

Veraguas Province



Nearly 500 years ago, the first attempt by the Spanish to obtain a footing in the continental world was in modern-day Veraguas Province. Lured to the region by the natural beauty of its robust rivers and stunning peaks (as well as the promises of vast gold reserves), Christopher Columbus tried but failed to establish a Spanish colony here. Although the Spanish were successful in founding the town of Concepción, the gold was not to last. Today, the Mosquito Coast of Veraguas remains one of the most isolated and undeveloped regions in Panama.

However, Veraguas is anything but a pristine wilderness. From a height, the Caribbean and Pacific slopes of Veraguas look as different from each other as Canada's Rocky Mountains do from Australia's Great Sandy Desert. While the Caribbean slopes are home to lush virgin forests, the Pacific slope of Veraguas is an environmentalist's nightmare. Since most people living in the province makes their living through farming or ranching, perhaps as little as 5% of the original dry tropical forest remains – the rest was hacked down with ruthless efficiency.

It's fitting that with its history of colonization and environmental devastation, Veraguas Province is now the modern-day battleground for the forces of foreign investment and development versus cultural and environmental conservation. In particular, the region's two all-star highlights, Isla de Coiba and Santa Catalina, are in the midst of redefining themselves. It's hard to predict which side will win out: while the national marine park around Isla de Coiba was recently protected as a Unesco World Heritage site, the beaches around Santa Catalina, famous for their tremendous waves, are primed to boom.

HIGHLIGHTS

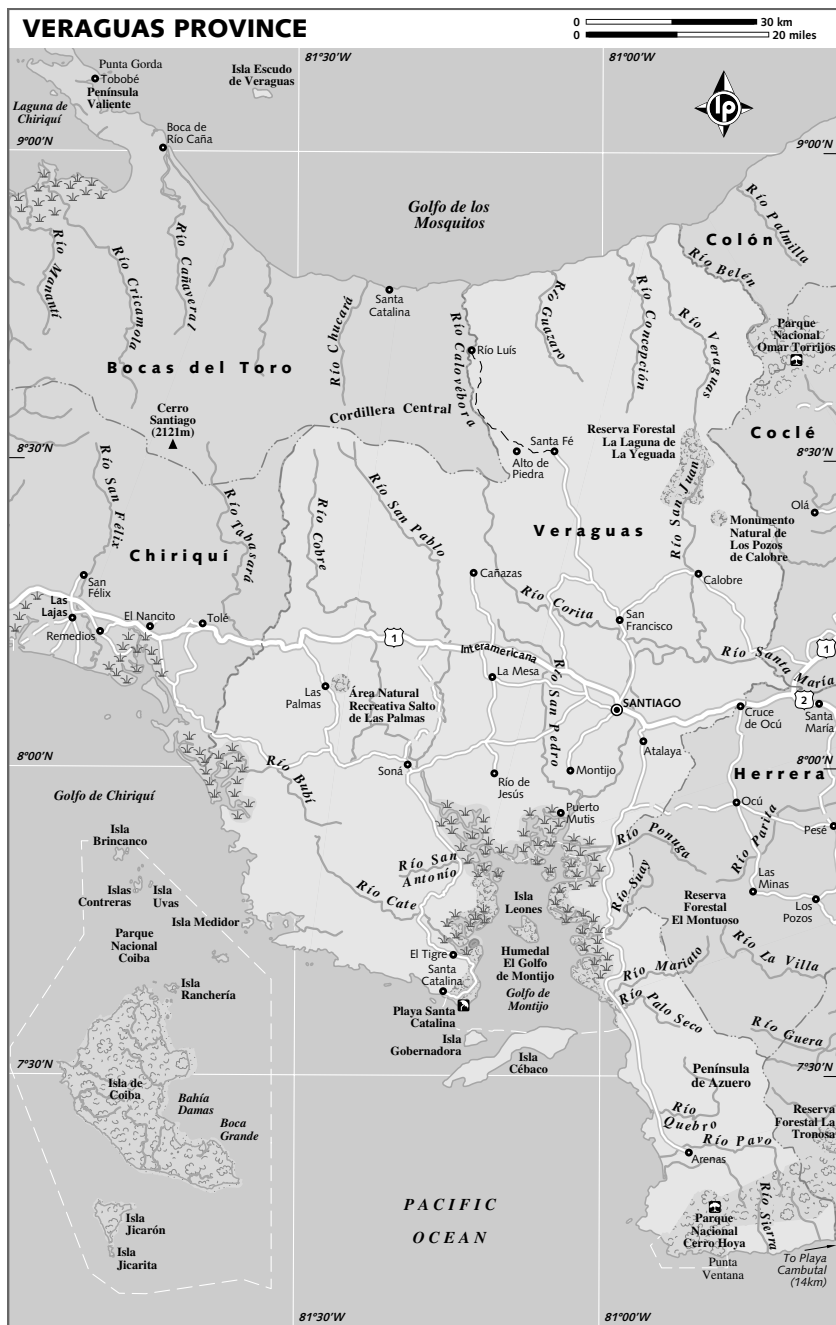
- Exploring the astounding natural beauty of **Parque Nacional Coiba** (p185), above or below the water line
- Surfing some seriously sick waves at **Playa Santa Catalina** (p182), Panama's legendary surf spot
- Escaping to the highland retreat of **Santa Fé** (p179), famous for its mountain air, bright flowers and lush forests
- Visiting the **Iglesia San Francisco de Veraguas** (p178), one of the Americas' best examples of baroque religious art and architecture



■ POPULATION: 210,100

■ AREA: 10,050 SQ KM

■ ELEVATION: SEA LEVEL TO 3478M



History

Columbus' first three voyages westward toward Asia were in search of land, though his fourth and final voyage was undertaken to find a water passage that would, by Columbus' calculation, pass south of Asia into the Indian Ocean. To the north the admiral had found Cuba, which he believed was part of eastern Asia, while to the south, he had found South America, which he described in his log book as a 'New World.' As a result, Columbus believed that the Atlantic Ocean flowed through a strait between them, and he was determined to find it.

For this venture, in which he proposed to sail around the world, Columbus chartered four small vessels. The year was 1502, and the great explorer spent most of it commanding his little worm-eaten fleet up and down the Caribbean coast from Venezuela to Nicaragua. Unable to find a strait, but seeing gold-laden natives in the region, the admiral cast anchor at the mouth of the Río Belén – the river that today constitutes the boundary between Veraguas and Colón Provinces. He was determined not to return to Spain empty-handed.

In February 1503 Columbus gave orders to establish a colony on a hill beside the river's silt-filled mouth. The Quibian, the area's native inhabitants, obviously disapproved. Armed with spears, the tribe massacred an exploratory party that had gone up the Río Belén. When Spanish corpses came floating down the river, Columbus, fearing an attack, loaded the ships and set sail for Hispaniola (island of modern-day Dominican Republic and Haiti).

In his journal, Columbus wrote: 'I departed, in the name of the Holy Trinity, on Easter night, with the ships rotten, worn out, and eaten with holes.' He died three years later believing he'd seen Asia, unaware that he'd found instead the second-largest landmass on Earth.

Over the next 30 years, several other expeditions were attempted by Spanish, though they all ended in similar disaster. The conquistadors, not ones to forget reports of gold in Veraguas, returned to the area two decades later, and eventually overcame the Quiban. They soon found gold, established mines, and in 1560 founded the town of Concepción (which has since disappeared), 10km west of the Río Belén. African slaves were brought

in to extract the gold, and to run the smelter in Concepción, though the mines were completely spent by 1590. Soon after, many miners left for newfound gold deposits in Colombia, while others escaped or were set free, and took to farming throughout Pacific Veraguas and the Península de Azuero.

SANTIAGO

pop 36,000

About 250km from Panama City is the town of Santiago, a small but bustling hub of rural commercial activity. Halfway between the capital and the Costa Rican border, and just north of the Península de Azuero, Santiago is a crossroads town where you can easily get a hot meal and a clean bed. For the casual tourist, there's little reason why you should stop in Santiago, though it's a good place to break up a long drive and recharge for the night.

Most of the town's commerce and services, including stores, banks, gas stations, internet cafes, restaurants and hotels, are along the Interamericana and Av Central, which splits off from the highway.

Approximately 25km south of Santiago is the port of Puerto Mutis, which is the most popular disembarkation point for boats heading to Coiba Island (p185).

Note that Santiago also serves as a convenient base for visiting the **Iglesia San Francisco de Veraguas** (San Francisco of Veraguas Church). For more information, see p178.

If all you need is a bed and a bathroom, one of the town's cheapies is **Hotel Gran David** (☎ 998 4510; s/d with fan US\$10/15, s/d with air-con US\$20/25; 📍 🚽 🚿), located on the Interamericana about 500m north of the Av Central intersection. This palatable option has fairly clean rooms, tile floors, adequate beds and private hot-water bathrooms. Although there are certainly cheaper options in town, it's nice to stay in a place that charges by the night and not by the hour.

Also along the Interamericana is the **Hotel Plaza Gran David** (☎ 998 3433; s/d US\$25/30; 📍 🚽 🚿), which is the nicest place to stay in town, mainly because it has a swimming pool. All of the rooms, which face out towards the pool, have air-con, tile floors, good beds and private hot-water bathrooms. It's certainly not a resort, but the Hotel Plaza Gran has a quiet location set back from the main road, and a pool can do a lot for a hotel's character.

THE LEGACY OF COLUMBUS

Despite the fact that Christopher Columbus never made landfall in what was to become the United States, he is nevertheless revered by the majority of Americans as a national hero. Every year, Americans celebrate his discovery of the New World on October 12, 1492, though it's usually observed on a Monday so everyone can spend the day shopping – it's hard to pass up Columbus Day sales.

Recently however, several cities across America have removed the national holiday from their calendars. Claiming that Columbus's life was anything but admirable, critics view the day as a celebration of conquest and genocide. In the US Virgin Islands, Columbus Day has been replaced by Puerto Rico–Virgin Islands Friendship Day, which honors the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean who suffered under the Spanish colonialism. In the state of South Dakota, Columbus Day has been replaced by Native American Day, which is aimed at increasing awareness of the past history and modern plight of this oft-overlooked indigenous group.

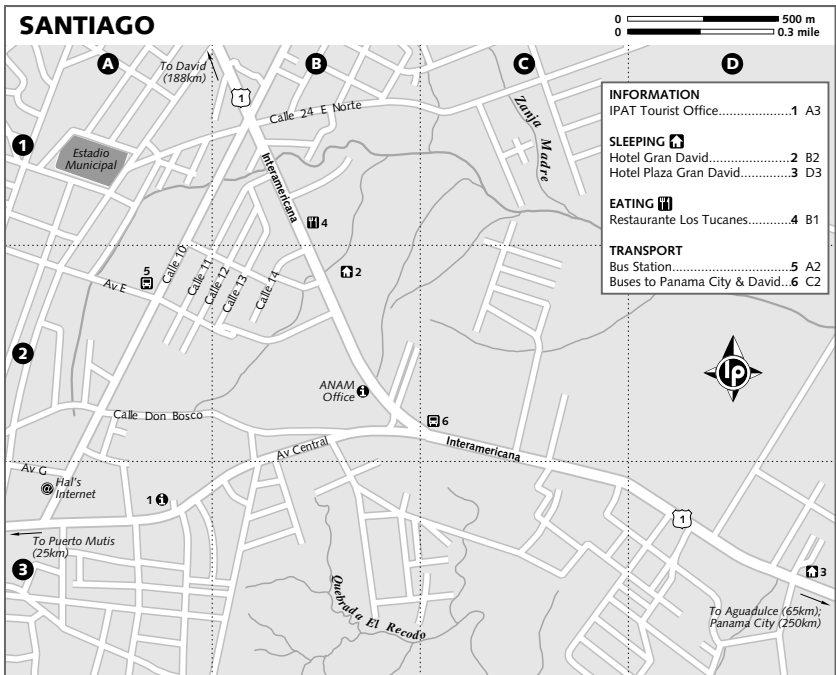
The growing dissent in America over the legacy of Columbus brings about a simple question: what did Columbus actually discover? Prior to his arrival in 1492, America had already been 'discovered' by other explorers and immigrants, not to mention the native peoples that were living there. However, Columbus's impact on history is simply to do with the fact that his journeys came at a time when mass media was improving across Europe. By reporting what he saw to Europeans across the social spectrum, Columbus was attributed in the public eye with the discovery of the New World.

In 1828, the great American storyteller Washington Irving published a historical narrative titled *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, which was aimed at building a foundation of American folklore. His efforts propelled Columbus into the national spotlight, though adulation of the explorer peaked in 1892 when the country celebrated the 400th anniversary of his arrival in the Americas. All across the country, monuments to Columbus were erected, while cities, towns, and streets changed their names, including the capital cities of Columbus, Ohio and Columbia, South Carolina. The admiration of Columbus was particularly embraced by Italian-American and Catholic communities, who began to view their ancestor as one of the founding fathers of America.

The need to separate myth from reality brings about a second question: what did Christopher Columbus actually achieve? If you ask any American school child, they'll proudly explain to you that Columbus proved the world was round even though everyone in Europe thought the world was flat. By defying the conventions of the time, and sailing west to get to the Far East (Columbus died believing that he had arrived in the East Indies), Columbus is often hailed as a model of the American 'can-do' attitude. Of course, it stands to reason that Columbus didn't actually prove that the world wasn't flat, especially since Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan was the first person to circumnavigate the globe. (Actually, Magellan didn't circumnavigate the globe in one trip since he was killed in 1521 at the Battle of Mactan in the Philippines. Instead, it was the 18 survivors of his expedition that finally returned to Spain after a journey of more than three years.)

Unfortunately, history often has a way of succumbing to popular myth and lore. Since Columbus Day in America is generally thought of as a celebration of the nation's history, there is little room for public discourse on the subject. Today, the majority of Americans remain ignorant about the realities of Columbus, and critics of the holiday argue that disregarding history is an injustice to the surviving indigenous communities of the New World.

Not surprisingly, this theme has been picked up by politicians across Latin America, most notably left-wing Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, who campaigned in 2003 to wipe out Columbus Day across the Americas. Of course, it's unlikely that Chávez's message will fall on receptive ears in America, especially since both countries have recently enjoyed less than lukewarm relations. In the meantime, school children in America will continue to learn about the Niña, the Pinta and the Santa Maria, though it's unlikely they'll hear the whole story about the New World's first genocide which followed in the wake of his discoveries.



If you're looking for a bite to eat, the **Restaurante Los Tucanes** (mains US\$4-7) is a favorite for David–Panama City buses passing on the Interamericana. In addition to daily specials such as roast chicken, chicken parmesan and shrimp *criolla* (tomato and onion sauce), you can grab hot sandwiches to go if you're looking to keep on traveling.

From the **bus terminal** (☎ 998 4006), buses depart for David (US\$6, three hours) hourly from 9am to 2am, and for Panama City (US\$6, four hours) hourly from 3:15am to 9:15pm.

Buses to destinations in Veraguas depart from Santiago's bus station on Calle 10, near Av E. For Santa Fé, buses depart half-hourly from 5am to 6pm (US\$2, 1½ hours). You can also hail these on the turnoff from the Interamericana, north of Calle 24. Buses to Soná (from where you can get a bus to Santa Catalina) depart half-hourly from 7am to 6pm (US\$1.50, one hour).

If you don't have your own wheels, taxis are the way to travel within Santiago – they are easy to hail and they go anywhere in town for US\$2 or less.

IGLESIA SAN FRANCISCO DE VERAGUAS

In the small town of San Francisco, 16km north of the Interamericana on the road from Santiago to Santa Fé, is the historic **San Francisco of Veraguas Church**, which is one of the best and oldest examples of baroque art and architecture in the Americas.

The centerpiece of this church, which was built by local indigenous communities, is the highly ornate altar of ash and bitter cedar. Although most colonial altars in the Americas were brought over from Europe, this altar was carved locally around the same time that the church was constructed. The date of completion is estimated to be 1727, but no one can confirm this, as written records have not survived to the present.

Carved into the altar and elsewhere around the church are the usual images (the crucifixion, the Virgin, the saints), but also throughout the church are finely carved and well-preserved images of the artisans and prominent natives. Their faces are cleverly inserted into the religious scenes – some appear atop the bodies of

cherubs. One large carving also includes items that had special meaning for the natives or otherwise impressed them – an eagle piercing its own heart with its beak, three large dice, a Spanish sword, a lantern and a human skull.

The steeple, incidentally, is not original. The original bell tower survived until 1942, when it suddenly collapsed without warning. Unfortunately, the new one doesn't resemble the old one. The original served two purposes, one good, one questionable – it was, of course, used for religious purposes, but the Spaniards also used it as a lookout tower to monitor the movements of the natives and slaves in the community.

To reach the church, head 16km north on the San Francisco turnoff from the Interamericana, until you reach the police substation – you'll see a stop sign there, and the station is conspicuously located on the main road. Veer right, proceed 400m, and then turn right again at the Supermercado Juan XXIII de San Francisco. Another 100m on, you'll see the church on the left.

A bus leaves the Santiago station for San Francisco (US\$1, 25 minutes, every 30 minutes from 7am to 6pm).

If you're short on time, an alternative is to hire a taxi in Santiago to take you to the church and, if you wish, on to Santa Fé. Expect to pay US\$12 roundtrip to and from San Francisco, and another US\$18 if you hire the taxi to take you all the way to Santa Fé.

Near the church in San Francisco is **El Chorro del Spiritu Santo** (Holy Spirit Waterfall), which has a fine swimming hole. To get to here, follow the road as it winds around the church, and then take the road just behind the church. After a few hundred meters, take the first right; after another several hundred meters the road will bring you to the small cascades.

Note that there are no places to stay in San Francisco, though you easily stop by on your way to Santiago or other destinations in Veraguas.

SANTA FÉ

pop 3000

This tiny mountain town lies in the shadow of the Continental Divide about 52km north of Santiago. At an altitude of 1000m, Santa Fé is much cooler than the lowlands, and much of the surroundings forests remain as they did when the Spaniards founded the town in 1557.

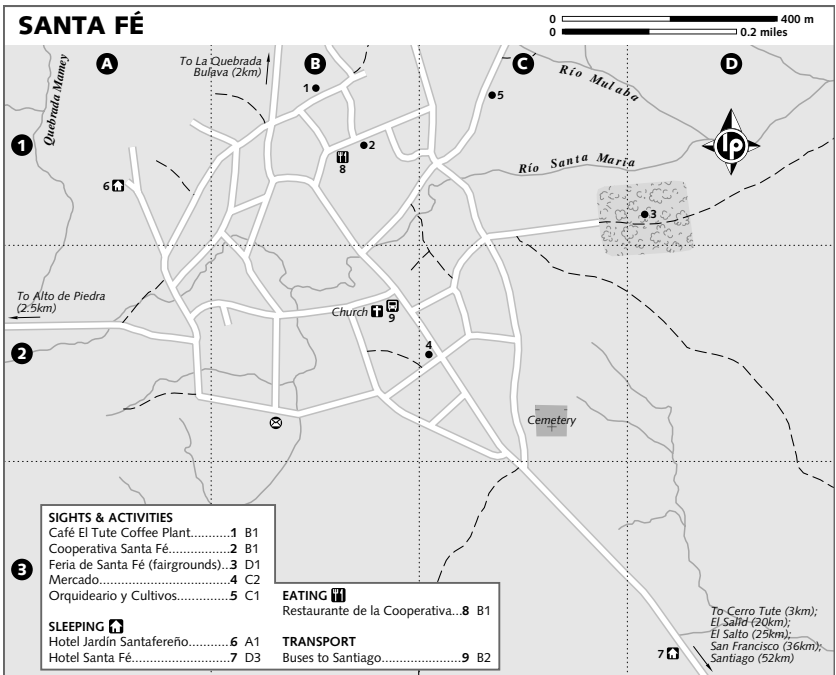
Like Boquete (p201), Santa Fé is famous for its fresh clean air and bucolic surroundings. However, while Boquete has become a hot-spot tourist destination, Santa Fé sees few foreign visitors, though the town remains incredibly popular with weekenders Panamanians from the capital. With lush mountainsides, waterfalls and mountain streams right outside the town, Santa Fé is an ideal destination for hikers, bird-watchers and those simply wanting to soak up the beauty of the highlands.

LOCAL LORE: EL DORADO

The Spanish colonization of the New World may have taken place under the guise of spreading civilization and Christianity, though early explorers were seemingly driven by simple greed. In the months prior to his landing in Panama, Columbus wrote in his journal about the need to acquire more treasures in order to help finance his expedition and to appease the Spanish royalty. Thus, it's not surprising that his attempts to start a colony in Veraguas were fuelled by rumors of the vast cities of gold that lay waiting in the jungles.

Perhaps the most famous legend was of El Dorado, a legendary city of pure gold that was ruled over by *El Indio Dorado* or 'The Golden Indian.' Although the myth originated in the 1530s when conquistador Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada came across the nation of Muisica in the Colombian Andes, the legend quickly spread throughout Central and South America.

Awed by the quantities of gold that the indigenous population in the Americas used for adornment, the Spanish swept through both continents in search of El Dorado. Eventually, the lore took on epic proportions, and some conquistadores believed they were searching for a lost kingdom or even an empire. However, after claiming most of the Americas, the Spaniards quickly realized that there were no golden cities, just rich mines. Of course, this didn't stop them from mining their empire to the ground, and shipping their riches back to Spain across the Isthmus of Panama.



Orientation & Information

Town planning is not evident in Santa Fé. The road that heads north to town from Santiago and the Interamericana, winding through lovely valleys along the way, branches out in three directions at the southern edge of town. The middle 'branch' forks yet again after a few more blocks.

None of the streets in town have names, and that's just fine with Santa Fé residents – everybody here seems to know where everybody else lives. And the structures in town that aren't homes (the mayor's office, the cooperative, the church and so on) can be counted on both hands.

Sights & Activities

ORQUIDEARIO Y CULTIVOS

Santa Fé is known throughout Panama for its orchids. Here, the person to see about these flowers is **Bertha de Castellón** (☎ 954 0910), who has an impressive collection of them (no fewer than 265 species) in her own backyard, and enjoys showing them to enthusiasts. Most of the orchids are hand-somely displayed in hanging coconut shells.

Among her orchids are some of the largest and some of the smallest varieties in the world, as well as a lovely lavender orchid found only in the hills around Santa Fé.

Bertha, who speaks a little English, can tell you a great many things about her plants if you can communicate with her in Spanish. Bertha and her brother are also the area's top birding guides, and can organize tours throughout the surrounding area.

To get to Bertha's house, take the right 'branch' at the point where the Santiago–Santa Fé road forks at the southern edge of town. Then take the second right and proceed 100m or so further, until you see a driveway flanked by a sign that reads: 'Orquideario y Cultivos Las Fragacias de Santa Fé.' Her house is located at the intersection of the right fork road and the road leading to the fairgrounds.

Although Bertha does not charge a fee for showing her orchids, feel free to leave a donation. Please remember you are visiting a home, so be considerate: don't show up before 9am or after 5pm, and if you call out to her from her gate and there's no answer,

assume she's not home – don't open the gate unless she instructs you to do so.

RIVERS & WATERFALLS

Not far from Santa Fé are a number of lovely waterfalls (including one that's pictured on IPAT's Veraguas glossy publication) and empty mountain streams, and the most accessible swimming spots are all within walking distance from town. Head along the same road as Bertha's, and you'll soon reach several spots that make for a nice dip. Continuing on, you'll reach a bridge – cross it, take the second turnoff on the right and you'll find a place to rent inner tubes (US\$1), allowing you to float idly down the river.

Behind the Café El Tute coffee factory, there's a lovely swimming hole, **La Quebrada Bulava**, about 30 minutes' walk away. Ask one of the local kids to show you the way.

El Salto is among the most impressive falls in this area. It lies about 30 minutes south of Santa Fé along a bad road fit only for a 4WD (and only accessible during the dry season). There are also three waterfalls in Alto de Piedra, though you shouldn't enter this area without first hiring a local guide.

ALTO DE PIEDRA & CERRO TUTE

There are two heavily forested mountainous areas near town that offer some fine birding. Many specialties of eastern Chiriquí and Veraguas Provinces can be found here, including the rufous-winged woodpecker and the crimson-collared tanager. Both areas require a 4WD vehicle, a horse or strong legs.

Alto de Piedra, reachable by a road that leaves the western side of town, is an excellent place to explore if you have the time and the will. This vast, mountainous area contains thousands of hectares of pristine wilderness, and extends from the northern edge of Santa Fé to the Caribbean Sea. The entire northern portion of the province – the area where Columbus, Nicuesa and the other Spanish explorers had so much trouble – contains not a single road, and is sparsely inhabited. The edge of the awesome forest is only a couple of kilometers from town, and the forest becomes thick jungle once you clear the ridge and proceed down the Caribbean slope.

Cerro Tute, a few kilometers south of town, on the western side of the Santiago–Santa Fé road, is less rugged and more accessible

than Alto de Piedra. In addition to the area's famed birdlife, Cerro Tute is also home to a towering set of waterfalls and a cliff with wind currents that seemingly prevent anyone from falling off. The extensive trail network here that winds through both primary and secondary rainforest.

You'd be wise to access either destination with someone who knows the area well, such as Bertha de Castellón and her brother or Edgar Toribio from Hotel Santa Fé (p182).

CAFÉ EL TUTE COFFEE PLANT

This famous Santa Fé **coffee plant** (admission free; ☎ 6am–8pm) is the flagship institution in a four decade-old cooperative named Esperanza de Los Campesinos (Hope of the Farmers). Started by Father Héctor Gallego, who was working in Veraguas in the late 1960s, the original aims of the cooperative were to wrest power from local coffee barons and to put the profit from the crop back in the hands of the farmers.

According to the co-op's history, the initial idea came when the priest decided to purchase 50kg sack of salt from the lowlands rather than from the company store in town. By showing the local farmers that he could circumvent the rich and powerful ruling families, he rallied the necessary support to start the co-op. Although the priest was eventually murdered by government forces wary of his teachings, Esperanza de Los Campesinos continues to thrive today.

Café El Tute is only sold for domestic consumption, though every stop of the growing, harvesting and roasting process is 100% organic. Stop by for a free Spanish tour, and start your day off right with a hot, steamy cup of mountain-grown coffee.

COOPERATIVA SANTA FÉ

The **Santa Fé Cooperative** (☎ 6am–8:30pm) and the cooperative's store above the Restaurante de la Cooperativa sell hats made of mountain palm (called *palmilla*) that are much more durable than hats found elsewhere in Panama – and they cost much less (from US\$5 to US\$15). They are not as refined as the hats available in Ocuá and Penonomé, but if you're looking for a rugged hat in classic panama style, you can't do better.

While in the cooperative, you might want to pick up some Café El Tute, the locally grown coffee.

MERCADO

Much larger than the Cooperativa is the open-air **market** just past the entrance to town. In addition to fruits and vegetables, you'll find woven handmade bags, a wide range of hats, leather goods and many other interesting items – it's a fun place to browse.

Festivals & Events

Agricultural Fair This lively event is hosted by the producers of northern Veraguas from 28 January to 2 February – if you're in the area don't miss it. The fair features traditional dancing, horse races, a multitude of food stands and an occasional boxing match or rodeo competition. It's held in the *Féria de Santa Fé* in the east of town.

Orchid Exposition Collectors from all over Panama display their finest orchids in the *Féria de Santa Fé* at this popular event each August; the **IPAT office** (☎ 998 3929) in Santiago can provide you with the precise date, as can Bertha, the orchid lady.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Jardín Santafereno (☎ 954 0866; cabins US\$12; Ⓟ) On the western edge of town, a good walk from the center, is this bare-bones, budget hotel, which offers the cheapest bed in town. The cabins are, not surprisingly, little more than concrete cells to shield you from the elements, and the mattresses should have been replaced decades ago. But, the cold shower works, and the hotel is attractively perched on the highest point in town overlooking the surrounding forest.

Hotel Santa Fé (☎ 954 0941; d without/with air-con US\$15/25; Ⓟ Ⓜ) This friendly spot just south of the town center is a good place to inquire about hiring a guide. The owner, Eudisia, has a great deal of knowledge to impart about Santa Fé, and he can put you in touch with Fidel and Edgar, two recommended local guides. The rooms at the hotel run the gamut from 'a little wear and tear' to 'has seen better days,' though with private cold-water showers and decent beds, you could definitely do worse.

In addition to the restaurants situated in the two hotels, there are a handful of places to dine at near the center of town. The best of the lot is the **Restaurante de la Cooperativa** (mains US\$3), which serves up fish, pork, beef and chicken with locally grown vegetables and heaping portions of rice. Self-caterers can stock up on fresh provisions at the local mercado.

Getting There & Away

Buses from Santa Fé to Santiago (US\$2, 1½ hours) depart every 30 minutes from 5am to 6pm.

CERAMICA LA PEÑA

This **artisans' market** (☎ 9am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) is on the Interamericana, 8km west of Santiago. Here you can find wood carvings and baskets made by the Emberá and Wounaan peoples of the Darién, woven purses and soapstone figurines made by Ngöbe-Buglé people living in the area and masks from the town of Parita in Herrera Province. There's also a workshop on the premises where you can occasionally see ceramics being made, as well as a good selection of pots and sculptures available for purchase.

LAS PALMAS

There's nothing of special interest in sleepy Las Palmas, a town 10km south of the Interamericana and 32km northwest of the town of Soná. But if you love waterfalls and have your own wheels, you'll want to know about the nearby cataract and its enticing swimming hole. The scene is set amid light forest, and you'll likely have the place to yourself.

To get to the **falls** from the Interamericana, take the Las Palmas turnoff and drive 10km. Bypass the first road into town, but turn left at the second road just before the town's cemetery. Follow this dirt road for 200m and then take the fork to the right. This last 1km to the falls, along a much rougher road, requires a 4WD vehicle. If you aren't driving one, it's best to play it safe and walk the last 1km to the falls. Be sure to lock up and take your valuables with you.

SANTA CATALINA

Although lagging behind Costa Rica in terms of tourist development (there is yet to be a beachside Pizza Hut), Santa Catalina has the potential to be the next great Central American beach destination (for better or for worse). Although difficult access and a remote location have so far kept the foreign investors away, the secret about Santa Catalina's incredible surf is out. Regarded as one of the best surf hot spots in Central America, you can choose from any number of beach breaks on Playa Santa Catalina. On a good day, the rights and lefts here are easily comparable to Oahu's Sunset Beach.

SURFING IN VERAGUAS PROVINCE

Although it's not as popular among the international surfing community as Bocas del Toro, Veraguas is home to the country's best surf. Serious surfers should head straight to Playa Santa Catalina, which has some of the biggest breaks in the whole of Central America, though there are plenty of other less-crowded spots to get your surf on.

- **Playa Santa Catalina** As good as it gets. Sharp rock bottom right and left break. Main wave is the right. Incredible tubes, long rides with lots of power. Surf ed mostly medium to high tide. For more information, see opposite.
- **Estero Beach Break** A 15-minute walk from Santa Catalina. A long beach break, has lefts and rights over sand bottom. Popular with beginners at low tide.
- **Punta Brava** Just west of Estero. Point breaks at low tide over sharp rock bottom. Has lefts and rights, but the lefts are the best. Very powerful. Has a great tube section. Booties needed.
- **Punta Roca** A 30-minute walk from Santa Catalina. Left point break surfed at low tide over a rock-bottom ledge, with short rides but big hollow tubes.
- **Isla Cébaco** Island near Santa Catalina. Four breaks, with rights and lefts. Area known for sharks.
- **Playa Mariato** Faces Isla Cébaco. Soft rock-bottom break with lefts, rights.

Santa Catalina is home to several hundred people who lead simple lives as fishers, and the town has a laid-back feel to it with one good outdoor pizzeria that forms the nexus of the dining and nightlife scene. However, the real-estate signs are starting to go up, and rumors run the gamut from constructing a mega-resort and an airstrip to establishing a protected area and a marine park. It's hard to know what the future of Santa Catalina holds, but in the meantime, enjoy it while it still is what it is – remote, undeveloped and home to some seriously wicked surf.

Orientation & Information

To get to the ocean-side surf hotels from the bus station, take the dirt road on the left side of the road into Santa Catalina just before the road ends. Each hotel has its own sign marking the turnoff. There is only one public phone, and there are no banks or internet cafes in Santa Catalina. Make sure you arrive with cash – no one takes credit cards.

Activities

Many of the local fishers make excellent guides, and can easily take you out to a variety of superb snorkeling and spearfishing spots as well as some remote surf breaks. Their lifelong knowledge and love of the area is apparent, and although you will need some basic Spanish to contract them, this

is the best way to support the community. Look for guides on the beach or simply ask around. You can also find locals who will lead horseback riding tours through the nearby forests.

SURFING

For more information on surfing in the Santa Catalina area, see the boxed text, above.

The best waves are generally from December to April, though there is surf here year round. Unlike the Caribbean, the Pacific offers fairly consistent sets, though a good swell will really give a boost to the surfing here.

Most of the accommodations in town rent boards in addition to offering surf lessons. Be advised that many of the breaks in the area are over rocks, and can easily snap your board if you don't know what you're doing.

SCUBA DIVING

Run by an experienced Austrian dive master, **Scuba Coiba** (☎ 263 4366; www.scubacoiba.com) offers divers a chance to experience some of the spectacular marine life around Isla Coiba. Two-tank dives start US\$70 per person, though diving in the park costs more since the distance is much greater. Scuba Coiba also offers day trips (US\$130) as well as two-day trips (US\$320) to Isla de Coiba, which include entry into the national park, lodging at the ANAM station on Coiba and meals;

there's a two-person minimum for these trips. You can also get PADI-certified here for US\$225, and snorkeling gear is available for hire (US\$6 per day). The dive shop is located on the main road into town, between the restaurant La Fonda and Cabañas Rolo.

FISHING

The area around Santa Catalina is famous for its big fish, including yellow fin tuna, wahoo, dolphin, Spanish mackerel, jacks and rooster fish. Although there isn't a major sportfishing operator in town, there is no shortage of local fishers willing to rent their boat and services to you for the day. Prices vary depending on the amount of the people in your party and the distance you want to go – remember that petrol is very expensive these days.

If you'd prefer to go after reef fish including snapper and grouper, there are some hidden spots along the coast that are perfect for spearfishing. There are also plenty of rocky ledges in the area that serve as hideouts for lobster, though make sure that you only harvest adults – lobster are in danger of being overfished throughout Panama. Scuba Coiba (see p183) can set you up with the gear you need, and the local fishers can help you get your feet wet.

Sleeping IN TOWN

Soly Mar (☎ 596 1521; www.solymarpanama.com; basic cabins per person US\$8.50, deluxe cabins s/d/tr US\$40/50/60; (P) (♿)) As you're coming into town, you'll pass a bright blue building on the rightside about 150m before Rolo's – this is the entrance to this cheery Portuguese-Panamanian-owned spot. If you're a surfer on a budget, and in need of a place to lie down and a shower to clean yourself up, the basic cabins here will serve you fine. However, if you're in search of your creature comforts, the recently constructed deluxe cabins feature private terraces, hot-water showers, ocean views, satellite TV and air-con.

Cabañas Rolo (☎ 998 8600; r per person US\$10; (P)) One of Santa Catalina's only locally owned hotels, these eight cabins are a favorite of baby-faced surfers from around the world. Each simple cabin has one to three good beds, a fan, and a shared cold-water bathroom, though it's the great international vibe that makes this place a winner. The owner, Rolo Ortega, speaks Spanish and English, cooks

meals by request (typically US\$3), rents surfboards (US\$10 per day), and can arrange fishing trips and gear rental.

La Vida Buena (michelle@labuenavida.biz; cabins from US\$40; (P) (♿)) This reader-recommended spot is located on the main street in Santa Catalina, and is the newest accommodation in the area. Although the friendly owners, Mike and Michelle, are still putting the finishing touches on the cabins and working on the restaurant, this promises to be a welcome addition to the Santa Catalina scene. Bright and cheerful cabins can comfortably hold two to three people, and the hot-water showers, satellite TV and firm mattresses really pull the place together.

BEACH

You can reach the following places by taking the turnoff on the left after arriving in town – it's the only other road in town.

Casablanca Surf Resort (☎ 226 3786; campsites US\$3, d from US\$20; (P) (♿)) Although its resort moniker is a bit of a stretch, this surfer's retreat has a number of housing options in a park-like setting bordering the beach. Whether you rent a tent for a night, bed down in simple thatched-roof bungalow or splurge on the tiled-floor duplex with private cold showers, there's a place here for you to crash regardless of your budget. The English-speaking owner spent several years surfing in the States, so he speaks English well, and can give you the low-down on the local surf.

Surfers' Paradise Camp (☎ 595 1010; surfcata.lina@hotmail.com; r per person US\$10; (P)) On a breezy bluff overlooking the ocean, you'll find eight rustic and ready wooden rooms on offer here. Owned by a father-son combination of expert surfers, this is cheapest accommodation on the beach, and you can literally roll out of bed in the morning and head down to the water. There are certainly more comfortable spots in Santa Catalina, but if you're a shoestring surfer who is not too fussy about the surroundings, Paradise can't be beat.

Kenny's Surf Camp (☎ 672 0089; www.panamasurf.tours.com; r from US\$10; (P) (♿)) This all-surfers spot is a regular stop on the Panama Surf Tour (see p312) junket, though feel free to stop by even if you're not on an organized tour. This all-wooden surf shack has a college-dorm feel to it, especially since it's chock full of young surfers from around the world. Guests can take advantage of the on-site kitchen and the

outdoor deck, which has immaculate views of the huge break right below the surf camp.

Punta Brava Lodge (☎ 614 3868; www.puntabrava.com; s/d from US\$15/30; (P) ♻️) This recently renovated beachside lodge is now sporting a fresh coat of paint and some well decorated rooms with air-con and private hot water bathrooms, though the same old dramatic sea views are still there. Although it's perfectly OK to show up and grab yourself a room, this lodge specializes in affordable package tours to Santa Catalina and nearby Isla de Coiba. Tours including transfers from Tocumen Airport, seven night's accommodation, three meals a day, local surf guides and a boat trip to Coiba costs for US\$999/799/699 for one/two/three people.

Oasis Surf Camp (per person with breakfast US\$20, half-/full-board US\$25/30; (P) ♻️) Located on Playa Estero near the mouth of the river, this rustic surf camp is owned by a no-nonsense retired Italian policeman. He opened up this remote camp because he takes his surfing seriously, though not as serious as he takes his cooking – authentic Italian meals can be yours for the price of a few bucks. The rooms themselves are located in cabins overlooking the black-sand beach, and have simple but adequate facilities including cold-water showers and ample hammocks.

Eating

There are several places in town and on the beach where you can buy excellent fresh fish to prepare yourself. There are also a number of small shops that sell basic groceries, which is ideal if you're a surfer on a budget. However, although the restaurant scene in Santa Catalina is limited, there are two locally famous places where you can get a hot meal without straining the budget.

Restaurant La Fonda (dishes US\$1-3) Just before Rolo's, this long-standing local restaurant offers fresh and healthy Panamanian cuisine at ridiculously low prices. Tuna sandwiches, fresh *batidos*, and fruit with granola are aimed more at the surfers, though there's no shortage of local staples including rice and beans with chicken and plantains.

Pizzeria Jamming (pizzas US\$3) Something of a Santa Catalina institution, this pizzeria offers delicious thin-crust pizzas made from fresh ingredients, any of which go nicely with the cold beer on hand. Located on the road to the beach-facing hotels, this stylish, open-air ran-

cho is Santa Catalina's liveliest gathering spot – it gets crowded, so arrive early in the night.

Getting There & Away

To reach Santa Catalina from Panama City, first take a bus to Soná where you can take one of the three daily buses to Santa Catalina, leaving at 5am, noon and 4pm (US\$3, 1½ hours). Unless the driver is pushed for time, he will take you to any one of the hotels listed for an additional US\$1. If you miss the bus, you can hire a taxi from Soná to Santa Catalina for around US\$25.

From Santa Catalina, three buses serve Soná daily, leaving at 7am, 8am and 2pm. In Santa Catalina, the bus stops near the Restaurant La Fonda – a conch-shell's throw from Cabañas Rolo. If you're staying at one of the other hotels, it's a 1km walk to them on mostly flat terrain. Note that there are never taxis in town, unless of course someone is arriving from Soná.

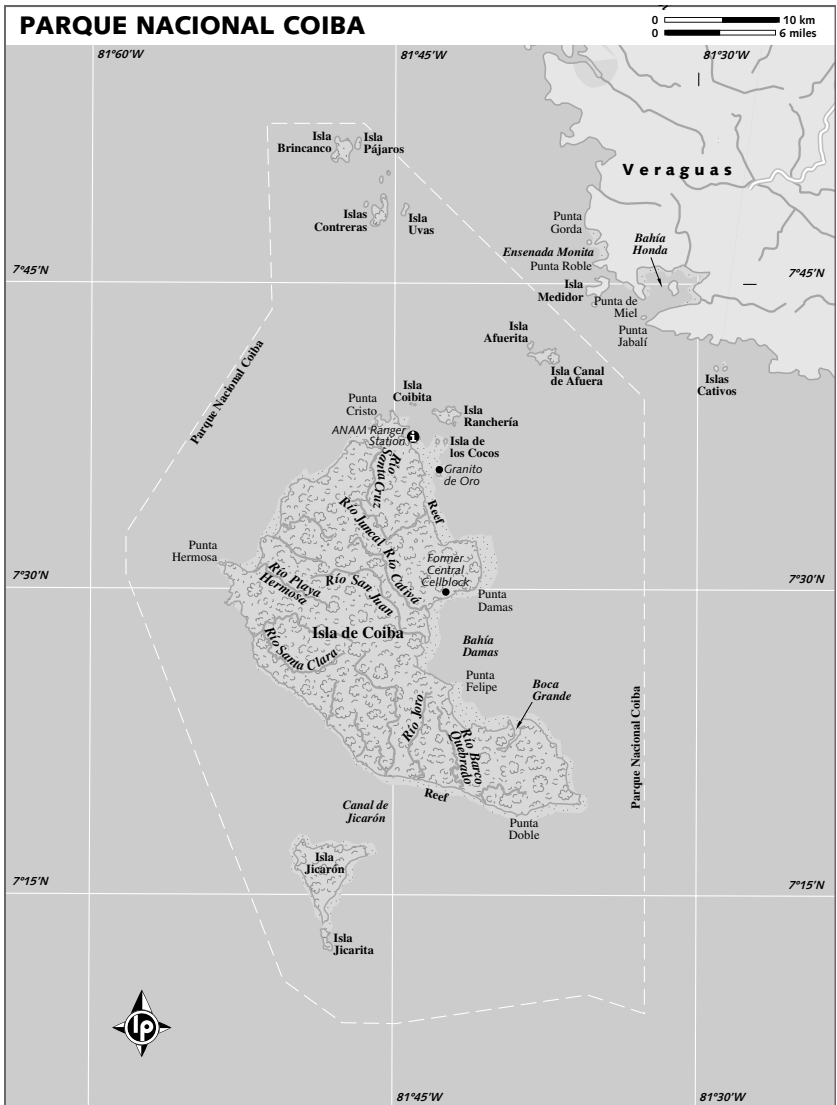
PARQUE NACIONAL COIBA

With the exception of the Galapagos and Isla de Coco, few destinations off the Pacific coast of the Americas are as exotic (and difficult to access) as this national park, which is centered on the 493 sq km Isla de Coiba. Although the island is just 20km offshore in the Golfo de Chiriquí, Coiba is a veritable lost world of pristine ecosystems and unique fauna. Left alone for the past century due to the creation of a notorious penal colony on its shores, Coiba offers intrepid travelers the chance to hike through primary rainforest, snorkel and dive in a marine park and come face to face to increasingly rare wildlife. However, with virtually no tourist infrastructure in place, you're going to have work hard (and empty the pockets) to get here.

Of course, things are going to change eventually on Coiba (see the boxed text, p188), though it's difficult to know what the future holds. Unfortunately, it's increasingly likely that some form of tourist infrastructure will soon manifest itself on the island, though conservationists are hoping that it will be a low-impact lodge and not a mega-resort. In the meantime however, don't miss the chance to explore this little-known ecological jewel.

Orientation & Information

On the northern end of the island is an **ANAM ranger station** (☎ 999 8103; park fee US\$10), which



consists of several basic cabins, a camping pitch, showers and toilets, and is located beside an attractive beach alongside a scenic cove. A few model prisoners work at the ANAM station – preparing meals, washing clothes, and even leading tourists on snorkeling jaunts in the cove – they are allowed to roam freely in the vicinity of the station

and to chat with guests. Although they are a friendly bunch, and no doubt curious about the outside world, please keep in mind that they are prisoners nevertheless.

Since Coiba is still operating as a penal colony, visitors to the island (even day-trippers) must register upon arrival at the ANAM ranger station. This is especially true if you arrive on

the island as an independent traveler – it's best to call ahead to confirm that there is space, though the phone lines are not always working (and when they are, there's no guarantee anyone will be around). Also, keep in mind that the majority of the island is a restricted area, though there is a large distance between the ANAM station and the main prison complex. As the future of the Coiba becomes clearer, it's likely that the prison may close down all together. At the time of writing however, it was not known exactly how many prisoners remained on the island, though there are rumored to be less than 100 left.

Coiba is home to the second-largest eastern Pacific coral reef and some of the finest diving and snorkeling to be found along the Pacific coast from Colombia to Mexico. The entire island is covered with a heavy virgin forest, except for the prison camps and along the lower courses of the larger streams where there are swampy woodlands. Rocky headlands project along the coast, and there are sandy beaches broken by mangroves at river mouths.

In addition to Coiba (50,314 hectares), islands within the park include Isla Jicarón (2002 hectares), Isla Brincanco (330 hectares), Isla Uvas (257 hectares), Isla Coibita (242 hectares), Isla Canal de Afuera (240 hectares), Isla Jicarita (125 hectares), Isla Pájaros (45 hectares) and Isla Afuerita (27 hectares).

Watching Wildlife

Although the list is far from complete, to date 147 species of bird have been identified on the island. If you're a serious birder, the prize sighting is the Coiba spinetail, a little brown-and-white bird found only on Coiba. However, the majority of visitors are searching for scarlet macaws, which are limited in Panama to Parque Nacional Coiba. Although they nest in the Barco Quebrado region of the park, they are frequently sighted while flying over clearings in the canopy, and their distinctive calls are easy to recognize, even amongst nonbirders.

It's believed that the national park is home to about 40 different species of mammals, though unfortunately little is known about their range and numbers. Due to the continued presence of the penal colony, few scientists have been granted access to Coiba, and a proper survey of the island's wildlife has yet to be done. Even more pressing is the fact that Coiba has two rare mammals endemic to

the island, namely the Coiba agouti and the Couiti howler. Although these two animals are difficult to spot, most visitors to the island are content by simply watching the howlers and white-faced capuchins playing on the beach.

Seventeen species of crocodiles, turtles and lizards, as well as 15 species of snakes (including the very dangerous fer-de-lance, coral snakes and boa constrictors) are found in the park. The crocodiles on the island are enormous, so it's best not to take a dip in any rivers or ponds without first consulting your guide – you're a long way from a hospital if something happens out here. With that said, although snakes tend to be extremely shy, and are easily scared away by ground vibrations, you should always walk slowly and carefully through the jungles. You can also minimize your chances of being bitten by wearing thick leather jungle boots.

The marine life in the park is simply astounding. Over 23 species of dolphins and whales have been identified, and humpback whales and spotted and bottle-nosed dolphins are frequently seen in the park. Killer whales, sperm whales and Cuvier's beaked whales are also present in park waters, but in much fewer numbers.

One of the reasons why Coiba has been such an effective penal colony is that the waters surrounding the island have a notorious reputation for big sharks. Although this is enough to keep prisoners at bay, it's heaven for avid scuba divers looking for a shark encounter. The most commonly sighted species are black- and white-tip reef sharks, though hammerheads school in frighteningly large numbers here as well. Lucky divers will have the chance to see the occasional whale shark. Unlucky divers will have the chance to see the occasional tiger shark, though the danger is highly overestimated. As long as you are confident in the water, sharks tend to view divers as an oddity rather than a potential meal.

The waters around Coiba are also home to large numbers of manta rays, as well as the occasional sea turtle (leatherback, olive ridley and the increasingly rare green). There are also some seriously large fish, and you're almost guaranteed to spot schools of snapper and jacks as well as large grouper and barracuda.

Activities

HIKING

Starting at the ANAM ranger station, the **Sendero del Observatorio** (Observatory Trail)

GREAT ESCAPES: ISLA DE COIBA

Virtually absent of human development let alone tourist infrastructure, Isla de Coiba is an untouched ecological gem. With an approximate area of 500 sq km, Coiba is the largest of a group of islands lying approximately 20km off the Pacific coast of Veraguas. Although historically the island hosted pre-Columbian cultures as well as a colonial-era pearl industry, Coiba was sectioned off as a penal colony in 1912.

Isla de Coiba has a dark and shrouded history as a spirit-crushing prison, and it's impossible to say exactly what has transpired here over the past century. With impenetrable jungles in its interior and vast expanses of shark-infested waters in every direction, Coiba has first and foremost a reputation as a place best avoided. However, it is exactly because of this belief that the island was spared the widespread destruction of the rainforest that swept through Panama this past century.

With the exception of the agricultural and pastoral land surrounding the prison, virtually the entire island is home to primary rainforest that is teeming with wildlife. Isla de Coiba is most well-known for its resident 150 bird species and the island is probably the last place in Panama where you can see the colorful scarlet macaws. Isla de Coiba is also home to about 40 different species of mammal as well as a whole slew of reptiles including the infamous fer-de-lance. There are even unique creatures endemic to the island ranging from Coiba spinetail birds to Coiba agoutis.

Coiba's underwater world is equally spectacular, especially since the island is surrounded by one of the largest coral reefs on the Pacific coast of the Americas. It gets even better – the warm Indo-Pacific current through the Gulf of Chiriqui create a unique underwater ecosystem atypical of this region, and Coiba is part of the same underwater mountain chain that includes Isla de Coco in Costa Rica and the Galapagos in Ecuador. Together, these elements attract large populations of pelagics including sharks, whales, dolphins and manta rays as well as enormous schools of fish.

In 1991, the Panamanian government established Parque Nacional Coiba, which protected both Isla de Coiba and its surrounding waters as a national park. The legislation also allowed for the penal colony to keep operating, especially since its presence was seen as a continued deterrent against mainland squatters moving to the island. In 2004, the Panamanian government passed a second law that doubled the size of the park to include several outlying islands and their surrounding waters. In July of 2005, Unesco followed suit and declared Parque Nacional Coiba a World Heritage site.

However, despite all of the national and international legislation protecting both the terrestrial and marine ecosystems of Coiba, the future of the national park remains uncertain. With the Panamanian tourist industry experiencing its highest ever rate of annual growth, developers view Parque Nacional Coiba as a prime piece of real estate. Specifically, they are arguing that constructing tourist facilities on the island will strengthen the Panamanian economy and generate the revenue needed to maintain the park. And, it seems as if the government is listening with a keen ear, especially since it has already started to scale back the size of the penal colony and has tried on several occasions to lighten the existing park legislation in order to allow for foreign investment.

Over the past few years, the country's largest private conservation organization, ANCON, has been lobbying to prevent the government from awarding hotel concessions in the park. The argument is simply that Coiba is a rare and unique ecosystem that should not be endangered by allowing massive construction projects on the island. ANCON also points to the success of the Galapagos as an example of how tourist revenue could be generated without resorting to traditional models of tourist infrastructure.

Unfortunately, there are powerful investors behind the scenes, and although ANCON has thus far postponed any construction on Coiba, it's difficult to say whether or not it will win out in the end. However, the granting of Unesco World Heritage status means that Panama's actions are being watched, so there is reason to be optimistic that if development does occur on the island, its impact will be minimal.

is a short, 500m long trail that terminates at a secluded bird-watching platform. The entrance to this trail is behind the cabins, through there is also a second part that starts behind the kitchen. After a few hundred meters, you will reach the top of a hill, which has views out to neighboring Isla Coibita.

The entrance to the **Sendero de Los Monos** (Monkey Trail) is near the Granito de Oro islet, and is accessible only by boat. The trail is only a few kilometers long, though it access several beaches and is home to several species of monkey. You're most likely to spot howlers and capuchins, especially in the dry season when the foliage isn't as dense.

SWIMMING & SNORKELING

The cove near the ANAM ranger station is home to a tiny island that you can snorkel around during high tide. If you choose to do this, be warned that the current on the island's far side is sometimes very strong. If you're a poor swimmer, do not venture outside the cove.

Two other popular spots for swimming and snorkeling are the islet of Granito de Oro and the mangrove forest close to Punta Hermosa in the west. Both the mangroves and Granito de Oro can be reached only by boat.

SCUBA DIVING

Currently, there are no dive centers on Coiba, though this will most certainly change if tourist infrastructure is ever allowed on the island. In the meantime, the majority of visitors to Coiba arrange their diving through their tour operators. For more information on tours, see right.

If you're an independent traveler, the easiest option is to arrange your diving through **Scuba Coiba** (p183) in Santa Catalina. Other options include the **Twin Oceans Dive Center** (p250) in Portobelo and **Centro de Buceo Isla Grande** (p254) in the Caribbean as well as the nationwide operator, **Scubapanama** (p312).

SPORTFISHING

The seas around Coiba are home to some seriously large fish, and lucky anglers can hook everything from marlin and sailfish to roosters and tarpon. If you're looking to test your luck, consider a trip with **Coiba Adventure** (www.coibadventure.com; Panama City ☎ 999 8108; USA ☎ 800-800-0907), a recommended

sportfishing operation run by Tom Yust, who is widely regarded as Panama's top sportfishing captain.

Tom runs an extremely personalized operation, and he offers a variety of boats and rigs to accommodate your wildest fishing fantasies. Tours can also be custom tailored to meet your needs, and Coiba Adventure's offerings also take the hassle out of planning your transport to the island. Rates vary depending on the time of year, boat used and the size of the party, and include transportation from Panama City, meals, accommodations and fishing charters

Tours

Even if you're normally a fiercely independent traveler, Coiba is one destination where it's probably worth joining up with an organized tour. Although you may be able to save a bit of money organizing your own transport to Coiba, you'll have an easier time getting ANAM to grant you access to the island's interior if you go with an operator. Being part of a chartered expedition also means that you can explore more of the marine park, which is more convenient and ultimately may be cheaper than arranging activities on your own.

The most reputable operator is **Ancon Expeditions** (☎ 269 9415; www.anconexpeditions.com; El Dorado Bldg, Calle 49A Este, Panama City), the for-profit arm of the conservation organization ANCON, which has played a major role in the conservation of Coiba. Prices vary depending on group size, length of stay, activities and other factors. Tours emphasize the ecology and environment of Coiba, and can be catered to your interests. For more information on Ancon Expeditions, see p89.

If you're looking for a little more luxury, the **MV Coral Star** (☎ 800-215-5169 in USA; www.coralstar.com) is a 115ft live-aboard ship that offers classy quarters and top-notch service. The **MV Coral Star** cruises the islands in and around Parque Nacional Coiba, carrying its passengers to some great diving spots. In addition, guests can sea kayak, fish, snorkel or explore the beaches and rainforests on uninhabited islands. Accommodations consist of two master staterooms on the main deck, two deluxe and four standard cabins on the lower deck. Weekly all-inclusive rates start at US\$2250 per person.

Sleeping & Eating

The only accommodation on the island is the **ANAM ranger station** (per night US\$10), which offers six split-cabins that share common cold showers and toilets. Owing to the isolation of Coiba, you shouldn't expect too much from the cabins. They're furnished with a spartan aesthetic and functional in form, though surprisingly they come equipped with air-conditioning (there's a catch – keep reading). However, the entire station has a certain deserted island charm to it, especially since, well, you're on a deserted island. If you have a tent or a jungle hammock, there is also a space for you to pitch or string up for the night.

There is electricity at the station, though it's produced by a diesel generator that's only turned on from dusk to dawn. Depending on the available gas supply, you might not be allowed to use the air-conditioning, though no one will stop you from turning it on if you bring your own fuel in from the mainland. Of course, if you've made it as far as Coiba, you probably have experience sleeping at night without air-con in tropical climes – plus, it's better for the environment to leave it off.

If you're traveling independently, be advised that there is no food available on the island. So, unless you're planning on fasting for a few days, you will need to purchase supplies in advance on the mainland. At the ANAM ranger station, you can hire one of the prisoners to cook your meals for you in the main kitchen. If you're traveling as part of a tour, you will not have to worry about meals as everything will be arranged for you.

If you're spending the night at the ranger station, bring insect repellent as there will be lots and lots of mosquitoes and the ever-pleasant sand fleas.

Getting There & Away

The most common departure point for boats heading to Isla de Coiba is Puerto Mutis, a small port about 25km southwest of Santiago. Typically, this trip takes about two to three hours, though it varies depending on the size and speed of both the boat and the waves. Boats also depart for Coiba from the port of Pedigral near David and Santa Catalina, though these two destinations are less convenient. There is also an airstrip on Coiba Island, though this is reserved for private charter flights.

If you're arriving on Coiba as part of an organized tour, your operator will take care of all the necessary transportation arrangements. However, if you're planning on trying to reach the island independently, the best place to hire a boat and a guide is Puerto Mutis. Prices are negotiable and ultimately dependant on the price of fuel, the size of your party and your intended length of stay on the island (eg whether or not your driver has to return to the mainland).

Although hiring boats is perfectly feasible, please keep in mind that the open sea can get extremely rough, and many fishers have been lost at sea over the years. Before making the journey, you need to have absolute confidence in the seaworthiness of both your vessel and its captain.

PARQUE NACIONAL CERRO HOYA

On the southwestern side of the *Península de Azuero*, this 32,577-hectare park protects the headwaters of the *Ríos Tonosí, Portobelo* and *Pavo*, as well as 30 endemic plant species, and rare fauna including the elusive *carato* parakeet. The national park also contains some of the last remaining rainforest on a huge peninsula that is one of the most agriculturally devastated regions of Panama. Although the park was created in 1984, much of the forest had been chopped down prior to that time, and unfortunately it will be a long time before the park really looks like a park.

There are no accommodations for visitors in or near the park, and the trails into it are ill defined. In short, until the park is more accessible and facilities are developed for tourists, visits to the park are reserved for intrepid types truly looking to get away from it all.

The best way to get to the park is by boat from *Playa Cambutal* in *Los Santos* Province. There, it's always possible to find a boatman to make the two-hour trip; the cost is generally US\$60 to US\$80 per party (one way). If you happen to come upon a boat going from *Playa Cambutal* to the park or to *Punta Ventana* nearby, the ride could cost as little as US\$5 per person.

It's also possible to reach the park by a road that winds along the western edge of the *Península de Azuero*. However, even with a 4WD vehicle (dry season only), visitors are only able to get as far as *Restigüe*, a hamlet south of *Arenas*, at the edge of the park.

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