Dive Resort, is located near the town of Nombre de Dios (p256).

At both of the operators listed below, a one-tank dive will cost about US\$60 and a two-tank dive is US\$80. An openwater/advanced course will cost US\$200/275. If you're planning to dive with either, it's best to phone ahead or make a reservation via the internet.

Scubaportobelo (☎ 448 2147; www.scubapanama.com) The Portobelo branch of Scubapanama (p312) can arrange Scuba diving trips throughout the country.

Twin Oceans Dive Center (☎ 448 2067; www.twin-oceans.com) Located inside the Coco Plum Eco Lodge (p254), this professional outfit has over 20 years of diving experience in Panamanian waters.

HIKING

Situated on the town's main road, **SelvAventuras** (☎ 688 6247; www.geocities.com/selvaaventuras)

is run by a group of charismatic locals eager to show visitors the wilder side of Portobelo. If you're looking to explore the surrounding Parque Nacional Portobelo, these guys can bring you to a number of impressive locales: Catarata de Río Piedras, a towering 45m waterfall; the tranquil waterfall-fed Salto de Tigre; and the rainforest-enshrouded swimming hole of Río Iguanita. Trips start at US\$15 per person; you'll need some Spanish.

SWIMMING

If you're looking for a day of fun in the sun, nearby **Playa Blanca** (p254) is a great day trip from Portobelo.

Festivals & Events

For information on the Black Christ Festival, see the boxed text below.

Los Congos, a festivity in which Blacks assume the role of escaped slaves and run around taking 'captives,' is held in Portobelo during Carnival, on New Year's Eve and March 20, Portobelo's patron saint day. 'The Congos' is both the name of the festivity and the name of the people who maintain this intriguing tradition, which is based around a satire of colonial Spaniards.

The tradition dates from the days of Panama's slave trade, when Blacks escaped into

THE LEGEND OF THE BLACK CHRIST

Every October 21, pilgrims from all over Panama arrive in Portobelo to partake in the **Festival de Cristo Negro** (Black Christ Festival), which honors the 1.5m-high statue of the Black Christ housed in the **Iglesia de San Felipe**. The exact origins of the Black Christ statue are a matter of speculation, especially since all definitive church records were lost in the fire that followed Henry Morgan's sacking of Panamá in 1671. However, there's no shortage of fanciful stories surrounding the origins of the statue.

One story has it that a ship bound for Cartagena, Colombia, tried to leave Portobelo five times, but on each occasion a mighty storm blew the ship back to the town's edge, nearly sinking it in the process. The terrified crew are said to have lightened their vessel by tossing a heavy box overboard. On their sixth attempt to sail out of the bay, the storm did not appear and they were able to go on their way unchallenged. Several days later, local fishers found the discarded box floating off Portobelo and discovered the Black Christ inside.

A second story claims that the box was instead found floating at sea during a cholera epidemic. After being retrieved by local fisherman, the statue was placed inside the Iglesia de San Felipe. Almost immediately, as the story goes, the epidemic passed and the infected were instantaneously cured.

The list of tales goes on, though regardless of the statue's actual origins, the Black Christ Festival is a sight behold. After the sun sets on October 21, the statue is paraded down the streets of Portobelo, while pilgrims bedecked in purple robes and thorned crowns dance and drink until the small hours of the morning.

the jungle and formed communities of exiles. The satire consists of taking someone prisoner and demanding a huge ransom, though the prisoner is freed when he or she pays a token ransom (US\$0.50 will suffice). The Congos are generally dressed in outlandish outfits that include tattered clothes, hats that resemble crowns and wooden swords, and usually perform before audiences.

Of course, sometimes a crazy-looking group of men will descend upon a person who's innocently walking down the street and demand thousands of dollars. If you ever find yourself an innocent 'victim' of this tradition, try not to freak out – they'll settle for a few coins.

Sleeping & Eating

Both dive operators in town offer rooms to their customers, though nondivers can stay at either spot without getting their feet wet.

You'll find that many local families also rent out spare rooms for around US\$5 to US\$10 – ask at the IPAT tourist office (p251).

Scubaportobelo (☎ 448 2147; www.scubapanama.com; 5-person cabin weekday/weekend US\$30/50; (P) ♿) If you're a nondiver, you might feel a bit out of place here, but avid divers will enjoy the company of other aqua-lovers. Although they are supposed to accommodate five people, the stale and somewhat past their sell-by-date cabins are probably a better fit for two or three.

Coco Plum Eco Lodge (☎ 264 1338; www.cocoplumpanama.com; s/d/tr US\$35/45/55; (P) ♿) Home to the Twin Oceans Dive Center, the Coco Plum is definitely a divers' den, but there are enough landlubbers here to even things out a bit. The maritime theme is definitely a bit kitschy, though the fish prints and beach murals brighten up the otherwise cookie-cutter rooms. Even if you're not staying here, stop by in the evenings for dinner and a drink as the attached bar-restaurant is one of only a handful of spots in town.

Getting There & Away

Buses to Portobelo (US\$1.50, one hour, hourly) depart from Colón's Terminal de Buses from 6:30am to 6pm. If you're coming by bus from Panama City, take the bus heading for Colón and get off at Sabanitas, 10km before Colón. Next, catch the bus coming from Colón to Portobelo when it passes through Sabanitas, thus avoiding a trip into Colón.

Getting Around

There are occasional taxis in Portobelo, though they never seem to be around when you need them. Instead, it's best to travel along the Sabanitas–Portobelo road by flagging down any of the buses headed in your direction. After dark, there is no public transportation.

AROUND PORTOBELLO

Playa Blanca

A 20-minute boat ride from Portobelo will bring you to this lovely white-sand beach, which fronts a tranquil cove and is surrounded by dense wilderness. Since it is impossible to access the beach by car or bus, you'd be forgiven in thinking that Playa Blanca is an uninhabited island floating in the Caribbean.

Playa Blanca has some of the least disturbed reefs between Colón and the Archipiélago de San Blas and its sheltered waters have better visibility than in nearby Portobelo. There's a colorful reef in the center of the cove that's a mere shell's toss away from the beach as well as a second reef that sits in deeper waters about 100m offshore.

Although it's easy enough to visit Playa Blanca as a day trip from Portobelo, beach-lovers can slow things down a bit by spending a night or two at the low-key **Tesoro del Caribe** (☎ 613 5749; www.tesorodelcaribe.com; r per person from US\$75). Mellow rooms emphasize comfort and style instead of luxury, and the solar-powered lights, fans and showers help minimize the impact of your stay on the surrounding environment. In keeping with the resort theme, you can take advantage of the available snorkeling gear, canoes, kayaks and sailboats, or just kick-back with a cold beer and some fresh ceviche in the casual bar-restaurant.

Any boat in Portobelo can bring you to the Playa Blanca, though it's possible to arrange for a pick-up if you make a reservation in advance.

ISLA GRANDE

pop 900

Palm trees and white-sand beaches form the backdrop to this lovely little island, just 15km offshore from Portobelo. A popular getaway for Panama City folk fleeing the urban grind, Isla Grande is an ideal setting for snorkeling, scuba diving or simply soaking up the island's relaxed vibe. A few hundred people of African descent live on Grande, most of whom eke out

SURFING IN COLÓN PROVINCE

Although it's one of Panama's least surfed provinces, there are a number of great breaks to be had in Colón. And of course, the lack of crowds means that you won't have to share your wave with anyone. The following beaches are mapped on pp68–9.

- **Playa María Chiquita** In front of María Chiquita. Beach break with lefts and rights, but limited to big swell.
- **Isla Grande** In front of La Guayra, best reached by water taxi. Reef bottom break with three peaks, rights and lefts.
- **Isla Mamei** Next to Isla Grande, reached by boat or paddling from Isla Grande. Left-hand point break over shallow reef.
- **Playa Palenque/Cuango** In front of Cuango village. Beach break with rights and lefts. Surfers seldom seen here.
- **Playa Grande Mainland** East of Isla Grande. Beach break with some reef. Waves break left and right.
- **Turtles** Paddling distance from Playa Grande. Waves are great; unreal tubes, if it is glassy with a big swell.
- **V-Land** Near Devils Beach, in Sherman. Unbelievable right-point reef break with great tubes when there's big swell and it's glassy.

a living from fishing and coconuts – you'll get a taste of both when you sample the fine island cuisine.

Owing to its location on Panama's northern Caribbean coast, Isla Grande gets an awful lot of rain year-round. Terms like 'rainy' and 'dry' seasons don't apply here, though torrential showers are usually intense and shortlived, much like a traveling fling.

Orientation

Isla Grande is 10-minute boat ride from La Guayra, a tiny coastal hamlet that is connected to Colón via frequent bus connections. Boats arriving at Isla Grande dock in front of the Cabañas Super Jackson, which serves as the island's unofficial landmark.

Activities

Some lovely **beaches** on the northern side of the island can be reached by boat (hire a water taxi at the dock in front of Cabañas Super Jackson) or on foot (there's a water's edge trail that loops around the 5km-long, 1.5km-wide island, as well a slippery cross-island trail).

Some fine snorkeling and dive sites are within a 10-minute boat ride of the island. **Centro de Buceo Isla Grande** (☎ 501 4374; www.buceoenpanama.com; 1-2-tank dive US\$60/80), located 50m west of Cabañas Super Jackson, offers a variety of dives around the island and in the Archipiélago de San Blás.

For US\$30, one of the boaters in front of Cabañas Super Jackson will take you on a half-day adventure. The possibilities are quite appealing – the **mangroves** east of Isla Grande are fun to explore, or you could go **snorkeling** off the coast of the nearby islets.

Festivals & Events

The **Festival of San Juan Bautista** is celebrated here on June 24 with swimming and canoe races. The **Virgen del Carmen** is honored on July 16 with a land and sea procession, baptisms and masses.

Carnaval is also celebrated here in rare form. Women wear traditional *polleras* (traditional festive dresses) while men wear ragged pants tied at the waist with old sea rope, and everyone dances the conga. There are also satirical songs about current events and a lot of joking in the Caribbean calypso tradition.

Sleeping & Eating

Cabañas Super Jackson (☎ 448 2311; d with fan/air-con US\$20/35; ♿) Closest to the main pier, this Isla Grande landmark offers a handful of budget rooms that have the character and ambience of a hospital waiting room. There are definitely more comfortable spots on the island, but it's hard to beat the price, the convenience factor and the humorous name. If you're looking to fill the gut without breaking the bank, the small on-site restaurant

serves both island cuisine and traditional Panamanian favorites.

Hotel Sister Moon (☎ 226 9861; www.hotelsistermoon.com; d from US\$70; 📶 🚶 🚰) A 10-minute walk east of the Super Jackson brings you to this lovely clutch of cabins, which are perched on a hillside at the end of the island. Surrounded by swaying palms and crashing waves, each cabin boasts fabulous views from its front porch, though they're best appreciated from the cozy confines of a swinging hammock. The hotel also has an excellent bar-restaurant that's built right over the water and features the island's famous coconut-infused seafood.

Bananas Village Resort (☎ 263 9766; www.bananasresort.com; s/d from US\$65/100; 📶 🚶 🚰) Located on the northern side of the island and only accessible by boat or trail, Grande's most upscale accommodation consists of several two-story A-frame cottages that are backed by jungle and fronted by the sea. Cheerful rooms are highlighted by white-wicker furniture and French doors – ask for the upstairs rooms which are slightly larger and have private balconies. Guests can also take advantage of the full resort amenities on offer including the free use of boats and snorkeling gear, organized tours and live shows.

Getting There & Away

Buses to La Guayra leave from the Colón bus terminal hourly from 6am to 6pm (US\$2.50, 1½ hours). These buses can be also be boarded at Sabanitas, the turnoff for Portobelo, La Guayra, and Nombre de Dios.

In La Guayra, there are always skippers hanging about near the water's edge, waiting to take people to the island. The 10-minute boat ride costs US\$1 per person; secure parking costs US\$1 per day.

NOMBRE DE DIOS

pop 1000

Once regarded as 'treasure house of the world,' Nombre de Dios was destroyed without prejudice by Sir Francis Drake in 1596. Although the Spanish subsequently abandoned the city, Drake's glory was fleeting. With the taste of victory still fresh in his mouth, Drake contracted dysentery and died quietly at sea.

For the past 400 odd years, Nombre de Dios has existed as a backwater hamlet. There are no Spanish ruins to speak of, though local residents, the majority of whom are descended from slaves, occasionally find silver coins on the beach.

Most travelers pass through Nombre de Dios on their way to the popular Jimmy's Caribbean Dive Resort, but you can stop here if you have a burning desire to look for Drake's body (see the boxed text, below).

History

In 1510 Diego de Nicuesa ordered his small fleet to land after they failed to establish a colony at the mouth of the Río Belén in Veraguas. Leading a fleet of sick and starving men, Nicuesa looked upon the seemingly fruitful shore near the northernmost point of the isthmus and exclaimed, '*Paremos aqui, en el nombre de Dios!*' (Let us stop here, in

LOCAL LORE: A PIRATE'S GRAVE

Legend has it that Sir Francis Drake's body lies near Nombre de Dios in a leaden coffin at the bottom of the ocean, but it remains undiscovered to this day. The captain was buried at sea within striking distance of the scenes of his earlier exploits, his descent to the ocean floor accompanied by a thunderous salute fired by his fleet.

In Drake's honor, two of his own ships and his share of the Nombre de Dios treasure were sunk near the spot, though these too remain undiscovered to this day. A nearby point and a small island were named after him and a sermon was read aboard Drake's ship, the *Defiance*, with all of the captains of his fleet in attendance. It went like this:

Where Drake first found, there last he lost his name,
And for a tomb left nothing but his fame.
His body's buried beneath some great wave,
The sea that was his glory is his grave.
On whom an epitaph none can truly make,
For who can say, 'Here lies Sir Francis Drake?'

the name of God!). His followers, sensing something auspicious in his words, decided to call the point Nombre de Dios even before they landed.

Although 800 men had left Hispaniola in November of 1509, only 280 survived long enough to land on shore at Nombre de Dios. Using what little strength they had left, the settlers built a fledgling settlement and survived on rotten provisions and the occasional alligator.

A few months later, a scouting party from the Spanish colony at Antigua in the Darién stumbled upon Nombre de Dios. By this time, only 60 settlers remained, though the majority of the survivors were racked with sickness and hunger. Mortified by the desperate existence of Nombre de Dios, the scouts fled and returned to Antigua with horror stories about Nicuesa and his men.

Hoping to escape their earthly prison, Nicuesa and 17 men sailed to Antigua, but they were forbidden to come ashore by the colony's governor. Racked with desperation, Nicuesa and his men paddled to shore on a lifeboat; they were immediately seized, placed on the worst vessel in the harbor and forced to sail away. The rotting craft left Antigua on March 1, 1511, and the ship and its passengers were never seen again. Back at Nombre de Dios, the 43 miserable survivors were rescued and given asylum back in Antigua by its governor, Vasco Núñez de Balboa.

It is rumored that the worm-eaten vessel wrecked on the coast of Veraguas, where these words were found carved into a tree: *'Aquí anduvó perdido el desdichado Diego de Nicuesa'* (Here wandered lost the wretched Diego de Nicuesa). Another rumor has it that while landing on the coast for water, Nicuesa and his men were captured by natives, barbecued and eaten. According to a third rumor, a tree was found in Cuba inscribed with the words *'Aquí feneció el desdichado Nicuesa'* (Here died the wretched Nicuesa) carved into it.

Following the founding of Panamá in 1519, Nombre de Dios was resettled and quickly became the Caribbean terminus of trade across the isthmus. And so it remained until 1598 when it met its fate at the hands of Sir Francis Drake.

Orientation & Information

Nombre de Dios consists of nothing more than a few rows of houses and a small commercial plaza. Jimmy's Caribbean Dive Resort is located on a signed turnoff 5km east of town.

Sleeping

Five kilometers east of Nombre de Dios is the turnoff for **Jimmy's Caribbean Dive Resort** (☎ 682 9322; www.caribbeanjimmysdiveresort.com; divers 4/6/7 nights US\$499/799/895, nondivers 4/6/7 nights US\$369/519/589; 📍 🚶), a remote retreat of five intimate cabins with private facilities that are perched on the ocean's edge. Jimmy's is a long way from pretty much everything, though the divers staying here don't seem to care, especially since there is an excellent assortment of shore dives, reef dives, wreck dives and cavern dives on offer. If you're the partner of a serious diver and you're not looking to get your feet wet, Jimmy's offers plenty of other distractions including jungle excursions, horseback riding and fishing trips. The heart of the resort is an excellent restaurant-bar, which serves a variety of fresh seafood plates, pastas and grilled meats, and hosts live bands on weekends. Rates include lodging, three meals a day, two boat dives per day, activities, and transport to and from the airport in Panama City.

Getting There & Away

Buses to Nombre de Dios (labeled 'Costa Arriba') depart from Colón's bus terminal hourly from 6am to 6pm (US\$2.50, 1½ hours). These buses can be also be boarded at Sabanitas, the turnoff for Portobelo and La Guayra.

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