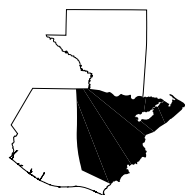


# Central & Eastern Guatemala



Stretching from the steamy lowland forests of El Petén to the dry tropics of the Río Motagua valley, and from the edge of the western Highlands to the Caribbean, this is the country's most diverse region.

The Carretera al Atlántico (Hwy 9) shoots eastward to the sea from Guatemala City. Along the way are numerous attractions – side trips to the pilgrim town of Esquipulas, and beyond to the wonderfully preserved ruins of Copán in Honduras. Further along the highway is Quiriguá, boasting impressive stelae more than 10m tall.

Another short detour brings you to Río Dulce, a favored resting spot for Caribbean sailors and gateway to the wilds of the Bocas del Polochic. While you're here, don't miss the gorgeous boat ride down the Río Dulce to the Garífuna enclave of Livingston.

The north of the region is lush and mountainous coffee-growing country. As you climb, you enter cloud forest where rain or at least mist will become a guaranteed daily part of your travels.

The limestone crags around Cobán attract cavers from all over the world, but those at Lanquín, Rey Marcos and elsewhere are easily accessible for amateurs.

The two must-sees in the Cobán area are the beautiful pools and cascades of Semuc Champey and the Biotopo del Quetzal, a nature reserve where you stand a reasonable chance of seeing the elusive national bird, the quetzal.

## TOP FIVE

- Splashing around the turquoise waters of **Semuc Champey** (p225) and getting deep in the caves at **Grutas de Lanquín** (p224)
- Admiring the impressive carvings at **Copán** (p236) and **Quiriguá** (p249) and relaxing in the Antigua-rivaling beauty of **Copán Ruinas** (p242)
- Going bush in the jungle hideaway of **Las Conchas** (p226), where waterfalls, jungle treks and village tours await
- Getting down with the Garífuna in the unique Caribbean town of **Livingston** (p261)
- Taking in the natural beauty of such little-visited protected areas as **Parque Nacional Laguna Lachúa** (p228) and the **Bocas del Polochic** (p256)





## SALAMÁ

pop 24,200 / elev 940m

A wonderful introduction to Baja Verapaz's not-too-hot, not-too-cold climate, Salamá is a smallish town with a couple of attractions. Excellent information on the area is available at [www.laverapaz.com](http://www.laverapaz.com).

Hwy 14 (also marked Hwy 17) leaves the Carr al Atlántico at El Rancho, 84km from Guatemala City. It heads west through a dry, desert-like lowland area, then turns north and starts climbing up into the forested hills. After 47km, at the junction called La Cumbre Santa Elena, Hwy 17 to Salamá divides from Hwy 14 for Cobán. Descending the other side of the ridge, Hwy 17 winds down into the broad valley of the Río Salamá, and enters Salamá town, 17km from the highway.

Before the Spanish conquest, the mountainous departments of Baja Verapaz and Alta Verapaz were populated by the Rabinal Maya, noted for their warlike habits and merciless victories. They battled the powerful K'iche' Maya for a century but were never conquered.

When the conquistadors arrived, they too had trouble defeating the Rabinal Maya. It was Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas who convinced the Spanish authorities to try peace where war had failed. Armed with an edict that forbade Spanish soldiers from entering the region for five years, the friar and his brethren pursued their religious mission, and succeeded in pacifying and converting the Rabinal Maya. Their homeland thus was renamed Verapaz (True Peace) and is now divided into Baja Verapaz, with its capital at Salamá, and Alta Verapaz, which is centered on Cobán. The Rabinal Maya have remained among the most dedicated and true to ancient Mayan customs, and there are many intriguing villages to visit in this part of Guatemala, including Rabinal itself (p214).

### Information

**Banrural** (☎) 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) On the south side of the plaza (opposite the church), changes cash and traveler's checks and has a Visa and MasterCard ATM.

**Cafe Deli-Donas** (15a Calle 6-61) Has useful free maps of the town (without street names).

**Police station** One block west of the plaza.

**Telgua** Has internet access (per hour US\$0.80). East of the plaza.

### Sights

Salamá has some attractive reminders of colonial rule. The main plaza, for instance, boasts an ornate **church** with gold-encrusted altars and a carved pulpit, which is located just to the left before the altar. Be sure to check out Jesus lying in a glass coffin with cotton bunting in his stigmata and droplets of blood seeping from his hairline. His thick mascara and the silver lamé pillow where he rests his head complete the scene. The Salamá **market** is impressive for its colorful, local bustle, particularly on Sunday.

### Tours

**EcoVerapaz** (☎ 7940 0146; [ecoverapaz@hotmail.com](mailto:ecoverapaz@hotmail.com); 8a Av 7-12, Zona 1; 1-day tours per person US\$40) is in the shop Imprenta, Mi Terreno – a block west of the plaza on the road to La Cumbre. Its local, trained naturalists offer interesting tours throughout Baja Verapaz including caving, birding, hiking, horse riding and orchid trips. EcoVerapaz also goes to Rabinal (p214) to check out its museum and crafts and arrange trips to see the famous rodeos of Baja Verapaz. Guides speak some English. Group discounts are offered.

### Sleeping

**Turicentro Las Orquídeas** (☎ 7940 1622; Carr a Salamá Km 147; campsite US\$4.50) Travelers with tents may want to check out this place, a few kilometers east of Salamá on Hwy 17. It has a grassy area for camping, plus a café, pool and open spaces hung with hammocks. You can use the pool (US\$2 per person per day) even if you're not camping here.

**Hotel Rosa de Sharon** (☎ 5774 8650; 5a Calle 6-39; s/d with bathroom US\$7.50/12; Ⓟ) The neat, bright rooms here loom over the busy market area, but they're set back from the road, so remain peaceful. They're big and clean, with whacky decorations such as wrought-iron hat stands made to look like trees.

**Posada de Don Maco** (☎ 7940 0083; 3a Calle 8-26; s/d with bathroom US\$8/14; Ⓟ) This clean, family-run place has simple but spacious rooms with fan and good bathrooms. The courtyard boasts a collection of caged squirrels.

**Hotel San Ignacio** (☎ 7940 0186; 4a Calle 'A' 7-09; s/d US\$8/14; Ⓟ) Not the loveliest place you're ever likely to stay, but it's a reasonable deal for the price, and super-close to the park. Look for the big *palapa* (open-sided palm-leaf shelter) sitting area up on the rooftop.

**Hotel Real Legendario** (☎ 7940 1751; 8a Av 3-57, Zona 1; s/d with bathroom US\$12/19; (P)) You'll recognize this place, three blocks east of the plaza, by the stands of bamboo in the car park. The clean, secure rooms have fan, hot-water bathroom and cable TV.

## Eating

You don't have to step far from the plaza to eat well.

**Café Deli-Donas** (15a Calle 6-61; cakes US\$1.30, sandwiches US\$2, licuados US\$0.90; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat) This exceedingly pleasant little café (where even the bathrooms smell good) is like an oasis in Salamá's busy market zone. Excellent coffee, homemade cakes and light meals are the go here.

**Antojitos Zacapanecos** (cnr 6a Calle & 8a Av; mains US\$2-3; ☎ lunch & dinner) For something a little different in the fast-food vein, check out the huge flour tortillas filled with pork, chicken or beef from this place. Better yet, grab one to go and have a picnic in the plaza.

**Cafetería Central** (cnr 15a Calle & 9a Av; lunches US\$2.40; ☎ breakfast & lunch) Try the savory, filling lunches at this place a few doors back towards the plaza from Café Deli-Donas. The chicken broth followed by grilled chicken, rice and salad, with perhaps a mango to finish, is a worthy feast.

**Restaurante El Balcón de los Recuerdos** (8a Av 6-28; mains US\$5-7; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) This restaurant, a half-block west of the plaza on the road to La Cumbre, is spacious, fan-cooled and has a central fountain. Here you can choose from a typical list of grilled meats, fish, prawns, and seafood soup.

## Getting There & Away

Buses going to Guatemala City (US\$3 to US\$4.50, three hours, 151km) depart hourly between 3am and 8pm from the northeast corner of the park. There is a Pullman at 4am. Arrive early for a seat. Buses coming from Guatemala City continue west from Salamá to Rabinal (US\$1.50, 40 minutes, 19km) and then 15km further along to Cubulco. Buses for San Jerónimo leave from in front of the *municipalidad* (town hall; east side of the plaza) every half-hour from 6am to 5:30pm (US\$0.40, 25 minutes). Buses for La Cumbre (US\$0.60, 25 minutes) and Cobán (US\$2.50; 1½ to two hours) leave just downhill from the corner of 15 Calle and 6a Av about every 30 minutes from early morning to 4pm.

## AROUND SALAMÁ

A few kilometers along the road to Salamá from Hwy 14, you come to the turnoff for **San Jerónimo**. Behind the town's beautiful church is a 16th-century sugar mill now used as a **museum** (admission free; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon & 1-4pm Sat & Sun) displaying a decent collection of artifacts and photographs, though none of the former is labeled. The grounds here are immaculate and there's a playground to keep the kids out of trouble. On the plaza are some large stones that were carved in ancient times.

About a five-minute walk from the town center are **Los Arcos**, a series of 124 arches in various states of decay. These formed a sophisticated aqueduct system to power the sugar mill. To get there, take the main road heading east (away from Salamá), bear right and slightly downhill, where you'll see a 'Barrio El Calvario' sign. Keep an eye to your right along this road and you'll start to see the arches. A second set of arches can be seen by going right at the second dirt alley on this road. If you continue straight ahead for about 50m, rather than going right, you'll see more arches through gaps in the trees. Continue straight on this road to reach **Finca San Lorenzo**, a coffee farm open to the public. The last bus of the day returning to Salamá leaves San Jerónimo at 4pm.

Nine kilometers west of Salamá along Hwy 5 is the village of **San Miguel Chicaj**, known for its weaving and for its traditional fiesta from September 25 to 29. Continue along the same road for another 10km to reach the colonial town of **Rabinal**, founded in 1537 by Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas as a base for his proselytizing. Rabinal has gained fame as a pottery-making center (look especially for the hand-painted chocolate cups), and for its citrus fruit harvest (November and December). Rabinal is also known for its adherence to pre-Columbian traditions, folklore and dance. If you can make it here for the annual fiesta of San Pedro, between January 19 and 25 (with things reaching a fevered pitch on January 21), or Corpus Cristi (40 days after Easter), do so. Market day here is Sunday. Rabinal also has the **Museo Comunitario Rabinal Achi'** (cnr 4a Av & 2a Calle, Zona 3), which is devoted to history, culture and the Achi' Maya who live in the district. Two small hotels, the *Pensión Motagua* and the *Hospedaje Caballeros*, can put you up.

## COURTING THE QUETZAL

The resplendent quetzal, which gave its name to Guatemala's currency, was sacred to the Maya. Its feathers grace the plumed serpent Quetzalcoatl and killing one was a capital offence. Unfortunately, in modern times it enjoys no such protection and hunting (mostly for the male's long, emerald-green tail feathers) and habitat loss have made the bird a rarity in Guatemala. You'd stand a much better chance of seeing one in Costa Rica or Panama.

The best place to look for a quetzal here is in the cloud forests of the Alta Verapaz, especially in the hopefully named Biotopo del Quetzal (below).

Avocado and fruit trees are what you're looking for here – that's the preferred food of the quetzal (along with insects, snails, frogs and lizards). But you'll have to look closely – the quetzal's green plumage is dull unless in direct sunlight, providing perfect camouflage, and it often remains motionless for hours.

The females lay two eggs per year, from March to June, and this is the best time to go looking, as the males' tail feathers grow up to 75cm long during this period. Keep an ear out for their distinctive call – sharp cackles and a low, burbling whistle: *keeeoo-keeeoo*.

It's possible to continue on from Rabinal another 15km to the village of **Cubulco**. Or, from Rabinal you can follow Hwy 5 all the way to Guatemala City, a trip of about 100km passing through several small villages. Buses ply this mostly unpaved route, albeit very slowly. Along the way you could detour 16km north from Montúfar to the ruins of **Mixco Viejo** (admission US\$4), which was the active capital of the Poqomam Maya when the Spaniards came and crashed the party. The location of this ceremonial and military center is awesome, wedged between deep ravines, with just one way in and one way out. To further fortify the site, the Poqomam built impressive rock walls around the city. It took Pedro de Alvarado and his troops more than a month of concerted attacks to conquer Mixco Viejo. When they finally succeeded, they furiously laid waste to this city, which scholars believe supported close to 10,000 people at its height. There are several temples and two ball courts here. Self-sufficient campers can overnight here for free. It's difficult to reach this site by public transportation. From Guatemala City you need to get a *Servicios Unidos San Juan* bus from the Zona 4 Terminal de Autobuses to San Juan Sacatepéquez (US\$0.80, one hour, departures every few minutes from 4am to 6pm) then change to onward transportation there. It's 12km north from San Juan to Montúfar.

## BIOTOPO DEL QUETZAL

Along the main Cobán highway (Carretera a Cobán or Hwy 14), 34km beyond the La Cumbre turnoff for Salamá, you reach the Biotopo

Mario Dary Rivera nature reserve, commonly called the **Biotopo del Quetzal** (admission US\$2.50; ☎ 7am-4pm), at Km 161, just east of the village of Purullhá.

You need a fair bit of luck to see a quetzal – they're rare and shy. For more about the quetzal, see the boxed text, above. You have the best chance of seeing them from March to June. If you're really keen to see Guatemala's national bird in the wild, contact Proyecto EcoQuetzal in Cobán (p220).

It's well worth stopping to explore and enjoy this lush high-altitude cloud-forest ecosystem that is the quetzal's natural habitat at any time – and you may get lucky! Early morning or early evening when the quetzals feed on *aguacatillo* trees are the best times to watch out for them – try around the Hotel y Comedor Ranchito del Quetzal (p216).

Trail guide maps in English and Spanish (US\$0.70) are available at the visitors center. They contain a checklist of 87 birds commonly seen here. Other animals include spider monkeys and *tigrillos*, which are similar to ocelots. Good luck spotting either of these.

Two excellent, well-maintained nature trails wind through the reserve: the 1800m Sendero los Helechos (Fern Trail) and the 3600m Sendero los Musgos (Moss Trail). As you wander through the dense growth, treading on the rich, spongy humus and leaf-mold, you'll see many varieties of epiphytes (air plants), which thrive in the *biotopo*'s humid atmosphere.

Both trails pass by waterfalls, most of which cascade into small pools where you can take a dip; innumerable streams have their headwaters here, and the Río Colorado pours

## CARDAMOM

The world's coffee drinkers know that high-quality coffee is important to Guatemala's export trade, but few know that Guatemala is the world's largest exporter of the spice cardamom. In Alta Verapaz, cardamom is more important to the local economy than coffee, providing livelihood for some 200,000 people. Cardamom (*Elettaria cardamomum*), a herbaceous perennial of the ginger family native to the Malabar Coast of India, was brought to Alta Verapaz by German coffee plantation owners.

The plants grow to a height of between 1.5m and 6m and have coarse leaves up to 76cm long that are hairy on the underside. The flowers are white, and the fruit is a green, three-sided oval capsule holding 15 to 20 dark, hard, reddish-brown to brownish-black seeds. Though the cardamom plant grows readily, it is difficult to cultivate, pick and sort the best grades, so fragrant cardamom commands a high price. That does not seem to bother the people of Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Gulf states, who purchase more than 80% of the world supply. They pulverize the seeds and add the powder to the thick, syrupy, pungent coffee that is a social and personal necessity in that part of the world.

through the forest along a geological fault. Deep in the forest is **Xiu Gua Li Che** (Grandfather Tree), some 450 years old, which germinated around the time the Spanish fought the Rabinal in these mountains.

The reserve has a visitors center, a little shop for drinks and snacks, and a camping and barbecue area. The ruling on camping changes from time to time. Check by contacting Cecon (Centro de Estudios Conservacionistas de la Universidad de San Carlos) in Guatemala City (see p68), which administers this and other *biotopos*.

## Sleeping & Eating

There are three lodging places close to the reserve.

**Hotel y Comedor Ranchito del Quetzal** (☎ 5368 6397; s/d US\$5/10, with bathroom US\$7.50/15; (P)) Carved out of the jungle on a hillside 200m away from the Biotopo del Quetzal entrance, this place has good-sized, simple rooms with cold showers in the older wooden building and hot showers in the newer concrete one. Reasonably priced, simple meals (mains US\$3.50) are served, and there are vegetarian options.

**Posada Montaña del Quetzal** (☎ 6620 0709; www.hposadaquetzal.com; Hwy 14 Km 156.5; s/d with bathroom US\$30/40, 2-bedroom bungalows US\$40/50; (P) (E)) This comfortable place is 5km before the Biotopo del Quetzal if you're coming from Guatemala City. Accommodations are rustically styled, but extremely comfortable. It's set on a huge property that includes an orchid nursery, fishing holes, forest walks and a 30-minute mountain bike track out to a private waterfall. The bungalows are a real steal, featuring living

rooms with huge open fireplaces. The restaurant is popular with tour groups, mainly for its excellent *cack'ik* (turkey stew; US\$4).

**Hotel Restaurant Ram Tzul** (☎ 5908 4066; www.m-y-c.com.ar/ramtzul; Hwy 14 Km 158; s/d US\$30/40; (P)) Quite likely the most beautiful hotel in either of the Verapaces, this place is about halfway between the Posada Montaña del Quetzal and the *biotopo* entrance. The restaurant/sitting area is in a tall, thatched-roofed structure with fire pits and plenty of atmosphere. The rustic, upmarket theme extends to the rooms and bungalows, which are spacious and elegantly decorated. The hotel property includes waterfalls and swimming spots.

## Getting There & Away

Any bus to/from Guatemala City will set you down at the park entrance. Heading in the other direction, it's best to flag down a bus or microbus to El Rancho and change there for your next destination.

## COBÁN

pop 57,600 / elev 1320m

Not so much an attraction in itself, but an excellent jumping-off point for the natural wonders of Alta Verapaz, Cobán is a prosperous city with an upbeat air. Return visitors will marvel at how much (and how tastefully) the town has developed since their last visit.

As you enter Cobán, a sign says 'Bienvenidos a Cobán, Ciudad Imperial', referring to the city charter granted in 1538 by Emperor Carlos V.

The town was once the center of Tezulutlán (Tierra de Guerra, or 'Land of War'), a stronghold of the Rabinal Maya.



In the 19th century, when German immigrants moved in and founded vast coffee and cardamom *fincas* (plantations), Cobán took on the aspect of a German mountain town, as the *fincas* owners built town residences. The era of German cultural and economic domination ended during WWII, when the USA prevailed upon the Guatemalan government to deport the powerful *fincas* owners, many of whom actively supported the Nazis.

Today, Cobán is an interesting town to visit, though dreary weather can color your impression. Most of the year it is either rainy or overcast, dank and chill. You can count on sunny days in Cobán for only about three weeks, in April. In the midst of the 'dry' season (January to March) it can be misty and sometimes rainy, or bright and sunny with marvelous clear mountain air.

Guatemala's most impressive festival of Indian traditions, the national folklore festival of **Rabin Ajau** with its traditional dance of the Paabanc, takes place here in the latter part of July or in the first week of August. The **national orchid show** is hosted here every December.

There is not a lot to do in Cobán itself except enjoy the local color and mountain scenery, but the town is a base for marvelous side trips, including to the Grutas de Lanquín (p224) and the pools and cascades of Semuc Champey (p225).

## Orientation

Most of the services you'll need are within a few blocks of the main plaza and the cathedral. The shopping district is around and behind the cathedral, and you'll smell the savory cardamom, which vendors come from the mountains to sell, before you see it.

Most buses will drop you at the terminal north of town. It's a 15-minute walk (2km) or US\$1 taxi ride to the plaza from there.

There is a **tourist office** (1a Calle, Zona 1; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) on the plaza, but unless your questions are very basic, you will probably send you to the tourism people in the **municipalidad** (1a Calle, Zona 1; ☎ 7952 1305, 7951 1148), where some switched-on young staff work in an office behind the police office. Casa D'Acuña (p221) can also give you loads of information.

The heart of Cobán is built on a rise, so unless what you're looking for is in the dead center, be prepared to walk uphill and down.

## Information

### INTERNET ACCESS

Plenty of places offer internet access. The going rate is US\$0.80 an hour.

**Access Computación** (Oficinas Profesionales Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, 1a Calle 3-13; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-6pm Sat)

**Cybercobán** (3a Av 1-11, Zona 4; ☎ 8:30am-7pm Mon-Sat) East (200m) of the plaza.

## COFFEE: FROM THE BEAN TO THE CUP

It's a long way from the farm to the table for the humble coffee bean. First, they have to wait until they're ripe – a sunburst red color – then they're picked and put in water. Those that float are skimmed off and sold as second-grade beans. The rest soak in the water for 12 to 24 hours (depending on the altitude) until they ferment and shed their outer skin.

Then it's into the wash to remove any residues and the fleshy substance that covers the kernel, before being baked in an oven to dry.

All the above, from picking to drying, should take place in around one day to maintain flavor, but at this point the bean can be stored for months without any loss in quality.

Many small-scale producers sell the beans at this point – buyers often prefer to take over from here, as the rest of the process influences the flavor of the finished product greatly.

A machine is now used to remove a fine, transparent skin that covers the inner kernel. This is done just prior to toasting. A lighter toast makes for a more aromatic, less flavorsome brew. Longer toasting means more flavor but less aroma.

The degree of acidity in a coffee bean is directly related to the altitude it's grown at – the higher the altitude, the greater the acidity.

Of Guatemala's main coffee-growing regions, Huehuetenango and Cobán produce the most acidic beans, Lake Atitlán and Antigua produce a medium acidity, and the smoothest beans come from the Pacific Slope and El Petén.







noon Sat) offers stellar guided tours. From propagation and planting to roasting and exporting, the 45-minute tour will tell you all you ever wanted to know about these powerful beans. At tour's end, you're treated to a cup of coffee and can purchase beans straight from the roaster for US\$2.60 to US\$5 a pound (0.45kg). The talented guide speaks English and Spanish.

### MUSEO EL PRÍNCIPE MAYA

This private museum (☎ 7952 1541; 6a Av 4-26, Zona 3; admission US\$1.30; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) features a collection of pre-Columbian artifacts, with an emphasis on jewelry, other body adornments and pottery. The displays are well designed and maintained.

### Language Courses

The **Oxford Language Center** (☎ 5892 7718; www.olcenglish.com; 4a Av 2-16, Zona 3) charges around US\$170 for 20 hours of Spanish lessons,

with discounts for groups. Its rationale for charging more than the competition is that it pays its teachers better.

### Tours

**Aventuras Turísticas** (☎ /fax 7951 4213; www.aventuras.turisticas.com; 3a Calle 2-38, Zona 3) In the Hostal de Doña Victoria, Aventuras leads tours to Laguna Lachuá, the Grutas de Lanquín, Rey Marcos and Candelaria, as well as to Semuc Champey, Tikal, Ceibal, and anywhere else you may want to go; it will customize itineraries. French-, English- and Spanish-speaking guides are available. Prices range from US\$16 to US\$200, per person.

**Casa D'Acuña** (☎ 7951 0484; casadacuna@yahoo.com; 4a Calle 3-11, Zona 2) offers tours to Semuc Champey, the Grutas de Lanquín and other places further afield. Its guides are excellent.

**Proyecto EcoQuetzal** (☎ /fax 7952 1047; www.ecoquetzal.org; 2a Calle 14-36, Zona 1; 🕒 8:30am-1pm

## WAKE UP & SMELL THE EXPLOITATION

Coffee is not just a drink in Guatemala. For many, it's a livelihood. It's also a neat analogy to the country's history and society.

The majority of coffee *fincas* (plantations) are large landholdings, many passed down for generations since the Spanish came and took over the land. Others have been 'gifted' from the government – often to ex-military types for...services rendered.

Wages and conditions on coffee farms are pitiful. Around harvest time, subsistence farmers from the area are brought in to live on the farm in crude dormitory-style buildings. Workers are paid by weight of beans picked, and you will often see entire families – including small children – out in the fields.

Minimum wage (around US\$100 per month for rural workers) is not a relevant concept here.

The unsteady world coffee market means that farm owners sometimes get rich, but workers barely scrape by.

A small group of owners and workers have come up with an alternative model. Working on a cooperative basis, they shun the exploitative model and market their produce as fair-trade coffee.

For a product to claim fair-trade status, it must be certified by the **Fair Trade Labeling Organization** (www.fairtrade.net). The main requisites for certification are that the producer:

- respects the human rights of workers
- grants equal pay and conditions to men and women
- doesn't use child labor
- assists in community development.

There are around 24 communities producing fair-trade coffee in Guatemala. The vast majority of their produce is exported, and much of it is organic, using natural, plant-based herbicides and pesticides.

To find out more about fair-trade coffee, log on to www.caféconciencia.org. You can visit, stay and even volunteer at a fair-trade coffee farm at Nueva Alianza (see p198).

& 2-5:30pm Mon-Fri) is an innovative project offering 'ethnotourism' trips in which participants hike to nearby villages nestled in the cloud forest and stay with a Q'eqchi' Maya family. To maximize the experience, travelers are encouraged to learn some Q'eqchi' words and stay with their host family for at least two days. For US\$42 you'll get a guide for three days, lodging for two nights, and six meals. Your guide will take you on hikes to interesting spots. The men of the family are the guides, providing them an alternative, sustainable way to make a living. Reservations are required at least one day in advance. The Proyecto also rents boots, sleeping bags and binoculars at reasonable prices, so you need not worry if you haven't come prepared for such a rugged experience. Participants should speak at least a little Spanish. With a month's notice, this outfit also offers quetzal-viewing platforms; contact the office for full details.

## Sleeping

When choosing a room in Cobán, you may want to ensure that the showers have hot water; it can be cold in these parts.

## BUDGET

**Parque Nacional Las Victorias Camping** (campsites per person per night US\$3) Camping is available at Parque Nacional Las Victorias, right in town. Facilities include water and toilets but no showers.

**Chipi Chipi Hostel** (☎ 5226 0235; 1a Calle 3-25, Zona 1; dm US\$3.50) This new hostel is a total winner in terms of location, and offers decent shared rooms, sleeping four in two bunks. The patio has hammocks and the young staff are full of info and tips.

**Hotel La Paz** (☎ 7952 1358; 6a Av 2-19, Zona 1; s US\$4, s/d with bathroom US\$6/10; **P**) This cheerful, clean hotel, 1½ blocks north and two blocks west of the plaza, is an excellent deal. It has many flowers, and a good *cafeteria* next door.

**Casa Luna** (☎ 7951 3528; 5a Av 2-28, Zona 1; dm US\$6; r per person US\$7.50) Modern rooms set around a pretty, grassy courtyard. Dorms have lockers and private rooms are well decorated. The shared bathrooms are spotless.

**Guest House Cobán** (5a Av & 2a Calle, Zona 1; s/d incl breakfast US\$6/12, with bathroom US\$7.50/15) A basic but comfortable little guesthouse in a good location. The beds are firm and the family who runs it is super friendly.

**Hostel Jam Bamboo** (2a Av 4-33, Zona 2; dm US\$6) Definitely party central in Cobán's hostel scene, this one isn't for your retiring types. But if you're looking to meet people and listen to live music (Tuesday to Sunday), this is your place. Rooms are spacious, with three beds per room and a bathroom in each.

**Posada de Don Pedro** (☎ 7951 0562; 3a Calle 3-12, Zona 2; s/d US\$6/12) This family-run place has spacious rooms with terracotta-tiled floors around a happy little courtyard. There are good sitting areas to while the day away.

**Casa D'Acuña** (☎ 7951 0482; casadacuna@yahoo.com; 4a Calle 3-11, Zona 2; dm/d US\$6.50/13) This clean, very comfortable European-style hostel has four dormitories (each with four beds) and two private doubles, all with shared bathroom with good hot-water showers. Also here is a fabulous restaurant called El Bistro (p222), a gift shop, laundry service and reasonably priced local tours.

**Hotel Central** (☎ 7952 1442; 1a Calle 1-79, Zona 1; s/d with bathroom & TV US\$16/20) Reasonable-sized rooms, with just a touch of mold on the walls, and lovely outdoor sitting areas make this a decent choice.

## MIDRANGE

**Posada Don Matalbatz** (☎/fax 7951 0811; www.discoveryguate.com; 3a Calle 1-46, Zona 1; s/d US\$8/16, with bathroom US\$22/27; **P**) This friendly place has a selection of rooms, including big, clean units facing a pretty courtyard with hot-water bathroom and cable TV. Upstairs, the attic room has the most light and character, and sleeps five. Also on this level are a couple of rooms with clean, shared bathroom and little balconies. There's also a pool table. Stuck in the middle of markets, this isn't the best area in town, especially after dark.

**Pensión Monja Blanca** (☎ 7952 1712; 2a Calle 6-30, Zona 2; s/d US\$7/15, with bathroom US\$15/30; **P**) This place is peaceful despite being on busy 2a Calle. After walking through two courtyards, you come to a lush garden packed with fruit and hibiscus trees around which the spotless rooms are arranged. Each room has an old-time feel to it and is furnished with two good-quality single beds with folksy covers, and has cable TV; the light switches are on the outside. This is a good place for solo women travelers.

**our pick Posada de Don Antonio** (☎ 7951 4287; 5a Av 1-51, Zona 4; s/d US\$14/28; **P**) This atmospheric two-story place provides some of the best value in town. Rooms are spacious with two

(or even three!) double beds, high ceilings and loving attention to detail. Breakfast (US\$4 to US\$6) in the lush patio area is a great way to start the day.

**Hostal de Doña Victoria** (☎ /fax 7951 4213; www.adventuraturisticas.com; 3a Calle 2-38, Zona 3; s/d US\$20/25; (P)) This lovely hotel in a restored mansion more than 400 years old is jam-packed with eye-catching decorations varying from an old copper coffee machine to wooden masks to antique religious statues. Eight brightly painted comfortable rooms, with bathroom and TV, surround a central courtyard with lush plants and a restaurant-bar.

**Casa Duranta** (☎ 7951 4188; www.casaduranta.com; 3a Calle 4-46, Zona 3; s/d US\$40/47) Some rooms at this carefully restored, eclectically decorated place are excellent value, while others are a bit cramped for the price. Have a look around if you can.

**Hotel La Posada** (☎ 7952 1495; www.laposadacoban.com; 1a Calle 4-12, Zona 2; s/d with bathroom US\$40/50) Just off the plaza, this colonial-style hotel is Cobán's best, though rooms streetside suffer from traffic noise. Its colonnaded porches are dripping with tropical flowers and furnished with easy chairs and hammocks from which you can enjoy the mountain views. The rooms are a bit austere, with plenty of religious relics around the place, but they have nice old furniture, fireplaces and wall hangings of local weaving, and a bathroom. La Posada has a restaurant and café (right).

## Eating

Most of the hotels in Cobán come with their own restaurants. In the evening, food trucks (kitchens on wheels) park around the plaza and offer some of the cheapest dining in town. As always, the one to go for has the largest crowd of locals hanging around and chomping down.

**Xkape Koba'n** (2a Calle 5-13, Zona 2; snacks US\$2; ☎ 10am-7pm) The perfect place to take a breather or while away a whole afternoon, this beautiful, artsy little café has a lush garden out back. The cakes are homemade, the coffee delectable and there are some interesting handcrafts on sale.

**Café El Tirol** (Oficinas Profesionales Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, 1a Calle 3-13; breakfasts US\$2-4; ☎ Mon-Sat) Another good central café, the Tirol claims to have Cobán's 'best coffee' (we disagree) and offers several types of hot chocolate. It's a cozy little place in which to enjoy breakfasts,

pastries and coffee or light meals, with a pleasant terrace away from the traffic.

**El Cafeto** (2a Calle 1-36 B, Zona 2; mains US\$3-4; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This cute little café right on the square does good, light set lunches (US\$3), has a half-decent wine selection and serves delicious coffee.

**Sonic Burger** (1a Calle 3-50, Zona 3; burgers from US\$3, set meals US\$3-5; ☎ lunch & dinner) The best burgers in town in a young, almost-hip environment. The food is cheap, the drinks expensive... go figure.

**Café La Posada** (1a Calle 4-12, Zona 2; ☎ 9-1pm; snacks under US\$4; ☎ 11am-7pm) This café has tables on a veranda overlooking the square, and a comfortable sitting room inside with couches, coffee tables and a fireplace. All the usual café fare is served. Snacks comprise nachos, tortillas, sandwiches, burgers, tacos, tostadas, fruit salad and more.

**Bokatas** (4a Calle 2-34, Zona 2; mains US\$4-10; ☎ dinner) This large outdoor eatery pumps out big juicy steaks and loud disco music in equal portions. Also on offer is a decent paella for two or three people (US\$24) and a range of seafood and Mediterranean options.

**Restaurant Kam Mun** (1a Calle 8-12, Zona 2; mains US\$5-11; ☎ lunch & dinner) Here you will find Chinese fare, served in a nice, clean atmosphere, 500m west of the plaza. Enjoy your meal surrounded by Chinese dragons, Buddhas and floral paintings.

**El Peñascal** (5a Av 2-61; mains US\$8-10; ☎ lunch & dinner) Probably Cobán's finest dining option, this one has plenty of regional specialties, Guatemalan classics, mixed meat platters, seafood and snacks in a relaxed, upmarket setting.

**El Bistro** (4a Calle 3-11; fish, steak & chicken mains US\$8.50-13; ☎ from 7am) Casa D'Acuña's restaurant offers authentic Italian and other European-style dishes served in an attractive oasis of tranquility to background classical music. In addition to protein-oriented mains, there is a range of pastas (US\$4 to US\$5.25), salads, homemade breads, cakes and outstanding desserts.

## Entertainment

Cobán has several places where you can get down and boogie. **Bar Milenio** (3a Av 1-11, Zona 4) has a bar, food, a pool table and mixed music disco.

**La Casona** (8a Av & 2 Calle, Zona 2; admission US\$2-3; ☎ Thu-Sat) A mega-disco with balcony seating and bowtied waiters.

**Keops** (3a Calle 4-71, Zona 3; admission US\$4) A popular disco. Wear your best gear.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

The highway connecting Cobán with Guatemala City and the Carr al Atlántico is the most traveled route between Cobán and the outside world. The road north through Chisec to Sayaxché and Flores has almost all been paved in recent years, providing much easier access than before to El Petén. The off-the-beaten-track routes west to Huehuetenango and northeast to Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas and Poptún are mostly paved and still provide a bit of an adventure. Always double-check bus departure times, especially for less frequently served destinations. Tourism staff at the *municipalidad* try to keep up with the frequent schedule changes and display bus details in the foyer.

Many buses leave from Cobán's new bus terminal, southeast of the stadium. Buses to Guatemala City, Salamá, Lanquín and many other destinations depart from completely different stations (see the list, above).

Minibuses, known as microbuses, are replacing, or are additional to, chicken buses on many routes. Many buses do a circuit of the plaza before leaving town and stop outside Oficinas Profesionales Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas.

Bus departures from Cobán:

**Biotopeo del Quetzal** (US\$1, 1¼ hours, 58km) Any bus heading for Guatemala City will drop you at the entrance to the Biotopeo.

**Cahabón** (US\$3.20, 4½ hours, 85km) Same buses as to Lanquín.

**Chisec** (US\$1.95, two hours, 66km, 10 buses from Campo 2, from 6am to 5pm)

**El Estor** (US\$6, seven hours, 166km) This road gets washed out in heavy rains – check at the *municipalidad* to see if the bus is running.

**Flores** (five to six hours, 224km) Go to Sayaxché and take an onward bus or minibus from there.

**Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas** (via Chisec US\$4, three hours, 121km; via San Pedro Carchá US\$4.50, four hours, 101km) Several buses and minibuses depart from Campo 2, from 5am to 3:30pm. Buses might just say 'Las Casas.'

**Guatemala City** (US\$4 to US\$6, four to five hours, 213km) Transportes Monja Blanca (☎ 7951 3571; 2a Calle 3-77, Zona 4) has buses leaving for Guatemala City every 30 minutes from 2am to 6am, then hourly until 5pm.

**Lanquín** (US\$2 to US\$3, 2½ to three hours, 61km) Minibuses depart from the corner of 3a Calle and 3a Av, in

Zona 4, from 7am to 4pm. Do check these times, though, as they seem to be fluid.

**Playa Grande (for Laguna Lachuá)** (US\$6.50, four hours, 141km) Frequent buses and minibuses from Campo 2. Playa Grande is sometimes called Cantabal.

**Puerto Barrios** (6½ hours, 335km) Take any bus headed to Guatemala City and change at El Rancho junction.

**Raxrujá** (US\$3, 2½ to three hours, 81km) Take a bus or microbus heading to Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas via Chisec; some Sayaxché-bound buses go through Raxrujá too. Or go to Chisec and change.

**Río Dulce** (6½ hours, 318km) Take any bus headed to Guatemala City and change at El Rancho junction. You may have to transfer again at La Ruidosa junction, 169km past El Rancho, but there is plenty of transportation going through to Río Dulce and on to Flores.

**Salamá** (US\$3, 1½ hours, 57km) Frequent minivans leave from Campo 2, or take any bus to Guatemala City and change at La Cumbre.

**San Pedro Carchá** (US\$0.40, 20 minutes, 6km) Buses every 10 minutes, from 6am to 7pm, from the lot in front of the Monja Blanca terminal.

**Sayaxché** (US\$7, four hours, 84km) Buses at 6am and noon, and microbuses from early until 1pm, from Campo 2.

**Tactic** (US\$0.60, 40 minutes, 32km) Frequent buses from Campo 2.

**Uspantán** (US\$4.50, 4½ hours, 94km) Microbuses go from Campo 2 with a stop at Oficinas Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas.

### CAR

Cobán has a couple of places that rent cars. Reserve your choice in advance. If you want to go to the Grutas de Lanquín or Semuc Champey, you'll need a 4WD vehicle. Rental companies include **Inque Renta Autos** (☎ 7952 1994, 7952 1172; 3a Av 1-18, Zona 4) and **Tabarini Rent A Car** (☎ 7952 1504; fax 7951 3282; 7a Av 2-27, Zona 1).

## AROUND COBÁN

Cobán, and indeed all of Alta Verapaz, has become a magnet for Guatemalan adventure travel, both independent and organized. Not only are there scores of villages where you can experience traditional Mayan culture in some of its purest extant forms, there are also caves running throughout the department, waterfalls, pristine lagoons and many other natural wonders yet to be discovered. Go find them!

**San Cristóbal Verapaz** is an interesting Poqomchi' Maya village set beside Lake Chicoj, 19km west of Cobán. During Semana Santa (Easter Week), San Cristóbal artists design elaborate *alfombras* (carpets) of colored sawdust and flower petals rivaled only by those in Antigua. In addition, San Cristóbal

is home to the **Centro Comunitario Educativo Pokomchi** (Cecep; ☎ 7950 4039; www.ajchicho.50g.com), an organization dedicated to preserving traditional and modern ways of Poqomchi' life. To this end, Cecep inaugurated the **Museo Katinamit** (Calle del Calvario; admission US\$1; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun), which re-creates a typical Poqomchi' house, with well-ordered displays of household items and everyday products. Other rooms feature art, tools and textiles still in daily use, and an introduction and orientation on the Poqomchi'. Cecep also offers volunteer and ethnotourism opportunities and runs the **Aj Chi Cho Language Center** (courses incl homestay per week US\$120) for teaching Spanish. **El Portón Real** (☎ 7950 4604) is a Poqomchi'-owned and -operated hostelry.

**Tactic** is a small town 32km south of Cobán that offers myriad opportunities to experience traditional Mayan culture. On the plaza is the **Cooperativa de Tejadores**, where women demonstrate weaving techniques and sell their wares. On the outskirts of Tactic, atop the hill called Chi Ixhim, is an altar to the God of Maiz; anyone in town can point you in the right direction. There are a few places to stay, but none as nice as **Country Delight** (☎ 7909 1149; ecotdms@latinmail.com; Hwy 14 Km 166.5), where there are hiking trails, camping facilities, rooms and a restaurant. Staff can supply information on the area and its attractions. Tactic celebrates the **Fiesta de la Virgen de la Asunción** from August 11 to 16.

## Balneario Las Islas

At the town of San Pedro Carchá, 6km east of Cobán on the way to Lanquín, is the Balneario Las Islas, with a river coming down past rocks and into a natural pool that's great for swimming. It's a five- to 10-minute walk from the bus stop in Carchá; anyone can point the way. Buses operate frequently between Cobán and Carchá (US\$0.50, 20 minutes).

## San Juan Chamelco

About 8km southeast of Cobán is the village of San Juan Chamelco, where you can swim at the Balneario Chio. The **church** here sits on top of a small rise, providing awesome views of the villages below. The colonial church may have been the first in Alta Verapaz. Paintings inside depict the arrival of the conquistadors. Mass is still held here in both Spanish and Q'eqchi'.

Buses to San Juan Chamelco leave from 4a Calle, Zona 3, in Cobán. To reach Don

Jerónimo's, take a bus or pickup from San Juan Chamelco towards Chamil and ask the driver to let you off at Don Jerónimo's. When you get off, take the footpath to the left for 300m, cross the bridge and it's the first house on the right. Alternatively, hire a taxi from Cobán (US\$6.50).

## Grutas Rey Marcos

This **cave system** (admission US\$3; 🕒 9am-5pm) is set in the **Balneario Cecilinda** (admission US\$2), which is, incidentally, a great place to go for a swim or a hike on scenic mountain trails. The caves themselves go for more than 1km into the earth, although chances are you won't get taken that far. A river runs through the cave (you have to wade through it at one point) and there are some impressive stalactites and stalagmites. According to local legend, any wishes made in the cave are guaranteed to come true. The Balneario Cecilinda is located a few hundred meters down the road from Don Jerónimo's.

In Aldea Chajaneb, only 12km from Cobán, **Don Jerónimo's** (☎ 2308 2255; www.dearbrutus.com/donjeronimo; s/d US\$25/45), owned by Jerry Makransky (Don Jerónimo), rents comfortable, simple bungalows. The price includes three ample, delicious vegetarian meals fresh from the garden. Jerry also offers many activities, including tours to caves and the mountains, and inner-tubing on the Río Sotzil. He dotes on his guests, and the atmosphere is friendly.

## Grutas de Lanquín

One of the best excursions to make from Cobán is to the caves near Lanquín, a pretty village 61km to the east.

The **Grutas de Lanquín** (admission US\$3; 🕒 8am-4pm) are about 1km northwest of the town, and extend for several kilometers into the earth. There is now a ticket office here. The first cave has lights, but do take a powerful flashlight (torch) anyway. You'll also need shoes with good traction, as inside it's slippery with moisture and bat crap.

Though the first few hundred meters of cavern have been equipped with a walkway and are lit by diesel-powered electric lights, most of this subterranean system is untouched. If you are not an experienced spelunker, you shouldn't wander too far into the caves; the entire extent has yet to be explored, let alone mapped.



As well as featuring funky stalactites, mostly named for animals, these caves are crammed with bats; at sunset, they fly out of the mouth of the cave in formations so dense they obscure the sky. For a dazzling display of navigation skills, sit at the entrance while they exit. The river here gushes from the cave in clean, cool and delicious torrents. You can swim in the river, which has some comfortably hot pockets close to shore.

Tours to the Grutas de Lanquín and Semuc Champey, offered in Cobán for US\$35 per person (see p220), are the easiest way to visit these places. Tours take about two hours to reach Lanquín from Cobán; the price includes a packed lunch.

Maya Expeditions (see p81), based in Guatemala City, offers exciting one- to five-day rafting expeditions on the Río Cahabón.

If you're driving, you'll need a 4WD vehicle. The road from San Pedro Charca to El Pajal, where you turn off for Lanquín, is paved. The 11km from El Pajal to Lanquín is not. You can head on from Lanquín to Flores in 14 to 15 hours via El Pajal, Sebol, Raxrujá and Sayaxché. The road from El Pajal to Sebol is not paved. Or you can head from Lanquín to Sebol and Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas and on to Poptún.

## SLEEPING & EATING

**El Retiro** (☎ 7983 0009; hammock/dm US\$3/4, s/d US\$6/12, with bathroom US\$22; 📺) This sublimely located hotel is about 500m along the road beyond Rabin Itzam. *Palapa* buildings look down over the greenest of green fields to a beautiful wide river – the same river that flows out from the Lanquín caves. It's safe to swim, and to inner-tube if you're a confident swimmer. The place is Guatemalan- and English-owned. Attention to detail in every respect makes this a backpackers' paradise. Dorm rooms have only four beds. Individual decor includes some clever use of tiles, shells, strings of beads and local fabrics. Excellent vegetarian food (three-course dinner US\$4.50) is available in the hammock-lined restaurant. Plenty of info is provided for onward journeys and there are organized activities such as jungle walks.

**La Divina Providencia** (s/d US\$3.50/7) In the center of Lanquín village, the plain wooden rooms here will do at a stretch if you're just stopping over and need a place to sleep. Upstairs rooms are much cheerier.

**Rabin Itzam** (s/d US\$3.50/7, with bathroom US\$13/16) The most comfortable option in the center, although the beds sag a bit. Rooms upstairs at the front (with shared bathroom) have good valley views.

**El Recreo** (☎ 7983 0057; hotel\_el\_recreo@hotmail.com; s/d US\$10/20, with bathroom US\$20/29; 📺) Between the town and the caves, this place has that 'made for tour groups' feel to it, but the bungalows set around forested grounds are a good deal – spacious and well decorated. The rooms set in the basement with shared bathrooms might be a bit grim for some.

**La Estancia de Alfaro** (mains US\$3-5; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This large outdoor eatery halfway between town and El Retiro serves up good-sized plates of steak, eggs and rice and gets rowdy and beerish at night.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses operate several times daily between Cobán and Lanquín, continuing to Cahabón. Buses leave Lanquín to return to Cobán at 3am, 4am, 5:30am and 1pm, and there are assorted minibuses with no fixed timetable. Since the last reliable return bus departs so early, it's best to stay the night.

## Road to El Estor

If you're heading towards Río Dulce, a back road exists, although it's unpaved for most of the way and gets washed out in heavy rains. Transportation schedules along here are flexible at best. Ask around to see what the current situation is. Five minibuses daily leave Lanquín for Cahabón (US\$2, one hour). The last of these leaves at 4pm, although you'll want to leave earlier to avoid getting stuck here. From Cahabón, one bus leaves daily for El Estor at 1pm (US\$5, four hours), although if you miss it you should be able to get a ride in a pickup without too much trouble.

## Semuc Champey

Nine kilometers south of Lanquín, along a rough, bumpy, slow road, is **Semuc Champey** (admission US\$4), famed for its great 300m-long natural limestone bridge, on top of which is a stepped series of pools with cool, flowing river water good for swimming. The water is from the Río Cahabón, and much more of it passes underground, beneath the bridge. Though this bit of paradise is difficult to reach, the beauty of its setting and the perfection of the pools, ranging from turquoise to emerald-green,



make it worth it. Many people consider this the most beautiful spot in all Guatemala.

If you're visiting on a tour, some guides will take you down a rope ladder from the lowest pool to the river, which gushes out from the rocks below. Plenty of people do this and love it, though it is a bit risky.

It's possible to camp at Semuc Champey, but be sure to pitch a tent only in the upper areas, as flash floods are common down below. It's risky to leave anything unattended, as it might get stolen. The place now has 24-hour security, which may reassure potential campers, but you should keep your valuables with you. You will also need to bring all supplies, as there's no shop of any kind nearby.

**Las Marias** (☎ 7861 2209; www.posadalasmarias.com; dm US\$3, s/d US\$6/9.50, with bathroom US\$9.50/14) is a rustic, laid-back place by the road 1km short of Semuc Champey. There are a couple of dorm rooms and three private rooms, all in wooden buildings in a verdant setting. Cool drinks and vegetarian food are available (full dinner US\$2.60) from the restaurant, where you can see the Río Cahabón flowing past. This place offers cave tours (US\$4/5.50 for guests/nonguests), tubing, walking tours and shuttles to Cobán for US\$4. You can camp here for US\$1.50 and rent a hammock for US\$2.

Pickups run from the plaza in Lanquín to Semuc Champey – your chances of catching one are better in the early morning and on market days: Sunday, Monday and Thursday. If there are a lot of local people traveling, expect to pay US\$0.65; otherwise, it's US\$1.95. Minibuses also serve this route – they leave when full (or get bored of waiting) from the main street in Lanquín.

### Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas

This town, often referred to simply as Fray, is a way station on the backdoor route between the Cobán/Lanquín area and Poptún on the Río Dulce–Flores highway. This route is nearly all along unpaved roads and is dotted with traditional Mayan villages where only the patriarchs speak Spanish, and then only a little. This is a great opportunity for getting off the 'gringo trail' and into the heart of Guatemala.

Fray is pretty substantial for being in the middle of nowhere, but don't let its size fool you. This is a place where the weekly soccer game is the biggest deal in town,

chickens languish in the streets and siesta is taken seriously.

The town itself is fairly spread out, with the plaza and most tourist facilities at one end and the market and bus terminus at the other. Walking between the two takes about 10 minutes. Coming from Cobán, you'll want to hop off at the central plaza.

The **post office** and **police station** are just off the plaza. Nearby, **Banrural** changes cash US dollars and traveler's checks. The **municipalidad** is on the plaza.

The friendly **Hotel La Cabaña** (☎ 7952 0352; 2a Calle 1-92 Zona 3; s/d US\$3.50/7, with bathroom US\$8/16) has the best accommodations in town. Eating options are limited here – you could try in the restaurant of the **Hotel Bartolo**, behind the plaza. Otherwise, grab a steak (with tortillas and beans; US\$1.50) at the informal barbecue shacks that open up along the main street at night.

One daily bus departs from the plaza at 3am for Poptún (US\$5, five to six hours, 100km). Buses for Cobán leave hourly between 4am and 4pm. Some go via Chisec (3½ hours, US\$4). Others take the slower route via San Pedro Carchá.

### LAS CONCHAS

From Fray you can visit Las Conchas, a series of limestone pools and waterfalls (admission US\$3) on the Río Chiyú, which some say are better than those at Semuc Champey. The pools are up to 8m deep and 20m wide and connected by a series of spectacular waterfalls. The pools are not turquoise like those at Semuc.

**Oasis Chiyú** (☎ 5839 4473; www.naturetoursguatemala.com; dm incl breakfast & dinner US\$20), a newish place right by the pools, has a wonderful tropical feel to it. Accommodations are in big, new rustic thatched-roof huts. Reservations are absolutely essential. The whole place has an atmosphere of serenity and seclusion. There's plenty to do here: kayaking (free for guests), 10m-high waterfalls to jump from, caves to explore, jungle trekking and visits to nearby Q'eqchi' communities. Volunteer work on community projects is also available. Tierra Madre Nature Tours operates out of here, and can arrange all-inclusive tours from Antigua or anywhere else in the country to Las Conchas. Local tour prices start at US\$15 per person.

Regular minibuses (US\$1, one hour) leave Fray for Chahal when full. From there

you must change buses for Las Conchas (US\$0.80). If you're in your own vehicle, look for the marked sign to Las Conchas, a few kilometers east of Chahal. Minibuses also go to Chahal direct from Cobán (US\$5, five hours). If you're coming south from El Petén, get off in Modesto Mendez (known locally as Cadenas), catch a Chahal-bound minibus to Sejux (*Say-whoosh*) and wait for another minibus to take you the remaining 3km to Las Conchas. Whichever direction you're coming from, travel connections are always easiest in the morning and drop off severely in the late afternoon.

## CHISEC

pop 20,600

The town of Chisec, 66km north of Cobán, is becoming a center for reaching several exciting destinations. This is thanks to the paving of nearly all the road from Cobán to Sayaxché and Flores, which runs through here, and some admirable community tourism programs aiming to help develop this long-ignored region, the population of which is almost entirely Q'eqchi' Maya.

Chisec has a few places to stay. The best hotel, **Hotel La Estancia** (☎ 5514 7444; s/d with bathroom US\$15/20; P), on the main road at the northern exit from town, has neat and sensible rooms with fan and cable TV. It has a restaurant and the swimming pool has some excellent waterslides in the shape of fallen tree trunks. **Hotel Nopales** (central plaza; s/d US\$6/10) has surprisingly large rooms (with smell) set around a courtyard dominated by a permanently empty (unless it's been raining) swimming pool.

In Raxrujá, **Pensión Gutiérrez** (r per person US\$4), a two-story wooden house, has decent rooms with mosquito net, fan and shared bathroom.

Buses leave Chisec for Cobán (US\$1.95, two hours) eight times daily, from 3am to 2pm. Buses or minibuses to San Antonio and Raxrujá (one hour) go hourly, from 6am to 4pm. Some of these continue to Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas. There are also two services daily, morning and afternoon, to La Isla (1¼ hours) and two to Playa Grande (two hours), for the Parque Nacional Laguna Lachuá. Some Cobán–Sayaxché minibuses and buses pass through Chisec. There are at least five scheduled departures daily to both Sayaxché and Cobán from Raxrujá.

## AROUND CHISEC Lagunas de Sepalau

Surrounded by pristine forest, these turquoise lagoons (admission US\$4; ☎ 8am–3pm) are 8km west of Chisec. Recently developed as a community ecotourism project by local villagers, tours of the area include a fair bit of walking and some rowboat paddling. The area is rich in wildlife: jaguars, tapir, iguanas, toucans and howler monkeys are all in residence.

There are three lagoons, the most spectacular of which is the third on the tour, Q'ekija, which is ringed by steep walls of thick jungle. This is a water source for the local community and swimming is prohibited at certain times of the year.

Pickups leave Chisec's plaza for the village of Sepalau Cataltzul throughout the day and there's usually a bus (US\$1, 45 minutes) at 10:30am. On arrival at the village, you pay the entrance fee and a guide will take you on the 2km walk to the first lagoon.

## Cuevas de B'ombi'l Pek

A mere 3km north of Chisec, these **painted caves** (admission US\$3; ☎ 8am–3pm) remained undiscovered until 2001. They haven't been fully mapped yet, but it's thought that they connect to the Candelaria caves. The community-run guide office is by the roadside. Pay the entrance fee and the guide will take you on the 1.5km walk through cornfields to the entrance. The first, main cavern is the most impressive for its size (reaching 50m in height), but a secondary cave – just 1m wide – features paintings of monkeys and jaguars.

Any bus running north from Chisec can drop you at the guide office.

## Cuevas de Candelaria

This 18km-long cave system, dug out by the subterranean Río Candelaria, holds some monstrous proportions – the main chamber is 30m high, 200m wide and has stalagmites measuring up to 30m in length. Natural apertures in the roof allow sunlight in, creating magical, eerie reflections.

The caves were used by the Q'eqchi' Maya and you'll see some platforms and ladders carved into the stone. A two-hour guided tour costs US\$3 per person. Two-day boat tours of the complex cost around US\$35 per person.

The **Complejo Cultural de Candelaria** (☎ 5710 8753; cuevascandelarias@aol.com; cabins per person from US\$50) offers supremely comfortable

accommodation in stylishly decorated cabins. Excellent, French-influenced meals are included in the rates. Some slightly cheaper cabins with shared bathrooms are available.

Another couple of caves can be visited nearby at the **Comunidad Candelaria** (Km 309.5; guided tours per person US\$1.30). Guides can be organized at the roadside *tienda* (store) for the short walk to the caves. Any bus running between Chisec and Raxrujá can drop you at either of these two places.

## CANCUÉN

This large Mayan site hit the papers when it was 'discovered' in 2000, even though it had already been 'discovered' back in 1907. Excavations are still under way, but estimates say that Cancuén may rival Tikal (see p288) for size.

It's thought that Cancuén was a trading, rather than religious, center, and the usual temples and pyramids are absent. In their place is a grand palace boasting more than 150 rooms set around 11 courtyards. Carvings here are impressive, particularly on the grand palace, but also along the ball courts and the two altars that have been excavated to date.

Cancuén's importance seems to stem from its geographical/tactical position. Hieroglyphics attest to alliances with Calakmul (Mexico) and Tikal, whereas its relative proximity to the southern Highlands would have given it access to pyrite and obsidian, prized minerals of the Maya.

Artisans certainly worked here – their bodies have been discovered found dressed, unusually, in royal finery. Several workshops have also been uncovered, one containing a 17kg piece of jade.

Cobán tour companies (see p220) make day trips to Cancuén. To get here independently, catch a pickup (leaving hourly) from Raxrujá to La Unión (US\$1, 40 minutes), from where you can hire a boat (US\$4 per person) to the site.

## PARQUE NACIONAL LAGUNA LACHUÁ

This **national park** (☎ 5704 1508; park admission US\$5.50, campsites US\$3.50, bunks with mosquito net US\$9) is renowned for the perfectly round, pristine turquoise lake (220m deep) for which it was named. Until recently, this Guatemalan gem was rarely visited by travelers because it was an active, violent area during the civil war and the road was in pathetic disrepair. Now it fills

up quickly on weekends and public holidays, and if you're thinking about coming during these times it's a good idea to call and reserve a space. Overnight visitors can use the cooking facilities, so come prepared with food and drink. There is only one shower. You can no longer rent canoes for exploring the lake, but there are hiking trails. The Cobán tour outfits (p220) offer two-day and one-night trips for US\$90 per person. Proyecto EcoQuetzal, also in Cobán, does jungle hikes (US\$45, three days) to the **Río Ikbolay** in the Laguna Lachuá vicinity.

Outside the park, about 7km southwest of the park entrance, is **Finca Chipantún** ([www.geocities.com/chipantun/main.html](http://www.geocities.com/chipantun/main.html); campsites per person US\$1.50, beds per person US\$4), 4 sq km of private land bordering the Río Chixoy (Negro). It has teak and cardamom plantations plus virgin tropical rain forest, and some uncovered Mayan ruins. In addition to accommodations, there are horse-riding opportunities, forest trails, river trips, kayaking, and bird- and wildlife-watching. The owners can take you by boat on the Río Negro to El Peyan, a magical gorge. Meals cost US\$2.50 to US\$4.

A new road (though unpaved most of the way from Chisec) means you can get to the park entrance from Cobán in four hours by bus. Take a Playa Grande (Cantabal) bus from Cobán via Chisec and ask the driver to leave you at the park entrance, from which it's about a 4km walk to the lake.

## WEST TO THE HIGHLANDS

From Playa Grande, a couple of buses a day make the tortuous journey across to Barillas (US\$6, five hours), the first stop on the backdoor route to Huehuetenango in the western Highlands. The road here is unmade and liable to get washed out in the wet season, but it's a spectacular, fascinating journey well off the beaten track. Check with locals for current road conditions. For details on the onward journey from Barillas, see p189.

## RÍO HONDO

pop 6900

Río Hondo (Deep River), 50km east of El Rancho junction and 130km from Guatemala City, is where Hwy 10 to Chiquimula heads south off the Carr al Atlántico (Hwy 9). Beyond Chiquimula are turnoffs to Copán, just across the Honduras border; to Esquipulas and on to Nueva Ocotepeque (Honduras); and a remote border crossing between Guatemala

and El Salvador at Anguiatú, 12km north of Metapán (El Salvador).

The actual town of Río Hondo is northeast of the junction. Lodging places hereabouts may list their address as Río Hondo, Santa Cruz Río Hondo or Santa Cruz Teculután. Nine kilometers west of the junction are several attractive motels right on Hwy 9, which provide a good base for explorations of this region if you have your own vehicle. By car, it's an hour from here to Quiriguá, half an hour to Chiquimula and 1½ hours to Esquipulas. These motels are treated as weekend resorts by locals and residents of Guatemala City, so they are heavily booked on weekends. They're all modern, pleasant places, with well-equipped bungalows (all have cable TV and bathroom), spacious grounds with large or giant swimming pools, and good restaurants, open from 6am to 10pm daily. You can find other eateries along the highway.

The town is home to the **Parque Acuatico Longarone** (adult/child US\$5/7; ☎ daylight hours) with giant waterslides, an artificial river and other water-based fun.

The motels are near each other at Km 126 on Hwy 9. **Hotel Santa Cruz** (☎ 7934 7112; ysik6780@yahoo.com; s/d with air-con US\$16/20; P ♻️ 🚰), the most laid-back option here, has modern, comfortable rooms set in duplex bungalows spread over a large area with plenty of foliage. Its popular **restaurant** (breakfast US\$3-5, 3-course lunches US\$5.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) is cheaper than those at the other motels.

On the north side of the highway, **Hotel Nuevo Pasabién** (☎ 934 7201; pasabien@infovia.com.gt; s/d/tr US\$20/39/42; P ♻️ 🚰) has large rooms with big windows. This hotel is a good choice for people traveling with children who can enjoy the three pools with all manner of fancy slides.

**Hotel El Atlántico** (☎ 7933 0598; s/d US\$30/40; P 🚰 ♻️ 🚰), the best-looking place in town, has plenty of dark wood fittings and well-spaced bungalows. The pool area is tranquil, with some shady sitting areas.

## Valle Dorado

Another attraction of Río Hondo is the Valle Dorado **aquatic park and tourist center** (☎ 7943 6666; www.hotelvalledorado.com; Hwy 9 Km149; d/tr/f US\$58/68/108). This large complex 14km past the Hwy 10 junction and 23km from the other Río Hondo hotels includes an **aquatic park** (adult/child US\$7/6; ☎ 8:30am-5:30pm Tue-Sun)

with giant pools, waterslides, toboggans and other entertainment. Make reservations on weekends.

## ESTANZUELA

pop 9300

Traveling south from Río Hondo along Hwy 10, you are in the midst of the Río Motagua valley, a hot expanse of what is known as 'dry tropic,' which once supported a great number and variety of dinosaurs. Three kilometers south of Hwy 9 you'll see a small monument on the right-hand (west) side of the road commemorating the earthquake disaster of February 4, 1976.

Less than 2km south of the earthquake monument is the small town of Estanzuela, with its **Museo de Paleontología, Arqueología y Geología Ingeniero Roberto Woolfolk Sarvia** (admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm), a startling museum filled with dinosaur bones – some reconstructed and rather menacing-looking. Most of the bones of three giant creatures are here, including those of a huge ground sloth some 30,000 years old and a prehistoric whale. Other exhibits include early Mayan artifacts. To find the museum, go west from the highway directly through the town for 1km, following the small blue signs pointing to the *museo*.

## ZACAPA

pop 40,800 / elev 230m

Capital of the department of the same name, Zacapa is just east of Hwy 10 a few kilometers south of Estanzuela. This town offers little to travelers, though the locals do make cheese, cigars and superb rum. The few hotels in town are basic and will do in an emergency, but better accommodations are available in Río Hondo, Esquipulas and Chiquimula. The bus station is on the road into town from Hwy 10.

## CHIQUIMULA

pop 44,200 / elev 370m

Another departmental capital, this one set in a mining and tobacco-growing region, Chiquimula is on Hwy 10, 32km south of the Carral Atlántico. It is a major market town for all of eastern Guatemala, with lots of daily buying and selling activity. For travelers it's not a destination but a transit point. Your goal is probably the fabulous Mayan ruins at Copán in Honduras, just across the

border from El Florido. There are also some interesting journeys between Chiquimula and Jalapa, 78km to the west (p232). Among other things, Chiquimula is famous for its sweltering climate and its decent budget hotels (a couple have swimming pools).

## Orientation & Information

Though very hot, Chiquimula is easy to get around on foot.

**Banco G&T** (7a Av 4-75, Zona 1; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) Half a block south of the plaza. Changes cash US dollars and traveler's checks, and gives cash advances on Visa and MasterCard.

**Biblioteca El Centro** (cnr 4a Calle & 8a Av; per hr US\$0.80; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-6pm Sat & Sun) For email and internet access.

**Post office** (10a Av) In a dirt alley between 1a and 2a Calles, around to the side of the building opposite the bus station.

**Telgua** (3a Calle) Plenty of card phones, a few doors downhill from Parque Ismael Cerna.

**Viajes Tivoli** (☎ 7942 4915; 8a Av 4-71, Zona 1) Can help you with travel arrangements.

## Sleeping

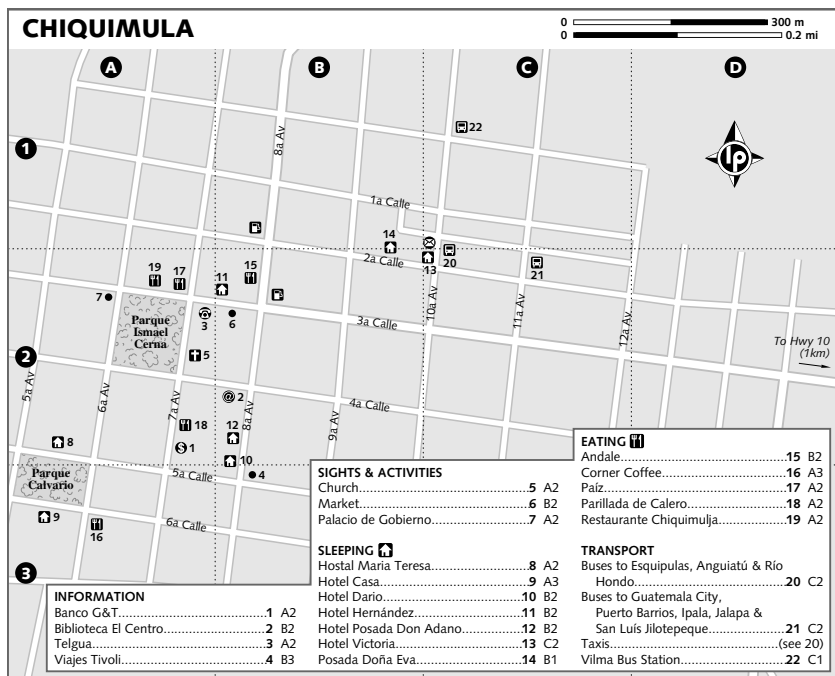
**Hotel Dario** (☎ 7942 0192; 8a Av 4-40, Zona 1; s/d US\$4/6, with bathroom US\$9/12) Big, plain rooms around a leafy courtyard. Upstairs rooms share a breezy sitting area, but have shared bathrooms.

**Hotel Hernández** (☎ 7942 0708; 3a Calle 7-41, Zona 1; s/d US\$5.50/8, with bathroom US\$11/13; ☎ ☎ P) It's hard to beat the Hernández – it's been a favorite for years, and keeps going strong, with its central position, spacious, simple rooms and good-sized swimming pool. Check out the carp pond in the *pila* (laundry trough).

**Posada Doña Eva** (☎ 7942 4956; 2a Calle 9-61, Zona 1; s/d with bathroom US\$8/12) Set way back from the busy streets, the cool clean rooms here offer a minimalist approach to comfort, with TV and fans.

**Hotel Victoria** (☎ 7942 2732; cnr 2a Calle & 10a Av; s/d with bathroom US\$9/12) If you're just looking for somewhere to crash close to the bus terminal, these rooms are a pretty good bet. Clean and not too cramped, with TV and a decent *comedor* (cheap eatery) downstairs. Get one at the back – the street noise can be insane.

**Hotel Casa** (☎ 7942 5357; 6a Calle 6-20, Zona 1; s/d with bathroom US\$12/16; P ☎) Neat rooms done out



in pleasant shades of mustard and blue, in a quiet location just off the Parque Calvario. Air-conditioning costs an extra US\$5.

**Hotel Posada Don Adano** (☎ 7942 3924; 8a Av 4-30, Zona 1; s/d with bathroom US\$13/20; (P) (♿)) The Don offers the best deal in this price range – neat, complete rooms with TV, fan, air-conditioning, a couple of sticks of furniture and good, firm beds.

**Hostal Maria Teresa** (☎ 7942 0177; 5a Calle 6-21, Zona 1; s/d with bathroom US\$25/45; (♿)) Set around a gorgeous colonial courtyard with wide shady passageways. The single rooms are a bit poky, but the doubles are generous and all the comforts are here: cable TV, hot showers and air-conditioning.

## Eating

There's a string of cheap *comedores* on 8a Av behind the market. At night, snack vendors and taco carts set up along 7a Av opposite the plaza, selling the cheapest eats in town.

**Andale** (8a Av 2-34, Zona 1; mains US\$3-5; (♿) lunch & dinner) For that late-night (until 11pm) Tex-Mex munchout, this is the place to be – big burritos, tacos three for US\$1.50 and cheap beer in a relaxed, clean environment.

**Restaurante Chiquimulja** (3a Calle 6-51; breakfasts US\$2-3.25, mains US\$4-7; (♿) breakfast, lunch & dinner) In the Hotel Chiquimulja, this is an impressive palm-roofed building on two levels. Relax with a lovely long drink and choose from the list of pasta dishes, prawns and grilled meats. The *parillada* (mixed grill) platter for two is a real heart-stopper, in more ways than one.

**Corner Coffee** (6a Calle 6-70, Zona 1; mains US\$4-8; (♿) lunch & dinner) You could argue with the syntax, but this air-con haven right on the lovely Parque Calvario serves up the best range of steaks, pasta, burgers and bagels in town.

**Parillada de Calero** (7a Av 4-83; mains US\$5-8; (♿) breakfast, lunch & dinner) An open-air steakhouse, serving the juiciest flame-grilled cuts in town. This is also the breakfast hotspot – the Tropical Breakfast (pancakes with a mound of fresh fruit; US\$4.50) goes down well in this climate.

**Paiz** (3a Calle) On the plaza, this grocery store is tremendous and sells close to everything under the sun. Stock up here for a picnic, or stop in to enjoy the air-con.

## Getting There & Away

Several companies operate buses to Guatemala City and Puerto Barrios; all of them arrive and

depart from the bus station area on 11a Av, between 1a and 2a Calles. Ipala and San Lúis Jilotepeque minibuses and the Jalapa bus also go from here. Minibuses to Esquipulas, Río Hondo and Anguiatú and buses to Flores arrive and depart a block away, on 10a Av between 1a and 2a Calles. **Vilma** (☎ 7942-2064), which operates buses to El Florido, the border crossing on the way to Copán, has its own bus station a couple of blocks north.

**Agua Caliente (Honduras border)** Take a minibus to Esquipulas and change there.

**Anguiatú (Salvador border)** (US\$2, one hour, 54km) Hourly minibuses, from 5am to 5:30pm.

**El Florido (Honduras border)** (US\$2, 1½ hours, 58km) Minibuses depart from the Vilma bus station every 30 minutes, from 5:30am to 4:30pm.

**Esquipulas** (US\$2, 45 minutes, 52km) Minibuses run every 10 minutes, from 4am to 8pm. Sit on the left for the best views of the basilica.

**Flores** (US\$10, seven to eight hours, 385km) Transportes María Elena (☎ 7942 3420) goes at 6am, 10am and 3pm.

**Guatemala City** (US\$5, three hours, 169km) Rutas Orientales and other companies depart at least hourly, from 3am to 3:30pm. The 3am bus leaves from the plaza, the rest from the bus station.

**Ipala** (US\$1.50, 1½ hours) Microbuses depart half-hourly, from 5am to 6pm.

**Jalapa** (US\$3, 3½ hours, 78km) One direct bus at 6am daily. Otherwise take a microbus to Ipala or San Lúis Jilotepeque (US\$1, one hour) and change.

**Puerto Barrios** (US\$5, 4½ hours, 192km) Buses run every 30 minutes, from 4am to 6pm.

**Quiriguá** (US\$4, two hours, 103km) Take a Puerto Barrios bus.

**Río Dulce** (US\$4.50, three hours, 144km) Take a Flores bus, or a Puerto Barrios bus to La Ruidosa junction and change there.

**Río Hondo** (US\$2, 35 minutes, 32km) There are minibuses every 30 minutes, from 5am to 6pm. Or take any bus heading for Guatemala City, Flores or Puerto Barrios. On Sunday, Guatemala City buses won't let you on for Río Hondo – take a minibus.

## AROUND CHIQUIMULA Volcán de Ipala

Volcán de Ipala is a 1650m volcano, notable for its especially beautiful clear crater lake measuring nearly a kilometer around and nestled below the summit at 1493m. The dramatic hike to the top takes you from 800m to 1650m in about two hours, though you can drive halfway up in a car. There are trails, a visitors center and a campsite on the shores of the lake. To get there, take a bus



**LOCAL LORE: HOW THE LAGUNA DE GÜIJA WAS FORMED**

In the beginning of time, powerful beings lived on Earth. One created the volcanoes, each of which had an owner, except for the Suchitan volcano. Devils began to argue over who should be the owner.

Some said they deserved it because they were younger. Others said it was theirs because they were older. All were liars and cheats. The slyest of them all said he would give his crown to whoever won ownership of the volcano.

Then the argument really began. One devil said he deserved it because he had invented sickness. Another said he deserved it because he invented floods. A third said it was his because he invented envy.

The argument raged on. The oldest devil said he was the rightful owner because he had invented laziness, so that humans could do no good. The other devils applauded, and the old devil thought he had won.

But the devil who invented envy still thought he was the winner, and soon a fight started – devils were gouging eyes, hitting each other with tree trunks and throwing stones. The fight would never end because they were all equally powerful.

Just then, a group of angels came down from Heaven. The old devil said to their leader, San Miguel, 'I deserve the crown because I invented laziness.'

'Show me the crown,' said San Miguel.

They showed him the crown, which was beautiful, made of thousands of stars.

'None of you shall have this crown,' said San Miguel. 'Now go back to Hell, and never return.'

With this, he threw the crown on the ground, where the stars turned into water and the Laguna de Güija was formed.

from Chiquimula (1½ hours) or Jalapa (two hours) to Ipala and transfer to a microbus to Agua Blanca (US\$0.60, every 15 minutes). The trailhead is at El Sauce just before Agua Blanca; look for the blue Inguat sign. There are several banks and serviceable (but basic) *hospedajes* (budget hotels) in Ipala if you want to stay overnight there.

**Jalapa**

pop 50,800

Jalapa is a small, friendly town 78km west of Chiquimula, and the route is a stunning one: verdant gorges choked with banana trees alternate with fog-enveloped valleys. Crossing the rugged mountain passes you'll see waterfalls, rivers and creeks flowing through the undergrowth. Though there isn't much going on in Jalapa proper, it's a good stopover before or after Volcán Ipala. There are plenty of services for travelers. Banks that change cash US dollars and traveler's checks are clustered around the bus terminal.

**SLEEPING & EATING**

**Hotel Recinos** (☎ 9722 2580; s/d US\$5/10, with bathroom US\$9/18) If you're just passing through, this pink palace on the west side of the terminal

is your best bet. The clean rooms with fan and shared bathroom are a good deal. More-expensive rooms come with cable TV.

**Pensión Casa del Viajero** (☎ 7922 4086; 1a Av 0-64; s/d US\$5/10, with bathroom US\$8.50/17) Four longish blocks from the bus terminal, this is a safe, clean place to stay, and definitely the pick of the budget joints. Some rooms are better than others – have a look around. There's a restaurant here that serves up big steaks and snacks all day.

**Posada de Don José Antonio** (☎ 7922 5751; Av Chipilapa A 0-64, Zona 2; s/d with bathroom US\$15/18; 📺) The big, clean rooms here are bare and simple, but offer a cool sanctuary from the heat outside; they're set around a small courtyard and come with TV. There's also a restaurant.

**Hotel Villa Plaza** (☎ 7922 4841; 1a Calle 0-70, Zona 2; s/d US\$15/22; 📺) This modern hotel offers the most comfortable deal in town. The big rooms have hot-water bathroom (not that you're ever likely to need it) and cable TV. Air-con costs US\$5 extra.

**Restaurante Casa Real** (1a Calle; mains US\$4; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Next door to the Hotel Villa Plaza and serving up grilled meat, soups and snacks, this humble eatery is an excellent choice for meals.



## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses leave Jalapa for Chiquimula hourly from 5am. Plenty of microbuses head to Ipala, where you can change for Chiquimula. For Esquipulas, change in Chiquimula. Buses to Guatemala City leave half-hourly between 2am and 3pm. Transportes Melva travels via Jutiapa and Cuilapa (US\$4, 3½ hours, 167km). Other buses take the quicker route via Sanarate and the Carr al Atlántico.

## PADRE MIGUEL JUNCTION & ANGUIATÚ

Between Chiquimula and Esquipulas (35km from Chiquimula and 14km from Esquipulas), Padre Miguel junction is the turnoff for Anguiatú, the border of El Salvador, which is 19km (30 minutes) away. Minibuses pass by frequently, coming from Chiquimula, Quetzaltepeque and Esquipulas.

The border at Anguiatú is open from 6am to 7pm daily. Plenty of trucks cross here. Across the border there are hourly buses to San Salvador, passing through Metapán and Santa Ana.

## VOLCÁN DE QUETZALTEPEQUE

About 10km east of the village of Quetzaltepeque, this volcano tops out at 1900m. The walk to the top is tough going, through thick subtropical pine forest, and the trail disappears in sections. From the summit are excellent views of the nearby Ipala and Suchitán volcanoes and the surrounding countryside. Due to the condition of the trail, you really need a guide to undertake this trek – you should be able to pick one up in Quetzaltepeque for around US\$15 per person.

Buses running between Chiquimula and Esquipulas pass through Quetzaltepeque. There are no hotels here – you're better off basing yourself in Esquipulas.

## ESQUIPULAS

pop 22,300

From Chiquimula, Hwy 10 goes south into the mountains, where it's a bit cooler. After an hour's ride through pretty country, the highway descends into a valley ringed by mountains, where Esquipulas stands. Halfway down the slope, about a kilometer from the center of town, there is a *mirador* (lookout) from which to get a good view. The reason for a trip to Esquipulas is evident as soon as you catch sight of the place, dominated by the great Basilica de Esquipulas towering

above the town, its whiteness shimmering in the sun. The view has changed little in over 150 years since explorer John L Stephens saw it and described it in his book *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (1841):

Descending, the clouds were lifted, and I looked down upon an almost boundless plain, running from the foot of the Sierra, and afar off saw, standing alone in the wilderness, the great church of Esquipulas, like the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, and the Caaba in Mecca, the holiest of temples... I had a long and magnificent descent to the foot of the Sierra.

## History

This town may have been a place of pilgrimage before the Spanish conquest. Legend has it that the town takes its name from a noble Mayan lord who ruled this region when the Spanish arrived, and who received them in peace.

With the arrival of the friars, a church was built, and in 1595 an image of Christ carved from black wood was installed behind the altar. The steady flow of pilgrims to Esquipulas became a flood after 1737, when Pedro Pardo de Figueroa, Archbishop of Guatemala, came here on pilgrimage and went away cured of a chronic ailment. Delighted with this development, the prelate commissioned a huge new church to be built on the site. It was finished in 1758, and the pilgrimage trade has been the town's livelihood ever since.

Esquipulas has assured its place in modern history as well: in 1986, President Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo spearheaded a series of meetings here with the other Central American heads of state to negotiate regional agreements on economic cooperation and peaceful conflict resolution. The resulting pact, known as the Esquipulas II Accord, became the seed of the Guatemalan Peace Accords, which were finally signed in 1996.

## Orientation & Information

The basilica is the center of everything. Most of the good hotels are within a block or two of it, as are numerous small restaurants. The town's most luxurious hotel, the Gran Chorti, is on the outskirts, along the road to Chiquimula. The highway does not enter town;

## ESQUIPULAS

<b>INFORMATION</b>	<b>SLEEPING</b>
Banco G&T.....1 B1	Hotel Aposento Alto.....7 B2
Banco Internacional.....2 B1	Hotel El Peregrino.....8 B2
Centro de Salud.....3 C1	Hotel Internacional.....9 A2
Global.com.....4 B1	Hotel Las Cúpulas.....10 B1
Honduran Consulate.....(see 14)	Hotel Legendario.....11 B1
Telgua.....5 B1	Hotel Los Angeles.....12 B2
<b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>	Hotel Monte Cristo.....13 B1
Monument.....6 C1	Hotel Payaquí.....14 B2
	Hotel Posada Santiago.....15 B2
	Hotel San Carlos II.....16 B1
	Hotel Villa Esperanza.....17 B1
	Hotel Villa Zonia.....18 A2
	Pensión La Favorita.....19 B1
	Pensión Santa Rosa.....20 A2
	<b>EATING</b>
	La Hacienda.....21 B2
	La Rotonda.....22 A2
	Restaurant El Angel.....23 B2
	Restaurant Payaquí.....(see 14)
	Restaurante Calle Real.....24 B1
	Restaurante La Frontera.....(see 10)
	<b>SHOPPING</b>
	Plaza Santa Fé.....25 B2
	<b>TRANSPORT</b>
	Minibuses & Taxis to Agua Caliente.....26 A2
	Minibuses to Angiatú.....27 C1
	Minibuses to Chiquimula.....28 C1
	Rutas Orientales Bus Station.....29 B2

11a Calle, also sometimes called Doble Vía Quirio Cataño, comes in from the highway and is the town's main drag.

**Banco Internacional** (3a Av 8-87, Zona 1) Changes cash and traveler's checks, gives cash advances on Visa and MasterCard, is the town's American Express agent and has a Visa ATM.

**Global.com** (3a Av; per hr US\$0.80) Opposite Banco Internacional; check your email here.

**Post office** (6a Av 2-15) About 10 blocks north of the center.

**Telgua** (cnr 5a Av & 9a Calle) Plenty of card phones.

### Basilica

A massive pile of stone that has resisted the power of earthquakes for almost 250 years, the basilica is approached through a pretty park and up a wide flight of steps. The impressive facade and towers are floodlit at night.

Inside, the devout approach the surprisingly small (with all the fuss, you'd think it was life-sized) El Cristo Negro with extreme reverence, many on their knees. Incense, murmured prayers and the scuffle of sandaled feet fills the air. When there are throngs of pilgrims, you must enter the church from the

side to get a close view of the famous Black Christ. Shuffling along quickly, you may get a good glimpse or two before being shoved onward by the crowd behind you. On Sundays, religious holidays and (especially) during the festival around January 15, the press of devotees is intense. Guatemalan tourist authorities estimate that one million visitors a year come to Esquipulas to see the Black Christ. On weekdays, you may have the place to yourself, which can be very powerful and rewarding. On weekends, you'll probably feel very removed from the intensity of emotion shown by the majority of pilgrims whose faith is very deep.

The annual **Cristo de Esquipulas festival** (January 15) sees mobs of devout pilgrims coming from all over the region to worship at the altar of the Black Christ.

When you leave the church and descend the steps through the park and exit right to the market, notice the vendors selling straw hats that are decorated with artificial flowers and stitched with the name 'Esquipulas,' perfect for pilgrims who want everyone to know they've made the trip. These are very popular

rearview mirror accessories for chicken bus drivers countrywide. Cruising the religious kitsch sold by the throngs of vendors around the basilica is an entertaining diversion.

### Cueva de las Minas

The **Centro Turístico Cueva de las Minas** (admission US\$1.50; ☎ 6:30am-4pm) has a 50m-deep cave (bring your own light), grassy picnic areas and the Río El Milagro, where people come for a dip and say it's miraculous. The cave and river are half a kilometer from their entrance gate, which is behind the basilica's cemetery, 300m south of the turnoff into town on the road heading towards Honduras. Refreshments are available.

If you've got kids along (or even if you don't), **Parque Chatun** (☎ 7943 4164; www.parquechatun.com; adult/child US\$6.50/4; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sat), a fun park 3km out of town, should provide some light relief from all the religious business. There are swimming pools, a climbing wall, campgrounds, a petting zoo and a mini bungee jump. If you don't have a vehicle, look for the miniature train doing rounds of the town – it will take you out there for free.

### Sleeping

Esquipulas has an abundance of places to stay. On holidays and during the annual festival, every hotel in town is filled, whatever the price; weekends are super busy as well, with prices substantially higher. These higher prices are the ones given here. On weekdays when there is no festival, there are *descuentos* (discounts). For cheap rooms, look in the streets immediately north of the towering basilica.

### BUDGET

**Pensión Santa Rosa** (☎ 7943 2908; cnr 10a Calle & 1a Av, Zona 1; s/d US\$5/8, with bathroom US\$14/17) Some splashes of color make this a cheerier-than-usual budget choice. Rooms with shared bathroom are plainer; those with bathroom have a bit of furniture and cable TV. There are several, similar budget hotels on this street.

**Hotel Monte Cristo** (☎ 7943 1453; www.hotelmontecristo.i8.com; 3a Av 9-12, Zona 1; s/d US\$10/12, with bathroom US\$15/18; ☎) Good-sized rooms with a bit of furniture and super-hot showers. A policy of not letting the upstairs rooms until the downstairs ones are full might see you on the ground floor.

**Hotel Posada Santiago** (☎ 7943 2023; 2a Av; s/d US\$10/14, with bathroom & cable TV US\$20; ☎) With

some interesting (but don't get excited) architecture, these rustic-chic rooms are some of the most attractive in town. They're spacious and clean, with good showers and cable TV.

**Hotel El Peregrino** (☎ 7943 1054; 2a Av 11-94, Zona 1; s/d US\$10/15, with bathroom US\$15/20; ☎) Motel-style rooms looking out onto plant-filled balconies. The rooftop pool is what makes this place.

**Hotel Aposento Alto** (☎ 7943 1115; 3a Av 10-35, Zona 1; r with bathroom US\$20; ☎) Kinda cramped, but comfortable enough. The paintjob goes a bit heavy on the yellow, but touches such as funky tile work and dark wood trims offset that. Some rooms have balconies.

**Hotel Villa Esperanza** (☎ 7943 0281; 3a Av 10-29, Zona 1; s/d US\$20; ☎) Just a few steps from the basilica, this place has bright, modern rooms with a few sticks of furniture. Rooms at the back are bigger but get less ventilation.

### MIDRANGE

**Hotel Internacional** (☎ 7943 1131; 10a Calle 0-85, Zona 1; s/d US\$20/30, with air-con US\$25/35; ☎ ☎ ☎) This establishment is on three levels around a covered courtyard. Rooms are comfortable but plain. It wouldn't be such a good deal if it weren't for the big covered swimming pool out back.

**Hotel Los Angeles** (☎ 7943 1254; 2a Av 11-94, Zona 1; s/d US\$20/35; ☎) Spacious rooms face a plant-filled balcony. Somebody obviously got a bulk deal on tiles, but these are good-value rooms, and have some of the only bathtubs on offer around town.

**Hotel Villa Zonia** (☎ 7943 1133; 10a Calle 1-84, Zona 1; s/d from US\$24/37; ☎) With two big beds squeezed into smallish rooms, what you've got here is pretty much wall-to-wall bed. The rooms are nicely done, though, and have private balconies looking out onto a quiet street.

**Hotel Las Cúpulas** (☎ /fax 7943 1570; cnr 11a Calle & 4a Av; s/d US\$30/40) If you can ignore the inordinate amount of leather lounge suites in the lobby here, this is a reasonable place. Bonuses include big, firm beds, those little courtesy shampoo bottles and balconies with tables and chairs for taking in the street action. Prices drop drastically from Monday to Thursday when there's no religious festival.

**Hotel Payaquí** (☎ 7943 1143; www.hotelpayaqui.com; 2a Av 11-56; s/d US\$45/55; ☎ ☎ ☎) Once the fanciest hotel in town, this one's showing a bit of wear. It is trying, though, with a decent restaurant, a couple of swimming pools and a day spa offering massages, facials and so on.

**TOP END**

**Hotel El Gran Chortí** (☎ 7943 1148; Carr Internacional a Honduras Km 222; s/d US\$46/61, 4-person ste US\$92; (P) (♿) (♿)) One kilometer west of the church on the road to Chiquimula, this hotel's lobby floor is composed of a hectare of black marble; behind it a serpentine swimming pool is set amid lawns, gardens and umbrella-shaded café tables. There's a games room and, of course, a good restaurant, bar and *cafetería*. The rooms have all comforts.

**Hotel Legendario** (☎ 7943 1824; www.portahotels.com; cnr 3a Av & 9a Calle, Zona 1; s/d US\$50/58; (P) (♿)) The fanciest hotel in town goes all out on the services, right down to a separate kids swimming pool. Rooms are reasonable – big enough, with new beds, large windows opening onto a grassy courtyard and all the comforts you'd expect for the price.

**Eating**

Restaurants are slightly more expensive here than in other parts of Guatemala. Budget restaurants are clustered at the north end of the park, where hungry pilgrims can find them readily. Most eateries open from 6:30am until 9pm or 10pm daily.

The street running north opposite the church – 3a Av – has several eateries. All of the midrange and top-end hotels have their own dining rooms.

**Restaurante Calle Real** (3a Av; breakfasts US\$2-4, mains US\$4-6; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Typical of many restaurants here, this big eating barn turns out cheap meals for the pilgrims. There's a wide menu, strip lighting and loud TV.

**Restaurant El Angel** (☎ 7943 1372; cnr 11a Calle & 2a Av; mains US\$4-8; ☺ lunch & dinner) This main-street Chinese eatery does all the standard dishes, plus steaks and a good range of *licuados* (milkshakes). Home delivery is available.

**ourpick La Hacienda** (cnr 2a Av & 10a Calle, Zona 1; mains from US\$6; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The best steakhouse in town also serves up some decent seafood and pasta dishes. There's a café-bakery attached and the breakfasts (US\$5.50) are a good (but slightly pricey) bet.

**La Rotonda** (11a Calle; breakfasts from US\$2.50, large pizzas US\$10; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Opposite Rutas Orientales bus station, this is a round building with chairs arranged around a circular open-air counter under a big awning. It's a welcoming place, clean and fresh. There are plenty of selections to choose from, including pizza, pasta and burgers.

**Restaurant Payaqui** (breakfasts US\$3, mains US\$8; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) On the west side of the park in the hotel of the same name, this is a bright and clean *cafetería* with big windows looking out onto the park. Prices are reasonable, and there's a good selection.

**Restaurante La Frontera** (breakfast US\$3-5, mains US\$5-11; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Opposite the park and attached to the Hotel Las Cúpulas, this is a spacious, clean place serving up a good variety of rice, chicken, meat, fish and seafood dishes for good prices.

**Getting There & Away**

Buses to Guatemala City arrive and depart from the **Rutas Orientales bus station** (☎ 7943 1366; cnr 11a Calle & 1a Av), near the entrance to town. Minibuses to Agua Caliente arrive and depart across the street; taxis also wait here, charging the same as the minibuses, once they have five passengers.

Minibuses to Chiquimula and to Anguiatú depart from the east end of 11a Calle; you'll probably see them hawking for passengers along the main street.

**Agua Caliente (Honduran border)** (US\$1.80, 30 minutes, 10km) Minibuses every 30 minutes, from 6am to 5pm.

**Anguiatú (Salvador border)** (US\$1.50, one hour, 33km) Minibuses every 30 minutes, from 6am to 6pm.

**Chiquimula** (US\$1.50, 45 minutes, 52km) Minibuses every 15 minutes, from 5am to 6pm.

**Flores** (US\$12, eight to 10 hours, 437km) Transportes María Elena (☎ 7943 0448) buses depart at 4am, 8am and 1pm from east of the basilica, amid the market.

**Guatemala City** (US\$7, four hours, 222km) Rutas Orientales *servicio especial* buses depart at 6:30am, 7:30am, 1:30pm and 3pm; ordinary buses depart every 30 minutes, from 4:30am to 6pm.

**COPÁN SITE (HONDURAS)**

The ancient city of **Copán** (admission US\$15; ☺ 8am-4pm), 13km from the Guatemala border in Honduras, is one of the most outstanding Mayan achievements, ranking in splendor with Tikal, Chichén Itzá and Uxmal. To fully appreciate Mayan art and culture, you must visit Copán. This can be done on a long day trip by private car, public bus or organized tour, but it's better to take at least two days, staying the night in the town of Copán Ruinas. This is a sweet town, with good facilities, so unless you're in a huge rush, try to overnight here. Get to the site around opening time to avoid the heat and the crowds.

There are two Copáns: the town and the ruins. The town is about 12km east of the Guatemala–Honduras border. Confusingly, the town is named Copán Ruinas, though the actual ruins are just over 1km further east. Minivans coming from the border may take you on to the ruins after a stop in the town. If not, the *sendero peatonal* (footpath) alongside the road makes for a pretty 20-minute walk, passing several stelae and unexcavated mounds along the way to the Copán ruins and Las Sepulturas archaeological site, a couple of kilometers further.

### Crossing the Border

The Guatemalan village of El Florido, which has no services beyond a few soft-drink stands, is 1.2km west of the border. At the border crossing are a branch of **Banrural** (☎ 7am–6pm Mon–Sat), the Vilma bus office and one or two snack stands. The border crossing is open from 6am to 7pm daily but it closes to vehicles at 6pm.

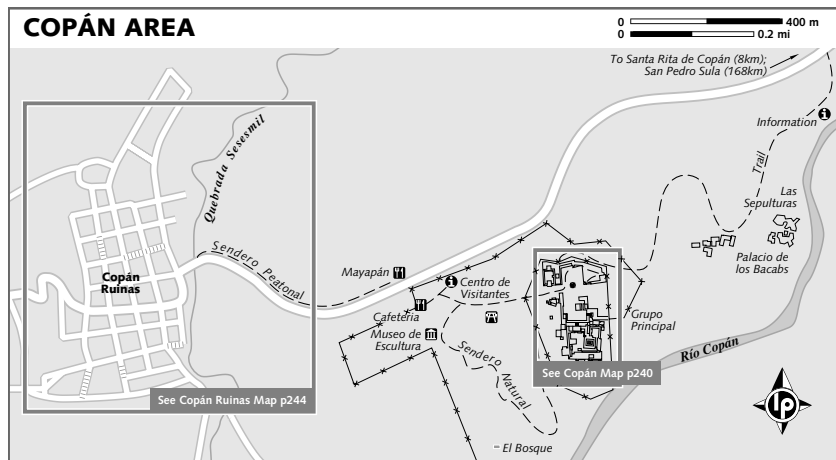
Money changers will approach you on both sides of the border anxious to change quetzals for Honduran lempiras, or either for US dollars. Usually they're offering a decent rate because there's a Guatemalan bank right there and the current exchange rate is posted in the Honduran immigration office – look for it. There's no bank on the Honduran side of the border. Still, if the money changers give you a hard time, change enough at the border to get you into Copán Ruinas and then hit one of the banks there. Of course, if it's Sunday, you're

beholden to the money changers. Though quetzals and US dollars may be accepted at some establishments in Copán Ruinas, it's best to change some money into lempiras.

At the crossing you must present your passport to the Guatemalan immigration and customs authorities, pay fees (although there is no official fee for leaving Guatemala) of up to US\$4, then cross the border and do the same thing with the Honduran authorities. Guatemala and Honduras (along with Nicaragua and El Salvador) are members of the CA-4, a trade agreement much like the EU but with more infighting and chaos. *Supposedly*, the CA-4 is designed to facilitate the movement of people through the region. Having entered the CA-4, you should be authorized to move throughout the region freely for 90 days (or as long as your visa stipulates). In practice, the reality is somewhat more Central American.

Basically, border officials are bored, unsupervised and underpaid. Most likely you'll end up paying a few dollars to get across. Travelers have tried playing the waiting game here and lost – all you do is end up standing around for a few hours, then paying the fee anyway. The Hondurans, at least, issue a nice, official-looking receipt. For more on the CA-4, see p318.

When you return through this border point, you must again pass through both sets of immigration and customs. Whether you pay fees again is up to the whims of the officials, but you could point out that you've already done so and see where that gets you.



For information on transportation to and from Copán Ruinas, see p247.

## History

### PRE-COLUMBIAN

People have been living in the Copán valley at least since around 1400 BC; ceramic evidence has been found from around that date. Copán must have had significant commercial activity since early times, as graves showing marked Olmec influence have been dated to around 900 to 600 BC.

In the 5th century AD one royal family came to rule Copán, led by a mysterious king named Mah K'ina Yax K'uk' Mo' (Great Sun Lord Quetzal Macaw), who ruled from AD 426 to 435. Archaeological evidence indicates that he was a great shaman, and later kings revered him as the semidivine founder of the city. The dynasty ruled throughout Copán's florescence during the classic period (AD 250–900).

Of the subsequent kings who ruled before AD 628 we know little. Only some of their names have been deciphered: Mat Head, the second king (no relation to Bed Head); Cu Ix, the fourth king; Waterlily Jaguar, the seventh; Moon Jaguar, the 10th; and Butz' Chan, the 11th.

Among the greatest of Copán's kings was Smoke Imix (Smoke Jaguar), the 12th king, who ruled from 628 to 695. Smoke Imix built Copán into a major military and commercial power in the region. He may have taken over the nearby principedom of Quiriguá, as one of the famous stelae at that site bears his name and image. By the time he died in 695, Copán's population had grown substantially.

Smoke Imix was succeeded by Uaxaclahun Ubak K'awil (18 Rabbit; r 695–738), the 13th king, who willingly took the reins of power and pursued further military conquest. In a war with his neighbor from Quiriguá, King Cauac Sky, 18 Rabbit was captured and beheaded. He was succeeded by K'ak' Joplaj Chan K'awil (Smoke Monkey; r 738–49), the 14th king, whose short reign left little mark on Copán. Smoke Monkey's son, K'ak' Yipyaj Chan K'awil (Smoke Shell; r 749–63), was, however, one of Copán's greatest builders. He commissioned the city's most famous and important monument, the great Escalinata de los Jeroglíficos (Hieroglyphic Stairway), which immortalizes the achievements of the dynasty from its establishment until 755,

when the stairway was dedicated. It is the longest inscription ever discovered in the Mayan lands.

Yax Pac (Sunrise or First Dawn; r 763–820), Smoke Shell's successor and the 16th king, continued the beautification of Copán. The final occupant of the throne, U Cit Tok', became ruler in 822, but it is not known when he died.

Until recently, the collapse of the civilization at Copán had been a mystery. Now, archaeologists have begun to surmise that near the end of Copán's heyday the population grew at an unprecedented rate, straining agricultural resources. In the end, Copán was no longer agriculturally self-sufficient and had to import food from other areas. The urban core expanded into the fertile lowlands in the center of the valley, forcing both agricultural and residential areas to spread onto the steep slopes surrounding the valley. Wide areas were deforested, resulting in massive erosion that further decimated food production and brought flooding during rainy seasons. Interestingly, this environmental damage of old is not too different from what is happening today – a disturbing trend, but one that meshes with the Mayan belief that life is cyclical and history repeats itself. Skeletal remains of people who died during Copán's final years show marked evidence of malnutrition and infectious diseases, as well as decreased life spans.

The Copán valley was not abandoned overnight – agriculturists probably continued to live in the ecologically devastated valley for maybe another one or two hundred years. But by the year 1200 or thereabouts, even the farmers had departed, and the royal city of Copán was reclaimed by the jungle.

### EUROPEAN DISCOVERY

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

It was Galindo's report that stimulated John L. Stephens and Frederick Catherwood



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

### TODAY

The history of Copán continues to unfold today. The remains of 3450 structures have been found in the 24 sq km surrounding the Grupo Principal (Principal Group), most of them within about half a kilometer of it. In a wider zone, 4509 structures have been detected in 1420 sites within 135 sq km of the ruins. These discoveries indicate that at the peak of civilization here, around the end of the 8th century AD, the valley of Copán had more than 27,500 inhabitants, a population figure not reached again until the 1980s.

In addition to examining the area surrounding the Grupo Principal, archaeologists continue to make new discoveries in the Grupo Principal itself. Five separate phases of building on this site have been identified; the final phase, dating from AD 650 to 820, is what we see today. But buried underneath the visible ruins are layers of other ruins, which archaeologists are exploring by means of underground tunnels. This is how the Templo Rosalila (Rosalila Temple) was found, a replica of which is now in the Museo de Escultura (p242). Below Rosalila is yet another, earlier temple, Margarita. Two of the excavation tunnels, including Rosalila, are open to the public.

Archaeologists also continue to decipher more of the hieroglyphs, gaining greater understanding of the early Maya in the process. In 1998, a major discovery was made when archaeologists excavated a burial chamber beneath the Acrópolis presumed to be that of the great ruler Mah K'ina Yax K'uk' Mo' (Great Sun Lord Quetzal Macaw).

### Information

Admission to Copán includes entry to **Las Sepulturas** archaeological site but not to the two **excavation tunnels** (☎ 8am-3:30pm), for which admission is US\$15.

Also at the site is the **Museo de Escultura** (admission US\$7), where many of the original stelae are housed, as well as an awesome replica of the impressive and colorful Rosalila Temple.

The **Centro de Visitantes** (Visitors Center) at the entrance to the ruins houses the ticket office and a small exhibition about the site and its excavation. Nearby are a *cafetería*, and souvenir and handicrafts shops. There's a picnic area along the path to the Principal Group of ruins. A **Sendero Natural** (Nature Trail) entering the forest several hundred meters from the visitors center passes by a small ball court.

Pick up a copy of the booklet *History Carved in Stone: A guide to the archaeological park of the ruins of Copán* by noted archaeologists William L Fash and Ricardo Agurcia Fasquelle; it's available at the visitors center for US\$4. It will help you to understand and appreciate the ruins. It's also a good idea to go with a guide, who can help to explain the ruins and bring them to life. Guides are US\$20 no matter the size of the group; packs of trained guides hang out at the visitors center.

Visitors should not touch any of the stelae or sit on the altars at Copán.

### Grupo Principal

The Principal Group of ruins is about 400m beyond the visitors center across well-kept lawns, through a gate in a strong fence and down shady avenues of trees. A group of resident macaws loiters along here. The ruins themselves have been numbered for easy identification and a well-worn path circumscribes the site.

### Stelae of the Gran Plaza

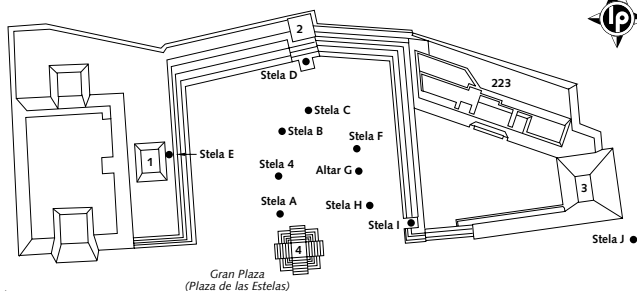
The path leads to the Gran Plaza (Great Plaza; Plaza de las Estelas) and the huge, intricately carved stelae portraying the rulers of Copán. Most of Copán's best stelae date from AD 613 to 738. All seem to have originally been painted; a few traces of red paint survive on Stela C. Many stelae had vaults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

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



## COPÁN

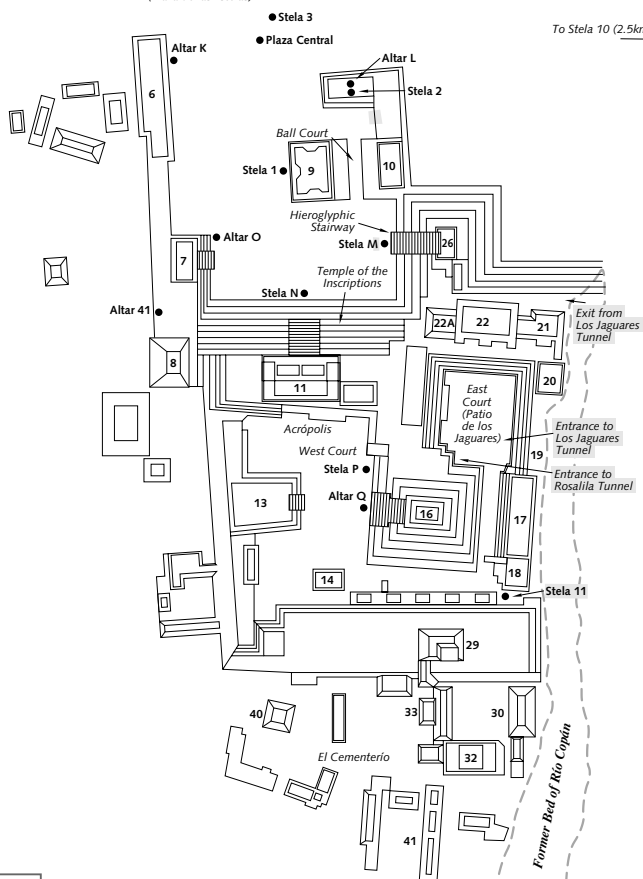
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To Visitors Center (500m);  
Museo de Escultura (600m);  
Las Sepulturas (2km);  
Stela 12 (4.5km)

Gran Plaza  
(Plaza de las Estelas)

To Stela 10 (2.5km)



Note: Numbers refer to accepted structure numbering.

(Structure 1) on the west side of the Great Plaza, is among the oldest.

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

On the east side of the plaza is Stela F (721), which has a more lyrical design than other stelae here, with the robes of the main figure flowing around to the other side of the stone, where there are glyphs. Altar G (800), showing twin serpent heads, is among the last monuments carved at Copán. Stela H (730) may depict a queen or princess rather than a king. Stela I (692), on the structure that runs along the east side of the plaza, is of a person wearing a mask. Stela J, further off to the east, resembles the stelae of Quiriguá in that it is covered in glyphs, not human figures.

### Juego de Pelota

South of the Great Plaza, across what is known as the Plaza Central, is the Juego de Pelota (Ball Court; 731), the second largest in Central America. The one you see is the third one on this site; the other two smaller courts were buried by this construction. Note the macaw heads carved atop the sloping walls. The central marker in the court is the work of King 18 Rabbit.

### Escalinata de los Jeroglíficos

South of the ball court is Copán's most famous monument, the Escalinata de los Jeroglíficos (Hieroglyphic Stairway; 743), the work of King Smoke Shell. Today it's protected from the elements by a roof. The flight of 63 steps bears a history (in several thousand glyphs) of the royal house of Copán; the steps are bordered by ramps inscribed with more reliefs and glyphs. The story told on the inscribed steps is still not completely understood because the stairway was partially ruined and the stones jumbled.

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

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

### Acrópolis

The lofty flight of steps to the south of the Hieroglyphic Stairway mounts the Templo de las Inscripciones (Temple of the Inscriptions). On top of the stairway, the walls are carved with groups of hieroglyphs. On the south side of the Temple of the Inscriptions is the Patio Occidental (West Court), with the Patio Oriental (East Court), also called the Patio de los Jaguares (Court of the Jaguars) to its east. In the West Court, be sure to see Altar Q (776), among the most famous sculptures here; the original is inside the Museum of Sculpture. Around its sides, carved in superb relief, are the 16 great kings of Copán, ending with its creator, Yax Pac. Behind the altar is a sacrificial vault in which archaeologists discovered the bones of 15 jaguars and several macaws that were probably sacrificed to the glory of Yax Pac and his ancestors.

The East Court also contains evidence of Yax Pac – his tomb, beneath Estructura 18. Unfortunately, the tomb was discovered and looted long before archaeologists arrived. Both the East and West Courts hold a variety of fascinating stelae and sculptured heads of humans and animals. To see the most elaborate relief carving, climb Estructura 22 on the northern side of the East Court. This was the Templo de Meditación (Temple of Meditation) and has been heavily restored over recent years.

### Túnel Rosalila & Túnel de los Jaguares

In 1999, exciting new additions were made to the wonders at Copán when two excavation tunnels were opened to the public. The Túnel Rosalila (Rosalila Tunnel) exposes the Rosalila Temple below Estructura 16, and the Túnel de los Jaguares (Jaguar Tunnel) shows visitors the Tumba Galindo (Galindo Tomb), below Estructura 17 in the southern part of the Patio Oriental.

Descending into these tunnels is interesting, but not so exciting as when they were opened in 1999; at the time of writing you could only visit 25m of the Rosalila Tunnel and 95m of

the longer Jaguar Tunnel. The Rosalila Tunnel reveals a little of the actual temple over which Estructura 16 was built; the carvings are remarkably crisp and vivid, especially the Sun God mask looming over the doorway. This is considered by some scholars to be the best-preserved stucco edifice in the Mayan world. Everything is behind Plexiglas to protect it from natural and human elements. Under the Rosalila Temple is the Margarita Temple, built 150 years earlier. Beneath that, there are other even earlier platforms and tombs.

The Túnel de los Jaguares is less dramatic, with its burial tombs and niches for offerings. The Galindo Tomb was one of the first tombs discovered at Copán, in 1834. Bones, obsidian knives and beads were found here, and archaeologists date the tomb's antebase mask to AD 540. The decorative macaw mask here is incredible. The full extent of this tunnel is 700m.

Though the US\$15 price of admission is dear for a short-lived pair of highlights, these tunnels are worth a look if you're into history.

## Museo de Escultura

Copán is unique in the Mayan world for its sculpture, and the **Museo de Escultura** (Museum of Sculpture; admission US\$7; ☎ 8am-3:40pm) is fittingly magnificent. Just entering the museum is an impressive experience in itself. Walking through the mouth of a serpent, you wind through the entrails of the beast, then suddenly emerge into a fantastic world of sculpture and light.

The highlight of the museum is a true-scale replica (in full color) of the Rosalila Temple, discovered in nearly perfect condition by archaeologists in 1989 by means of a tunnel dug into Estructura 16, the central building of the Acrópolis (p241). Rosalila, dedicated in AD 571 by Copán's 10th ruler, Moon Jaguar, was apparently so sacred that when Estructura 16 was built over it, the temple was not destroyed but was left completely intact. The original Rosalila Temple is still in the core of Estructura 16.

The other displays in the museum are stone carvings, brought here for protection from the elements. All the important stelae may eventually be housed here, with detailed reproductions placed outdoors to show where the stelae originally stood. So far, at least Altar Q and Stelae A, N, P and Estructura 2 have

been brought into the museum, and the ones you see outdoors are reproductions.

## El Bosque & Las Sepulturas

Excavations at El Bosque and Las Sepulturas have shed light on the daily life of the Maya in Copán during its golden age.

Las Sepulturas, once connected to the Gran Plaza by a causeway, may have been the residential area where rich and powerful nobles lived. One huge, luxurious residential compound seems to have housed some 250 people in 40 or 50 buildings arranged around 11 courtyards. The principal structure, called the **Palacio de los Bacabs** (Palace of the Officials), had outer walls carved with the full-sized figures of 10 males in fancy feathered headdresses; inside was a huge hieroglyphic bench.

To get to Las Sepulturas you have to go back to the main road, turn right, then right again at the sign (2km from the Gran Plaza).

The walk to get to El Bosque is the real reason for visiting it, as it is removed from the main ruins. It's a one-hour (5km) walk on a well-maintained path through foliage dense with birds, though there isn't much of note at the site itself save for a small ball court. Still, it's a powerful experience to have an hour-long walk on the thoroughfares of an ancient Mayan city all to yourself. To get to El Bosque, go right at the hut where your ticket is stamped. There have been no reports of crimes against tourists here.

## COPÁN RUINAS

pop 6000

The town of Copán Ruinas, often simply called Copán, is just over 1km from the famous Mayan ruins of the same name. It's a beautiful place paved with cobblestones and lined with white adobe buildings with red-tiled roofs. There's even a lovely colonial church on the recently remodeled plaza. The Maya have inhabited this valley, which has an aura of timeless harmony, for about 2000 years. Copán has become a primary tourist destination, but this hasn't disrupted the town's integrity to the extent one might fear.

## Orientation & Information

The Parque Central, with the church on one side, is the heart of town. Copán is very small, and everything is within a few blocks of the plaza. This is fortunate for visitors, since

### CALLING COPÁN

The Honduras telephone country code is ☎ 504. Like Guatemala, Honduras has no area or city codes. So when dialing a number in Copán Ruinas from Guatemala, or any other country, you dial the international access code (usually 00), then 504, then the local number.

the town doesn't use street signs. The ruins are on the road to La Entrada. Las Sepuluras archaeological site is a few kilometers further along.

Internet services cost around US\$1 per hour:

**Copán Net** One block south and one block west of the plaza.

**Maya Connections** Two locations, one across from Vamos a Ver restaurant, the other in La Casa de Todo, one block east of the plaza. International phone and fax services are also available, and both branches offer laundry service (US\$0.50 to wash, dry and fold each pound; US\$1 per kg), plus book exchange.

For US dollars, the banks give a better rate than the money changers at the border, but slightly less than banks elsewhere in Honduras.

**Banco Atlántida** (☎ 8:30am-3:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat) On the plaza, changes cash US dollars and traveler's checks and gives cash advances on Visa cards.

**Banco Credomatic** Also on the plaza; has a Visa and MasterCard ATM.

**Banco de Occidente** (☎ 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat) On the plaza, changes cash US dollars and traveler's checks, and quetzals, and gives cash advances on Visa and MasterCard.

**Honduran immigration office** (Palacio Municipal; ☎ 7am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) On the plaza; come here for visa matters.

**Hondutel** Telephone office around the corner from the post office.

**Post office** A few doors from the plaza.

**Tourist office** ([www.copanhonduras.org](http://www.copanhonduras.org); ☎ 11am-7pm) Run by a chamber of commerce; down the hill half a block east of the plaza.

### Sights & Activities

Though the main attraction of the Copán region is the archaeological site, there are other fine places to visit in the area. The **Museo de Arqueología Maya** (admission US\$3; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Sat), on the town plaza, is well worth a visit. It contains the original Stela B, portraying King

18 Rabbit. Other exhibits of painted pottery, carved jade, Mayan glyphs and a calendar round are also interesting and informative, as is the Tumba del Brujo, the tomb of a shaman or priest who died around AD 700 and was buried with many items under the east corner of the Plaza de los Jaguares. **Casa K'inich** (admission free; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Sat), on the north side of the plaza, inside the little artisan market, is an interactive museum for kids all about the Maya.

About four blocks north of the plaza is the **Mirador El Cuartel**, the old jail, with a magnificent view over town.

A pleasant, easy walk on the road on the south side of town provides a fine view over the corn and tobacco fields surrounding Copán. On this same side of town is an agreeable walk to the river.

The **Macaw Mountain Bird Park** (☎ 651 4245; [www.macawmountain.com](http://www.macawmountain.com); admission US\$10; ☎ 9am-5pm), 2.5km out of town, is an extensive private reserve aimed at saving Central American macaws. There's plenty of them in evidence, along with toucans, motmots, parrots, kingfishers and orioles, all flying around freely. Even if you're not a bird freak, it's a lovely place to wander around, with plenty of walking trails weaving through the lush forest and over boardwalks to various lookout points and swimming holes. The entrance ticket – which includes a guided tour in English – is valid for three days and there's a café-restaurant on the property.

The **Enchanted Wings Butterfly House** (☎ 651 4133; [www.hondurasecotours.com](http://www.hondurasecotours.com); adult/child US\$6/2; ☎ 8am-5pm) is a nature center about a 10-minute walk west of the plaza on the road back to Guatemala. It has beautiful live and preserved butterflies, and numerous tropical flowers including around 200 species of orchids. With such a pretty name, how could you miss it?

**Horse rides** can be arranged by any of the town's tour companies and most hotels. You can ride to the ruins or make other, lengthier excursions. You will most likely be approached on the street by somebody wanting to rent you a horse. Unfortunately, there have been a number of incidents of payment without delivery, and it's recommended that you go through an agency. The Hacienda El Jaral (p248) also offers horse riding. Three-hour rides (US\$10 to US\$15) out of Café ViaVia and the Tunkul Bar (both in the second block



**Xukpi Tours** (☎ 651 4435), operated by Jorge Barraza, also runs several ecological tours both locally and further afield. His ruins and bird-watching tours are justly famous, and he'll do trips to all parts of Honduras and to Quirigua (Guatemala). Most days Jorge can be found at the archaeological site. You can also contact him through Café ViaVia.

**Yaragua Tours** (☎ 651 4147; fax 651 4695) is opposite the Hotel Yaragua. Samuel from Yaragua leads local tours, horse-riding trips and excursions to Lago de Yojoa. Caving trips are another option.

Base Camp Tours, across the road from Café ViaVia, offers a range of original and adventurous tours around the local area on foot, motorcycle and horseback. One horse-riding tour goes up to nearby San Rafael, where you have the option of whizzing back down on a 22 zip-line canopy tour (US\$30). An excellent two-hour walking tour delves beneath the glossy surface of the town and investigates the reality of life for many Hondurans.

## Sleeping

### BUDGET

**Manzana Verde** (☎ 651 4652; dm US\$4) A beautifully decked-out hostel, run by the same people as the Café ViaVia, with six beds in bunks per dorm. Common areas are comfortably set up, there's heaps of free, reliable tourist advice and kitchen access for guests.

**Hostel Iguana Azul** (☎ 651 4620; www.iguanaazulcopan.com; dm/s/d US\$4/8/11) This funky place three blocks west and two blocks south of the plaza is next door to La Casa de Café B&B (p246) and operated by the same friendly people. It has eight comfy bunk beds in two rooms with shared piping-hot, terrific bathroom in a colonial-style ranch home. Three private rooms sleep two. There's also a pretty garden. The common area has books, magazines, travel guides and lots of travel information. This is backpacking elegance at its finest.

**Hotel Posada Honduras** (☎ 651 4082; s/d US\$4.50/5.50, with bathroom US\$6/8; 📍) There's not a whole lot of joy in this, the cheapest hotel in town, but if you're looking for a bargain bed, these aren't the worst in the country. The courtyard at least is pretty: full of mango, mamey and lemon trees. Shared bathrooms have hot water, private bathrooms have cold.

**Hotel Los Gemelos** (☎ 651 4077; s/d US\$5.50/8; 📍) A longtime budget-watcher's favorite,

a block northeast from the plaza. The simple rooms look out onto a leafy garden patio with flowers and birds. The shared bathrooms are gender-specific.

**Posada de Belssy** (s/d US\$11/15; 📍) Run by a charming local family, this place has great rooms with balconies overlooking the mountains on the outskirts of town. All the mod cons – cable TV, hot showers, air-conditioning – are here.

**Café ViaVia** (☎ 651 4652; www.viaviacafé.com; s/d US\$12/14) This small European-style hotel is run by two young, energetic, helpful, travel-loving Belgian couples. (It's part of the Joker group, a Belgian-led organization of cafés with a travel theme around the world including at Louvain, Zanzibar, Kathmandu and Yogyakarta.) Café ViaVia Copán has five spotless rooms with private hot-water bathroom, tiled floors and great beds (2m long for the tall folks reading this!) There are hammocks, a small garden and enough space to chill out. It's a great place to come for tourist information, and has an art gallery and lively bar attached. English, French, German and Dutch are spoken here.

**Rosalila Hotel** (☎ 651 4235; s/d US\$14/20) Despite the technicolor paint job, this is one of the better budget deals in town. Rooms look out onto a leafy courtyard and have super-hot showers, big TVs and firm beds.

**Hotel Clásico Copán** (☎ 651 4040; s/d with bathroom US\$13/15; 📍) Good-sized standard rooms set upstairs around a lush courtyard. If you don't want TV, they'll take a couple of bucks off the price.

**Hotel La Posada** (☎ 651 4059; laposada@hotelmariacopan.com; s/d US\$15/25) Good-value, tranquil and comfortable, La Posada is only half a block from the plaza. Its 19 rooms with hot-water bathroom, fan and TV are set around two leafy patios. There's very tasty, free black coffee first thing in the morning.

**Hotel Yaragua** (☎ 651 4147; www.yaragua.com; s/d US\$20/25) The bright-yellow paint job and jungle patio area give this place a cheery feel. Rooms are smallish but comfortable and you can't beat the central location.

### MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Hotel Madrugada** (☎ 651 4092; s/d US\$25/50; 📍) This beautiful little hotel is tucked away in a corner, but actually has one of the best locations in town, overlooking a babbling creek. Rooms are generously sized and fitted out with period touches such as four-poster



beds. There are plenty of armchairs and hammocks on the wide wooden balcony.

**Hotel Popol Nah** (☎ 651 4645; r US\$25) Right off the park, this tranquil little spot has comfortable, modern rooms with tiled floors. Try to get one upstairs with a balcony.

**La Casa de Café B&B** (☎ 651 4620; www.casade.cafecopan.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$35/45) This classy B&B four blocks from the plaza has loads of character in a beautiful setting – the garden area with tables and hammocks has a view over cornfields to the mountains of Guatemala. The 10 rooms with hot-water bathroom have wooden ceilings, antique ceiling fans and other nice touches, and all prices include a hearty breakfast. This place has a good library pertaining to Honduras. It also rents comfortable, fully equipped two-bedroom houses, starting from US\$70 per night, with discounts for longer stays. You can check them out at www.casajaguarcopan.com.

**Hotel Los Jaguares** (☎ 651 4451; jaguares@copan.honduras.org; s/d US\$36/40; P ☎) A surprisingly good deal right on the plaza. The rooms don't have views, but are clean and cheery enough, without being overly stylish.

**Don Udo's** (☎ 553 2675; www.donudos.com; s/d US\$40/60; ☎) A lovely little B&B run by a Dutch-Honduran couple (and guess which one decided that all the tap water – even in the showers – should be purified?). Rooms are decently sized and well decorated, and set around a cheery courtyard patio.

**Hotel Camino Maya** (☎ 651 4518; www.camino.mayahotel.com; s/d US\$48/54; P ☎ ☎ ☎) Shades of old British colonial rule run through this place – the decor's all very stiff upper lip, with a bit of exotic native carving thrown in. The restaurant downstairs lays on a big fry-up breakfast (US\$5.50), just to drive the point home. The swimming pool area set in large gardens is gorgeous.

**Hotel Plaza Copán** (☎ 651 3832; www.plazacopan.hotel.com; s/d US\$49/55; P ☎ ☎ ☎) This classically styled hotel right on the plaza has a range of good-smelling, atmospheric but modern rooms. The dark wood furniture and Spanish tiling give it that extra boost of class. Some rooms have private balconies and views of the church. Each room differs, so look at a few before choosing. The hotel has a restaurant and a terrace with views.

## Eating

The town's little food market is right by the Parque Central.

**Café San Rafael** (snacks US\$1; ☎ 9am-7:30pm) This café serves organic coffee grown at the *finca* of the same name, just out of town. There's also a yummy range of teas and homemade snacks on offer.

**Café Velchez** (breakfasts US\$0.90-3.50, cakes per slice US\$1.80; ☎ 8am-8pm) This pleasant, wood-paneled café has good views out over the plaza from the upper floor. The menu doesn't go much beyond coffee, cakes, juice and breakfast, but it does them all well.

**Café ViaVia** (breakfasts US\$1.40-2.40, mains US\$3-5; ☎ 7am-10pm) This terrific restaurant serves breakfast, lunch and dinner in a convivial atmosphere, with tables overlooking the street and a replica of Altar Q behind the bar. The organically grown coffee it prepares is excellent, bread is homemade and there's always a good selection of vegetarian and meat-based dishes on offer.

**La Casa de Todo** (mains US\$3-5; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This restaurant/café/gift shop/stationery store has a lush backyard, perfect for sipping a cold *licuado* or sampling the healthy, innovative breakfasts and salads on offer.

**Llama del Bosque** (mains US\$3-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This large, popular place has a bit of a dining hall feel to it, but the side balcony is lush and cool. The menu has a good selection of Honduran meals and snacks; the *anafre* (fondue cooked in a clay pot; US\$4) is especially tasty.

**Picame** (mains US\$3-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This cute little café-restaurant does a seriously full breakfast, yummy roast chicken and an assortment of burgers and sandwiches.

**Churrasquería Mimos** (mains US\$4.50-7; ☎ lunch & dinner) With one of the best settings in town, this big open-air steakhouse occupies a huge *palapa*. It's popular with tourists and locals alike.

**Carnitas Nia Lola** (dishes US\$3-6.20; ☎ 7am-10pm) Two blocks south of the plaza, this open-air restaurant has a beautiful view toward the mountains over corn and tobacco fields. It's a relaxing place with simple and economical food; the specialties are charcoal-grilled chicken and beef. Happy hour starts at 6:30pm.

**Vamos A Ver** (mains US\$6-10; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Although the outdoor jungle setting is a bit more imaginative than the food on

offer, this place is popular for its large portions and laid-back atmosphere. Homemade breads, a variety of international cheeses, tasty soups, fruit or vegetable salads, rich coffee, fruit *licuados*, a wide variety of teas and always something for vegetarians are just a taste of what's on offer.

**Twisted Tanya** (mains US\$15; ☎ lunch & dinner) Set upstairs, with a lovely balcony sporting views out to the mountains, Tanya's serves up some good versions of Italian and Asian-influenced dishes. Cardboard Moroccan-style lampshades add an artistic flourish. A starter of soup or salad is included in the price.

## Entertainment

Café ViaVia and the bar in Carnitas Nia Lola are happening spots in the evening. Café ViaVia also shows movies on Sunday night in low season, nightly in high season; proceeds go to Cine Campesino – an innovative grassroots project that projects educational and cultural films in rural locations in Honduras. The Hotel Camino Maya's **Centro de Recreación** (admission \$US1.80; ☎ disco 6am–2am Fri & Sat) has a disco that's popular with locals and a few tourists. It's beside the Quebrada Sesesmil, two blocks south and one block east of the plaza. Also down here is **Papachanga's** (☎ from midnight Thu–Sat), a popular, laid-back reggae bar. It heats up around midnight, when all the bars in the center are required by a town council ordinance to close.

## Getting There & Away

If you need a Honduran visa in advance, you can obtain it at the Honduran consulate in Esquipulas or Guatemala City (p313).

Several Antigua travel agencies offer weekend trips to Copán (US\$125), which may include stops at other places, including Quiriguá. All-inclusive day trips from Antigua to Copán cost around US\$90 and are very rushed. Check with the agencies in Antigua (p107).

## BUS

It's 227km (five hours) from Guatemala City to El Florido, the Guatemalan village on the Honduras border. **Hedman Alas** (☎ 651 41037) runs direct 1st-class services daily in both directions between Copán Ruinas and Guatemala City (US\$35), leaving its office in Copán Ruinas at 1pm and 5:30pm and Guatemala City at 5am. Coming from

other places, you have to take a bus to Chiquimula, and change there for a connecting service to the border.

If you're coming from Esquipulas, you can get off the bus at Vado Hondo, the junction of Hwy 10 and the road to El Florido, and wait for a bus there. As the buses to El Florido usually fill up before departing from Chiquimula, it may be just as well to go the extra 8km into Chiquimula and secure your seat before the bus pulls out. Traveling from the border to Esquipulas, there's no need to go into Chiquimula; minibuses ply the route to Esquipulas frequently.

Minivans and some pickups depart for Copán Ruinas from the Honduras side of the border regularly throughout the day. They should charge around US\$1.50, payable before you depart, for the 20-minute ride. Drivers may hassle you about the fare but late in the day they have the trump card.

Minibuses and pickups from Copán Ruinas to Guatemala depart from the intersection one block west of the plaza. They leave every 40 minutes (or when full), from 6am to 6pm, and charge around US\$2 – check the price beforehand. On the Guatemala side, buses to Chiquimula (US\$2, 1½ hours, 58km) leave the border hourly from 5:30am to 11:30am then hourly from noon to 4pm and at 4:30pm.

Buses serving points further afield in Honduras depart from a few different places in Copán Ruinas. Hedman Alas goes to San Pedro Sula (US\$9, three hours) and on to Tegucigalpa (US\$17, seven hours) at 5:30am daily.

## SHUTTLE MINIBUS

Base Camp Tours (p245) in Copán Ruinas and nearly every Antigua travel agency (p100) run shuttles between those two towns. Scheduled shuttles leave Copán for Antigua (US\$16, minimum four passengers, six hours) at 2pm daily and can drop you in Guatemala City (five hours) en route. Base Camp also offers direct shuttles to San Salvador, El Salvador, on Saturday and Sunday at 3pm (US\$18, five hours).

## CAR

You could conceivably visit the ruins as a day trip from Guatemala City by car, but it's exhausting and far too harried. From Río Hondo, Chiquimula or Esquipulas, it still

takes a full day to get to Copán, tour the ruins and return, but it's easier. It's better to spend at least one night in Copán Ruinas if you can.

Drive 10km south from Chiquimula (or 48km north from Esquipulas) and turn eastward at Vado Hondo (Km 178.5 on Hwy 10). Just opposite the turnoff there is a small motel, which will do if you need a bed. A sign reading 'Vado Hondo Ruinas de Copán' marks the way on the one-hour, 50km drive along the paved road that runs from this junction to El Florido.

Twenty kilometers northeast of Vado Hondo are the Ch'orti' Maya villages of Jocotán and Camotán, set in mountainous tropical countryside dotted with thatched huts in lush green valleys. Jocotán has a small *centro de salud* (medical clinic) and the **Hotel Katú Sukuchuje** (☎ /fax 7941 2431; s/d with hot-water bathroom US\$6/8; 📍), which also has a restaurant.

If you are driving a rented car, you will have to present the Guatemalan customs authorities at the border with a special letter of permission to enter Honduras, written on the rental company's letterhead and signed and sealed by the appropriate company official. If you do not have such a letter, you'll have to leave your car at El Florido and continue to Copán by minivan or pickup.

## AROUND COPÁN RUINAS

**Hacienda San Lucas** (☎ 651 4106; www.haciendasanlucas.com; s/d US\$50/60) is a magical place 5km south of town. Phone beforehand or enquire at Café ViaVia. The recently restored adobe hacienda is solar-powered, but the rooms are candlelit at night, adding to the serene atmosphere. The food here is highly praised. Los Sapos archaeological site (p244) is on the property.

Visiting **Finca El Cisne** (☎ 651 4695; www.fincaelcisne.com; overnight packages per person US\$85), 24km from Copán Ruinas, is more like an agro-eco experience than a tour. Founded in the 1920s and still operating, the *finca* mainly raises cattle and grows coffee and cardamom, but it also produces corn, avocados, beans, breadfruit and star fruit, among other things. Day-long (US\$65 per person) and overnight packages include guided horse riding through the forests and pastures (with a stop to swim in the Río Blanco) and tours of the coffee and cardamom fields and processing plants. If you come in February or October you can help with the harvest. Lodging is in a homey,

solar-powered cabin, with meals and a visit to nearby hot springs included.

**Hacienda El Jaral** (☎ 552 4457; www.haciendaeljaral.com; campsite per person US\$4, s/d/tr US\$55/60/80; 📍 📍 📍 📍), a lush ecotourism resort offering many activities, is 11km from town on the way to La Entrada. The luxurious rooms with air-con, hot-water bathroom, cable TV and fridge are all in duplex cabins with outdoor terraces. The resort has a shopping mall, cinema, water park, children's play area and a couple of restaurants. The activities offered to guests and nonguests alike include bird-watching in a bird-sanctuary lagoon (thousands of herons reside here from November to May), horse riding, bicycling, hiking, river swimming, inner-tubing, canoeing and 'soft rafting' on the Río Copán.

## Santa Rita de Copán

Nine kilometers from town (20 minutes by bus) on the road towards La Entrada, Santa Rita de Copán is a lovely village at the confluence of two rivers. Just outside Santa Rita – but unfortunately out of bounds due to a sequence of nasty incidents – is **El Rubí** waterfall, with an inviting swimming hole. It's about a half-hour uphill walk (3km) on a trail departing from opposite the Esso fuel station beside the bridge on the highway. Yaragua Tours (p245) in Copán Ruinas comes out here with armed guards – not your most tranquil swimming experience, but unfortunately the most sensible way to do it until the situation improves.

## Agua Caliente

The attractively sited **Agua Caliente** (hot springs; admission US\$1; ☎ 8am-8pm), not to be confused with Agua Caliente in Honduras, not far from Esquipulas, are 23km north of Copán Ruinas via the road running north out of town. Here hot water flows and mingles with a cold river. There are facilities for changing, a basketball court and bathrooms plus a *tienda* for soft drinks and snacks. To get to the springs, you can drive (45 minutes), hire a pickup (US\$25) or catch a ride early with farmers going out there (US\$1.50). Base Camp Tours (p245) in Copán Ruinas hires a minibus with a capacity of 15 people for US\$30 return – a good deal if you can get a group together.

## LUNA JAGUAR SPA RESORT

Directly across the river from the hot springs, this is a high-concept Mayan **day spa** (admission

US\$10, with treatment US\$30; (☒) 8am–5pm). The idea is that this is what the Maya kings would have done to relax if they had the chance.

Thirteen ‘treatment stations’ (offering massage, hot tub, herbal steam baths and so on) are scattered around the hillside, connected by a series of stone pathways. The jungle here has been left as undisturbed as possible, and reproduction Mayan sculptures dot the landscape. The water used in the hot tub and steam baths comes directly from the volcanic spring. It’s an amazing and beautiful spot, and worth checking out even if you aren’t a spa junkie.

## QUIRIGUÁ

From Copán it is only some 50km to Quiriguá as the crow flies, but the lay of the land, the international border and the condition of the roads make it a journey of 175km. Quiriguá is famed for its intricately carved stelae – the gigantic brown sandstone monoliths that rise as high as 10.5m, like ancient sentinels, in a quiet, well-kept tropical park.

From Río Hondo junction it’s 67km along the Carr al Atlántico to the village of Los Amates, where there are a couple of hotels, a restaurant, food stalls, a bank and a little bus station. The village of Quiriguá is 1.5km east of Los Amates, and the turnoff to the ruins is another 1.5km to the east. The 3.4km access road leads south through banana groves.

## History

Quiriguá’s history parallels that of Copán, of which it was a dependency during much of the classic period. Of the three sites in this area, only the present archaeological park is of interest.

Quiriguá’s location lent itself to the carving of giant stelae. Beds of brown sandstone in the nearby Río Motagua had cleavage planes suitable for cutting large pieces. Though soft when first cut, the sandstone dried hard in the air. With Copán’s expert artisans nearby for guidance, Quiriguá’s stone carvers were ready for greatness. All they needed was a great leader to inspire them – and to pay for the carving of the huge stelae.

That leader was K’ak’ Tiliw Chan Yo’at (Cauc Sky; r 725–84), who decided that Quiriguá should no longer be under the control of Copán. In a war with his former suzerain, Cauac Sky took King 18 Rabbit of Copán prisoner in 737 and later had him beheaded. Independent at last, Cauac Sky commissioned

his stonemasons to go to work, and for the next 38 years they turned out giant stelae and zoomorphs dedicated to the glory of King Cauac Sky.

Cauc Sky’s son Sky Xul (r 784–800) lost his throne to a usurper, Jade Sky. This last great king of Quiriguá continued the building boom initiated by Cauac Sky, reconstructing Quiriguá’s Acropolis on a grander scale.

Quiriguá remained unknown to Europeans until John L Stephens arrived in 1840. Impressed by its great monuments, Stephens lamented the world’s lack of interest in them in his book *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (1841):

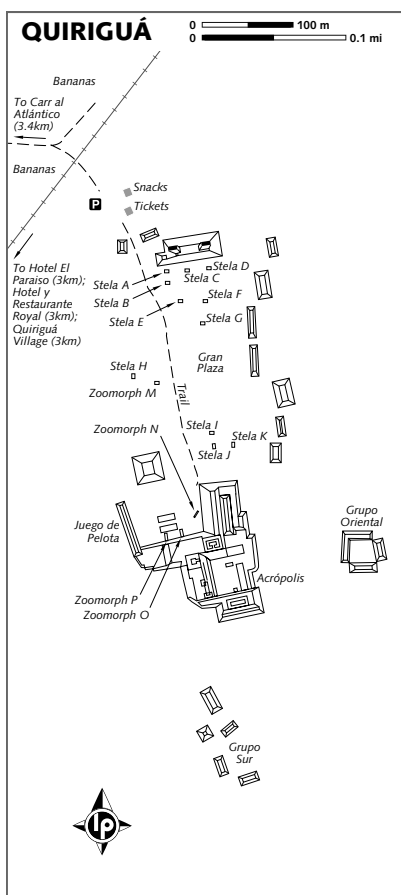
Of one thing there is no doubt: a large city once stood there; its name is lost, its history unknown; and...no account of its existence has ever before been published. For centuries it has lain as completely buried as if covered with the lava of Vesuvius. Every traveler from Yzabal to Guatemala has passed within three hours of it; we ourselves had done the same; and yet there it lay, like the rock-built city of Edom, unvisited, unsought, and utterly unknown.

Stephens tried to buy the ruined city in order to have its stelae shipped to New York, but the owner, Señor Payes, naturally assumed that Stephens (being a diplomat), was negotiating on behalf of the US government and that the government would pay. Payes quoted an extravagant price, and the deal was never made.

Between 1881 and 1894, excavations were carried out by Alfred P Maudslay. In the early 1900s all the land around Quiriguá was sold to the United Fruit Company and turned into banana groves (see boxed text, p252). The company is gone, but the bananas and Quiriguá remain. Restoration of the site was carried out by the University of Pennsylvania in the 1930s. In 1981, Unesco declared the ruins a World Heritage Site, one of only three in Guatemala (the others are Tikal and Antigua).

## Ruins

The beautiful park-like **archaeological site** (admission US\$4; (☒) 7:30am–5pm) has a small *tienda* near the entrance selling cold drinks and snacks, but you’ll be better off bringing your own picnic.



Note the exuberant, elaborate headdresses; the beards on some of the figures (an oddity in Mayan art and life); the staffs of office held in the kings' hands; and the glyphs on the sides of the stela.

At the far end of the plaza is the **Acrópolis**, far less impressive than the one at Copán. At its base are several **zoomorphs**, blocks of stone carved to resemble real and mythic creatures. Frogs, tortoises, jaguars and serpents were favorite subjects. The low zoomorphs can't compete with the towering stelae in impressiveness, but as works of art, imagination and mythic significance, the zoomorphs are superb.

### Sleeping & Eating

Both of the hotels listed here have restaurants. There seems to be a bit of a price war going on in Quiriguá – just mention that you're going to have a look at the other place and listen to the prices plummet. To get to them both, walk down the main street, veering right at the first fork and then follow the road around to the left at the bend.

**Hotel El Paraíso** (s/d US\$5.50/8, with bathroom US\$8/11) The better of the two hotels in town, the rooms with shared bathroom here are fine, plus you get to use the shower with the awesome mountain views.

**Hotel y Restaurante Royal** (☎ 7947 3639; s/d US\$5.50/8, with bathroom US\$8/11) The first hotel you come to, this one has small but adequate rooms – those with bathroom are a lot nicer. The restaurant serves both meat and vegetarian meals (US\$4 to US\$6).

### Getting There & Around

The turnoff to Quiriguá village is 205km (four hours) northeast of Guatemala City, 70km northeast of the Río Hondo junction, 41km southwest of La Ruidosa junction (for Río Dulce and Flores) and 90km southwest of Puerto Barrios.

Buses running from Guatemala City to Puerto Barrios, Guatemala City to Flores, Esquipulas to Flores or Chiquimula to Flores will drop you off or pick you up here. They'll also drop you at the turnoff to the archaeological site if you ask.

From the highway it's 3.4km to the archaeological site – US\$0.25 by bus or pickup, but if one doesn't come, don't fret: it's a pleasant walk (without luggage) on a dirt road running through banana plantations to get there. You

Despite the sticky heat and (sometimes) bothersome mosquitoes, Quiriguá is a wonderful place. The giant stelae on the **Gran Plaza** (Great Plaza) are all much more worn than those at Copán. To impede further deterioration, each has been covered by a thatched roof. The roofs cast shadows that make it difficult to examine the carving closely and almost impossible to get a good photograph, but somehow this does little to inhibit one's sense of awe.

Seven of the stelae, designated A, C, D, E, F, H and J, were built during the reign of Cauac Sky and carved with his image. **Stela E** is the largest Mayan stela known, standing some 8m above ground, with another 3m or so buried in the earth. It weighs almost 60,000kg.



may have to wait to get from the ruins back to the main highway, but eventually some transportation will turn up.

If you're staying in the village of Quiriguá or Los Amates and walking to the archaeological site, you can take a shortcut along the railway branch line that goes from the village through the banana fields, crossing the access road very near the entrance to the archaeological site. There have been no reports of safety issues here.

To head on to Río Dulce (US\$3, two hours) if you don't want to wait for a bus to Flores (around 20 daily coming from Guatemala City), you can take any bus or minibus to Morales (the transportation hub for the area) and a bus on from there to Río Dulce. This is a bit of a detour off the main road, but at least you'll get a seat from Morales. Alternatively, take a Puerto Barrios bus and get off at La Ruidosa, where you can wait for a minivan or bus for the 34km to Río Dulce. For Chiquimula, take any bus the 3km from the turnoff to the ruins to Los Amates and wait for the next bus through to Chiquimula (US\$3, two hours).

## LAGO DE IZABAL

Guatemala's largest lake, to the north of the Carr al Atlántico, is just starting to register on travelers' radar screens. Most visitors checking out the lake stay at Río Dulce town, by the long, tall bridge where Hwy 13, heading north to Flores and Tikal, crosses the Río Dulce emptying out of the east end of the lake. Downstream, the beautiful river broadens into a lake called El Golfete before meeting the Caribbean at Livingston. River trips are a highlight of a visit to eastern Guatemala. If you're looking for lakeside ambience minus the Río Dulce congestion and pace, head to Denny's Beach at Mariscos (p257) or, closer, El Castillo de San Felipe (p254), about 3km west of the bridge. The neat town of El Estor near the west end of the lake gives access to the Bocas del Polochic river delta, where there is lots of wildlife (see p256). There are many undiscovered spots in this area waiting to be explored, so don't limit yourself.

## Río Dulce

At the east end of the Lago de Izabal where it empties into the Río Dulce, this town still gets referred to as Fronteras. It's a hangover from the days when the only way across the river was by ferry, and this was the last piece

of civilization before embarking on the long, difficult journey into El Petén.

Times have changed. A huge bridge now spans the water and El Petén roads are some of the best in the country. The town sees most tourist traffic from yachties – the US coast guard says this is the safest place on the western Caribbean for boats during hurricane season. The rest of the foreigners here are either coming or going on the spectacular river trip down to Livingston (see p264).

## ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Unless you're staying at Hotel Backpacker's (p253) or volunteering at its Casa Guatemala, get off the bus on the north side of the bridge. The Fuente del Norte and Litegua bus offices are both here, opposite each other. Otherwise you'll find yourself trudging over what is believed to be the longest bridge in Central America – it's a very hot 30-minute walk (3.5km).

The main dock is now under the bridge on the opposite side of the main road from Bruno's (p253) – you'll see a side road leading down to it.

The website [www.mayaparadise.com](http://www.mayaparadise.com) has loads of information about Río Dulce.

**Cap't Nemo's Communications** (☎ 7930 5174; [www.mayaparadise.com](http://www.mayaparadise.com); internet access per hr US\$2; ☎ 7am–8pm Mon–Sat, 9am–2pm Sun) Beside Bruno's on the river, Nemo's offers email and international phone and fax services. Tijax Express, Hacienda Tijax and Hotel Backpacker's are hooked up too, all charging US\$3 per hour.

**Tijax Express** (☎ daily) In the little lane between the river and the Fuente del Norte bus office, this is Río Dulce's unofficial tourist information center. English is spoken here. There are two similar places near the Tijax, Otitours and Atitran. You can book *lanchas*, tours, sailing trips and shuttles with all three.

If you need to change cash or traveler's checks, hit one of the banks in town, all on the main road.

**Banco Agromercantil** Will give cash advances on credit cards if there is a problem with the ATMs.

**Banco Industrial** (☎ 9am–5pm) Has a Visa ATM.

**Banrural** Has Visa and MasterCard ATMs.

## TOURS

**Aventuras Vacacionales** (☎ /fax 7832 5938; [www.sailing-diving-guatemala.com](http://www.sailing-diving-guatemala.com); Centro Comercial María, 4a Calle Poniente 17, Antigua) runs fun sailing trips on the sailboat *Las Sirenas* from Río Dulce to the Belize reefs and islands (US\$400, seven days)



## BANANA REPUBLIC

In 1870, the first year that bananas were imported to the US, few Americans had ever seen a banana, let alone tasted one. By 1898 they were eating 16 million bunches annually.

In 1899 the Boston Fruit Company merged with the interests of the Brooklyn-born Central American railroad baron Minor C Keith to form the United Fruit Company. The aim was to own large areas of Central America and cultivate them by modern methods, providing predictable harvests of bananas that Keith, who controlled virtually all of the railroads in Central America, would then carry to the coast for shipment to the USA.

Central American governments readily granted United Fruit rights at low prices to large tracts of undeveloped jungle. The company created access to the land by road and/or rail, cleared and cultivated it, built extensive port facilities for the export of fruit and offered employment to large numbers of local workers.

By 1930, United Fruit was capitalized at US\$215 million and was the largest employer in Central America. The company's Great White Fleet of transportation ships was one of the largest private navies in the world. In Guatemala, by controlling Puerto Barrios and the railroads serving it, all of which it had built, United Fruit effectively controlled all the country's international commerce, banana or otherwise.

The company came to be referred to as El Pulpo, 'the Octopus,' by local journalists, who accused it of corrupting government officials, exploiting workers and in general exercising influence far beyond its role as a foreign company in Guatemala.

United Fruit's treatment of its workers was paternalistic. Though they worked long and hard for low wages, these wages were higher than those of other farm workers, and they received housing, medical care and in some cases schooling for their children. Still, indigenous Guatemalans were required to give right of way to whites and remove their hats when talking to them. And the company took out of the country far more in profits than it put in: between 1942 and 1952 the company paid stockholders almost 62 cents (US) in dividends for every dollar invested.

The US government, responding to its rich and powerful constituents, saw its role as one of support for United Fruit and defense of its interests.

On October 20, 1944, a liberal military coup paved the way for Guatemala's first-ever free elections. The winner and new president was Dr Juan José Arévalo, a professor who, inspired by the New Deal policies of Franklin Roosevelt, sought to remake Guatemala into a democratic, liberal nation guided by 'spiritual socialism.' His successor, Jacobo Arbenz, was even more vigorous in undertaking reform. Among Arbenz' many supporters was Guatemala's small communist party.

Free at last from the repression of past military dictators, labor unions clamored for better conditions, with almost constant actions against la Frutera, United Fruit. The Guatemalan government demanded more-equitable tax payments from the company and divestiture of large tracts of its unused land.

Alarm bells sounded in the company's Boston headquarters and in Washington, where powerful members of Congress and the Eisenhower administration – including Secretary of State John Foster Dulles – were convinced that Arbenz was intent on turning Guatemala communist. Several high-ranking US officials had close ties to United Fruit, and others were persuaded by the company's expensive and effective lobbying campaign that Arbenz was a threat.

In 1954, the CIA arranged an invasion from Honduras by 'anti-communist' Guatemalan exiles, which resulted in Arbenz' resignation and exile. The CIA's hand-picked 'liberator' was Carlos Castillo Armas, a military man of the old caste, who returned Guatemala to rightist military dictatorship. The tremendous power of the United Fruit Company had set back democratic development in Guatemala by at least half a century.

A few years after the coup, the US Department of Justice brought suit against United Fruit for operating monopolistically in restraint of trade. In 1958 the company was ordered to reduce its size by two-thirds within 12 years. It began by selling some of its Guatemalan holdings to Guatemalan entrepreneurs and its US rival Standard Fruit. It yielded its monopoly on the railroads as well.

Caught up in the 'merger mania' of the 1960s, United Fruit became part of United Brands, which in the early 1970s sold all of its remaining land in Guatemala to the Del Monte corporation. Standard Fruit (now part of the Dole Corporation) and Del Monte are still active in Guatemala.

and Lago Izabal (US\$180, four days). The office is in Antigua but you can also hook up with this outfit in Río Dulce. It makes the Belize and lake trips in alternate weeks.

The Río Dulce-based **Wizard of Oz** (☎ 5733 0516; www.sailthewizard.com; tours per person per day US\$75) offers sailing tours to Belize, Honduras and Cayes from Guatemala. Trips include snorkeling, kayaking and also basic sail training if you are interested.

**That Boat** (www.that-boat.com; tours per person from US\$10), a 60-footer, offers various day and half-day trips (including sunset tours, splash lunches and waterparties) on the Río Dulce and its lakes. For more information visit the Sundog Café (see p254) or the website.

### SLEEPING

Many places in Río Dulce communicate by radio. Tijax Express, the bar at Bruno's, and Restaurant Río Bravo will radio your choice of place to stay if necessary.

### On the Water

The places listed here are out of town on the water, which is the best place to be. You can call or radio them from Tijax Express and they'll come and pick you up.

**Hotel Backpacker's** (☎ 7930 5169; casaguatemala@guate.net; dm US\$4, s/d US\$8/16, with bathroom US\$10/20) Across the bridge, this is a business run by Casa Guatemala and the orphans it serves. It's an old (with the emphasis on old) backpacker favorite, set in a rickety building with very basic rooms. Volunteer work is available here, either working in the hotel or the nearby children's refuge. The bar kicks on here at night. If you're coming by *lancha* or bus, ask the driver to let you off here to spare yourself the walk across the bridge.

**Casa Perico** (☎ 7930 5666; VHF channel 68; dm US\$5.50, s/d US\$6/7, with bathroom US\$20/27) One of the more low-key options in the area, this is set on a little inlet about 200m from the main river. Cabins are well built and connected by boardwalks. The Swiss guys who run it offer tours all up and down the river and put on an excellent buffet dinner (US\$6) or you can choose from the menu (mains US\$3 to US\$4). The place has a good book exchange and a young, fun atmosphere.

**Nutria Marina** (☎ 5863 9365; www.nutriamarina.com; dm/s/d US\$7/20/30) Set right across the water from the Castillo San Felipe and a bit up on the hillside, this place catches some

cool breezes and good views. Bungalows are simple and well built and the nine-person dorm is popular with groups who come for art workshops.

**Hacienda Tijax** (☎ 7930 5505/7; VHF channel 09; www.tijax.com; campsite per person US\$3, s US\$8-34, d US\$13-39; (P) (B) (E)) This 500-acre hacienda, a two-minute boat ride across the cove from Bruno's, is a special place to stay. Activities include horse riding, hiking, birding, sailboat trips and tours around the rubber plantation. Accommodation is in lovely little cabins connected by a boardwalk. Most cabins face the water and there's a very relaxing pool/bar area. Access is by boat or by a road that turns off the highway about 1km north of the village. The folks here speak Spanish, English, Dutch, French and Italian, and they'll pick you up from across the river; ask at the Tijax Express office.

**El Tortugal** (☎ 5306 6432; www.tortugal.com; bungalows US\$20) The best-looking bungalows on the river are located here, a five-minute *lancha* ride east from town. There are plenty of hammocks, the showers are seriously hot and kayaks are free for guest use.

**Hotel Catamaran** (☎ 7930 5494; www.catamaran.island.com; s/d from US\$71/91; (P) (B) (E)) Built on its own little island, this is the most upmarket option on the river. Bungalows are surprisingly plain, but comfortable enough and the grounds strike a neat balance between lush and manicured.

### In Town

**Bruno's** (☎ 7930 5721; www.mayaparadise.com/brunoe.htm; dm US\$5, s/d US\$6/12, with bathroom US\$23/33; (P) (B) (E)) A path leads down from the northwest end of the bridge to this riverside hang-out for yachties needing to get some land under their feet. The cheapest rooms here are barely worth looking at, but the dorms are clean and spacious and the new building offers some of the most comfortable rooms in town, with air-con and balconies overlooking the river. They're well set up for families and sleep up to six, charging US\$10 per additional person over the doubles rate.

**Hospedaje Golding** (☎ 7930 5123; Carr a San Felipe; r per person US\$5, with bathroom US\$8) A yellow building with no sign, just off the main road, Golding is a simple place. It has some pretty trees and its brightly colored upstairs rooms have a bit of a view.

**Hospedaje Marilu** (☎ 7930 5403; s/d US\$5/8, with bathroom US\$6/10) A clean, cheap option on the main drag, opposite Las Brisas. Rooms have a double bed, fan and mosquito screen.

**Las Brisas Hotel** (☎ 7930 5124; s/d with bathroom US\$10/13; 🍷) This hotel is opposite Tijax Express. All rooms are clean enough and have three beds and fans. Three rooms upstairs have private bathroom and air-con (US\$40). It's central and good enough for a night, but there are much better places around.

## EATING

**Sundog Café** (sandwiches US\$3, meals from US\$4; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Down the hill a bit from Tijax express, this open-air bar-restaurant makes great sandwiches on homemade bread, a good selection of vegetarian dishes and fresh juices. It's also the place to come for unbiased information about the area.

**Restaurante La Carreta** (breakfast US\$2, mains US\$5-8; 🍷 lunch & dinner) While most of the waterside joints are serving up pricey food with romantic views, this *palapa*-style restaurant off the highway on the road towards San Felipe (with charming views of the neighbor's backyard) is keeping it real for the locals with big serves at low prices. The surf 'n' turf (US\$9.50) comes highly recommended.

**Restaurant Los Pinchos** (breakfasts US\$3, mains US\$6-10; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) With an open-air deck over the lake, this place has some good eats and a very local flavor. It doesn't get too fancy, but there is a good range of steaks, seafood and Chinese dishes on offer in a relaxed environment.

**Bruno's** (breakfasts US\$2.60-4, mains US\$10; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Another open-air place right beside the water, Bruno's is a restaurant-sports bar with satellite TV and video; its floating dock makes it popular with yachties.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Beginning at 7am, 14 Fuente del Norte buses a day head north along a paved road to Popatún (US\$4, two hours, 99km) and Flores (US\$6.50, four hours, 208km). The 12:30pm, 7:30pm, 9:30pm and 11:30pm buses continue all the way to Melchor de Mencos (US\$12) on the Belize border. With good connections you can get to Tikal (279km) in a snappy six hours. In the other direction, at least 17 buses daily go to Guatemala City (US\$6.50, six hours, 280km) with Fuente del Norte and Litegua. Línea Dorada/Fuente del Norte has

1st-class buses departing at 1:30pm for Guatemala City and at 2:30pm for Flores (both US\$18). This shaves up to an hour off the journey times.

Minibuses leave for Puerto Barrios (US\$2.50, two hours) when full, from the roadside opposite Tijax Express.

Atitrans' shuttle minibuses operates from the Atitrans office on the highway. Shuttles to Antigua cost US\$37, to Copán Ruinas US\$30 and Guatemala City US\$30, with a minimum of four passengers in each case. Otitours and Tijax Express offer much the same service.

Dilapidated Fuente del Norte buses leave for El Estor (US\$1.30, 1½ hours, 43km) from the Pollolandia restaurant at the San Felipe and El Estor turnoff in the middle of town, hourly from 7am to 4pm. The road is only paved for 15km.

*Colectivo lanchas* go down the Río Dulce (from the new dock) to Livingston, usually requiring eight to 10 people, charging US\$12 per person. The trip is a beautiful one and they usually make a 'tour' of it, with several halts along the way (see p264). If everyone wants to get there as fast as possible, it takes one hour without stops. Boats usually leave from 9am to about 2pm. The three tour offices (see p251) offer *lancha* service to Livingston and most other places you'd care to go, but they charge more.

## El Castillo de San Felipe

The fortress and castle of San Felipe de Lara, **El Castillo de San Felipe** (admission US\$2.80; 🕒 8am-5pm), about 3km west of the bridge, was built in 1652 to keep pirates from looting the villages and commercial caravans of Izabal. Though the fortress deterred the buccaneers a bit, a pirate force captured and burned it in 1686. By the end of the next century, pirates had disappeared from the Caribbean, and the fort's sturdy walls served as a prison. Eventually, though, the fortress was abandoned and became a ruin. The present fort was reconstructed in 1956.

Today the castle is protected as a park and is one of the Lago de Izabal's principal tourist attractions. In addition to the fort itself, there are grassy grounds, barbecue and picnic areas, and the opportunity to swim in the lake. The place rocks from April 30 to May 4 during the **Feria de San Felipe**.

**SLEEPING & EATING**

**Hotel Don Humberto** (☎ /fax 7930 5051; s/d US\$8/11; 📍) Near the Castillo, offering basic rooms with big beds and good mosquito netting. It's nothing fancy, but more than adequate for a cheap sleep.

**Viñas del Lago** (☎ 7930 5053; www.infovia.com.gt/hotelvinasdelago; s/d US\$32/40; 📍 📺 📶) The much fancier del Lago, near the Hotel Don Humberto, has 18 spacious, plain rooms, all with hot-water bathroom, air-con and TV. Rooms out the back have good views. The grounds are large and there's a restaurant (mains US\$7.75 to US\$10.50) with views of Lago de Izabal.

Between the turnoff from the El Estor-Río Dulce road and the castle are a couple of good-value places:

**La Cabaña del Viajero** (☎ 7930 5062; s/d with bathroom US\$10/17; 📍 📺 📶) The smallish rooms in these two-story cabins are an excellent deal. They're clean and colorfully decorated and there's a shady pool area to splash around in. Air-conditioning costs an extra US\$7.

**Hotel Changri-la** (☎ 7930 5467; hotelchangrila@yahoo.com; s/d with bathroom US\$25/37, 6-person bungalows US\$152; 📍 📺 📶) These pretty rooms provide some comfortable touches. There are no water views, but there is a relaxed little pool/restaurant/bar area.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

San Felipe is on the lakeshore, 3km west of Río Dulce. It's a beautiful 45-minute walk between the two towns, or take a minivan (US\$0.80, every 30 minutes). In Río Dulce it stops on the corner of the highway and road to El Estor; in San Felipe it stops in front of the Hotel Don Humberto, at the entrance to El Castillo.

Boats coming from Livingston will drop you in San Felipe if you ask. The Río Dulce river tours usually come to El Castillo, allowing you to get out and visit the castle if you like. Or you can come over from Río Dulce by private *lancha* for US\$8.

**Finca El Paraíso**

On the north side of the lake, between Río Dulce and El Estor, **Finca El Paraíso** (☎ 7949 7122; admission US\$1.30) makes a great day trip from either place. This working ranch's territory includes an incredibly beautiful spot in the jungle where a wide, hot waterfall drops about 12m into a clear, deep pool. You can bathe in the hot water, swim in the cool pool or duck under an overhanging promontory and enjoy a jungle-style sauna.

Also on the *finca* are a number of interesting caves and a restaurant by a sandy lake beach. If you like you can stay on in comfortable bungalows for around US\$30 for two people.

The *finca* is on the Río Dulce-El Estor bus route, about one hour (US\$0.90) from Río Dulce and 30 minutes (US\$0.60) from El Estor. The last bus in either direction passes at around 4:30pm to 5pm.

**El Estor**

pop 17,100

The major settlement on the northern shore of Lago de Izabal is El Estor. The nickel mines a few kilometers to the northwest (for which the town grew up) closed in 1980 but are set to be reopened by Canadian companies as world nickel stocks run low. A friendly, somnolent little town with a lovely setting, El Estor is the jumping-off point for the Bocas del Polochic, a highly biodiverse wildlife reserve at the west end of the lake. The town is also a staging post on a possible route between Río Dulce and Lanquín.

**ORIENTATION & INFORMATION**

The main street, running parallel to the lakeshore two blocks back from the water, is 3a Calle. Buses from Río Dulce terminate at Tienda Cobanerita on the corner of 3a Calle and 4a Av. Walk one block west from here along 3a Calle to find the Parque Central.

Asociación Feminina Q'eqchi' sells clothes, blankets and accessories that are made from traditional cloth woven by the association's members. To find it go two blocks north along 5a Av from the Parque Central, then two blocks west. All profits benefit the women involved in the program.

**Banrural** (cnr 3a Calle & 6a Av; ☎ 8:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Changes US dollars and Amex traveler's checks.

**Café Portal** (5a Av 2-65; ☎ 6:30am-10pm) On the east side of Parque Central, this place provides information, tours and transportation.

**Municipal police** (cnr 1a Calle & 5a Av) Near the lakeshore.

**SLEEPING & EATING**

**Hotel Santa Clara** (☎ 7949 7244; 5a Av 2-11; s/d US\$3/6, with bathroom US\$4/8) You'd have to be really penny-pinching to find the downstairs rooms with shared bathroom here attractive.

Upstairs (with bathroom), the situation improves slightly, as rooms get a breeze at least and some have lake views.

**Hotel Villela** (☎ 7949 7214; 6a Av 2-06; s/d US\$5/9)

The rooms are less attractive than the neat lawn and trees they're set around, but some are airier and brighter than others. All have fan and bathroom.

**Hotel Central** (☎ 7949 7497; 5a Av; s/d with bathroom US\$7/10; (P)) This hotel provides rooms with fan at the northeast corner of the Parque Central.

**Restaurante Típico Chaabil** (☎ 7949 7272; 3a Calle; r with bathroom per person US\$10; (P)) Although they go a bit heavy on the log cabin feel, the rooms at this place, at the west end of 3a Calle, are the best deal in town. Get one upstairs for plenty of light and good views. The restaurant here, on a lovely lakeside terrace, cooks up delicious food, such as *tapado* (the Garifuna seafood and coconut stew; US\$8). The water here is crystal clear and you can swim right off the hotel's dock.

**Hotel Vista al Lago** (☎ 7949 7205; 6a Av 1-13; s/d with bathroom US\$10/20) Set in a classic, historic building down on the waterfront, this place has plenty of style, although the rooms themselves are fairly ordinary. Views from the upstairs balcony are superb.

The Chaabil apart, the best place to look for food is around the Parque Central, where Café Portal and Restaurante Hugo's both serve a broad range of fare with some vegetarian options. Main dishes are around US\$3 to US\$4 at either.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

See Río Dulce (p254) for information on buses from there. The schedule from El Estor to Río Dulce is hourly, from 6am to 4pm.

The road west from El Estor via Panzós and Tucurú to Tactic, south of Cobán, has had a bad reputation for highway holdups and robberies in the past, especially around Tucurú. It's also prone to getting flooded out during the wet season, so it's very advisable to ask around on the current situation. You can get to Lanquín by taking the truck that leaves El Estor's Parque Central at 9am for Cahabón (US\$2, four to five hours), and then a bus or pickup straight on from Cahabón to Lanquín the same day. Two buses go direct to Cobán (US\$8, six hours) on this route, leaving at the very unfriendly times of 1am and 4am from the El Estor's Central Park.

There are no public boat services between El Estor and other lake destinations. Private *lanchas* can be contracted, though this can be pricey. Ask at your hotel.

## Around El Estor

### REFUGIO BOCAS DEL POLOCHIC & RESERVA DE BIOSFERA SIERRA DE LAS MINAS

The Refugio Bocas del Polochic (Bocas del Polochic Wildlife Reserve) covers the delta of the Río Polochic, which provides most of Lago de Izabal's water. A visit here provides great bird-watching and howler monkey observation. The reserve supports more than 300 species of birds – the migration seasons, September to October and April to May, are reportedly fantastic – and many varieties of butterflies and fish. You may well see alligators and, if you're very lucky, glimpse a manatee. Café Portal (p255) can set up early-morning trips with local boatman Benjamín Castillo costing US\$60 for two people plus US\$13 for each extra person for 3½ hours. The reserve is managed by the **Fundación Defensores de la Naturaleza** (☎ 7949 7130; www.defensores.org.gt in Spanish; cnr 5a Av & 2a Calle, El Estor), whose research station, the **Estación Científica Selem pim**, just south of the Bocas del Polochic reserve, in the Reserva de Biosfera Sierra de las Minas, is open for ecotouristic visits. Contact Defensores' El Estor office for bookings and further information: ask for Luis Pérez, who speaks English. You can get to the station on a local *lancha* service leaving El Estor at 11am Monday, Wednesday and Saturday (US\$7 round-trip, 1¼ hours each way) or by special hire (US\$65 to US\$90 for a boatload of up to 12 people), and stay in attractive wood-and-thatch *cabañas* (per person US\$7) or camp (US\$4 per person). Meals are available for US\$3.50 each or you can use the Estación Científica's kitchen. To explore the reserves you can use canoes free of charge, take boat trips (US\$20 to US\$32) or walk any of the three well-established trails.

### El Boquerón

This beautiful, lushly vegetated canyon abutting the tiny Mayan settlement of the same name is about 6km east of El Estor. For around US\$2, villagers will paddle you up the Río Sauce through the canyon, drop you at a small beach, where you can swim and if you like scramble up the rocks, and return for you at an agreed time. Río Dulce-bound buses



from El Estor will drop you at El Boquerón (US\$0.50, 15 minutes), as will El Estor-bound buses from Río Dulce.

## Mariscos

Mariscos is the principal town on the lake's south side. Ferries from here used to be the main access to El Estor and the north side of the lake, but since a road was built from Río Dulce to El Estor, Mariscos has taken a back seat. As a result, **Denny's Beach** (☎ 2337 4946; VHF channel 63; www.dennysbeach.com; campsites per tent US\$4, hammocks US\$2, cabañas per person US\$5-10), 10 minutes by boat from Mariscos, is a good place to get away from it all. Dennis Gulck and his wife, Lupe, offer tours, hiking and swimming, and host full-moon parties. When you arrive in Mariscos, you can radio them on VHF channel 63 – many people and businesses in Mariscos use radios – and they'll come to pick you up. Otherwise, you can hitch a ride in a *cayuco* (dugout canoe) at the market for US\$2 or go to Shop-n-Go and hire a speedboat for US\$15, fine if you're a group. In Río Dulce, you can radio from Cap't Nemo's Communications (p251) and they'll send someone to pick you up.

## PUERTO BARRIOS

pop 62,800

The country becomes even more lush, tropical and humid heading east from La Ruidosa junction toward Puerto Barrios. Port towns have always had a fame for being slightly dodgy, and those acting as international borders doubly so. Perhaps the town council wants to pay homage to that here. Or perhaps the edgy, slightly sleazy feel is authentic. Either way, for foreign visitors, Puerto Barrios is mainly a jumping-off point for boats to Punta Gorda (Belize) or Livingston, and you probably won't be hanging around.

The powerful United Fruit Company once owned vast plantations in the Motagua valley and many other parts of Guatemala. The company built railways to ship its produce to the coast, and it built Puerto Barrios early in the 20th century to put that produce onto ships sailing for New Orleans and New York (see the boxed text, p252). Laid out as a company town, Puerto Barrios has long, wide streets arranged neatly on a grid plan, and lots of Caribbean-style wood-frame houses, many of which have seen better days.

When United Fruit's power and influence declined in the 1960s, the Del Monte company became successor to its interests. But the heyday of the imperial foreign firms was past, as was that of Puerto Barrios. A more modern and efficient port was built a few kilometers to the southwest at Santo Tomás de Castilla, and Puerto Barrios sank into tropical torpor. In the last few years, however, things have started to look up again with the construction of a huge new truck container depot where the old railway yards were.

## Orientation & Information

Because of its spacious layout, you must walk or ride further in Puerto Barrios to get from place to place. For instance, it's 800m from the bus terminals by the market in the town center to the Muelle Municipal (Municipal Boat Dock) at the end of 12a Calle, from which passenger boats depart.

**Banco Industrial** (7a Av.; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Changes cash US dollars and traveler's checks, and has Visa ATMs.

**Banrural** (8a Av.; ☎ 8:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Changes cash dollars only and has a MasterCard ATM.

**Cybernet del Atlántico** (7a Calle; per hr US\$0.80) Internet access; west of 2a Av.

**El Muñecón** (intersection 8a Av, 14a Calle & Calz Justo Rufino Barrios) A statue of a dock worker; this is a favorite landmark and monument in the town.

**Immigration office** (cnr 12a Calle & 3a Av.; ☎ 24hr) A block from the Muelle Municipal. Come here for your entry or exit stamp if you're arriving from or leaving for Belize: if you're leaving, there is a US\$10 departure tax to pay. If you are heading to Honduras, you can get your exit stamp at another immigration office on the road to the border.

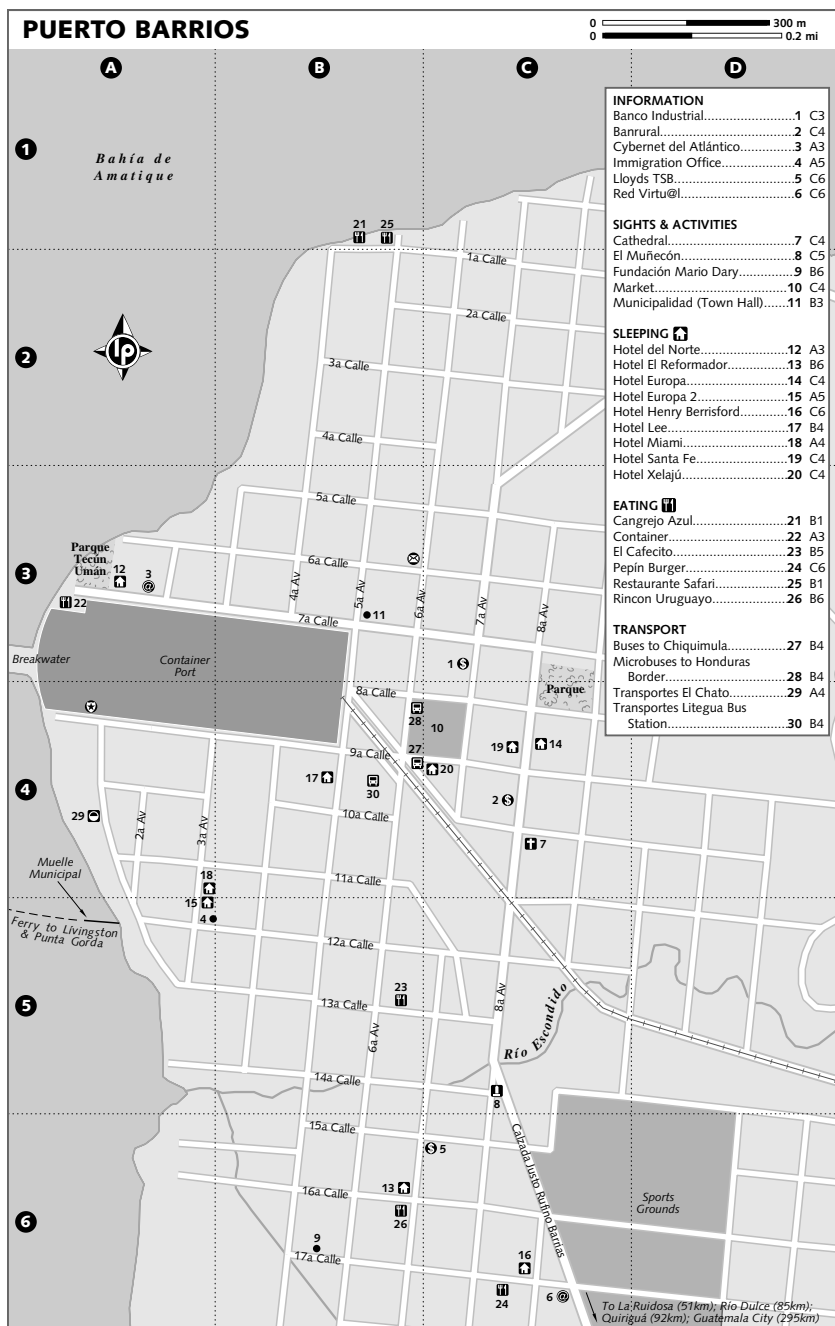
**Red Virtu@l** (cnr 17a Calle & Calz Justo Rufino Barrios; per hr US\$0.80; ☎ 8am-9:30pm) Internet access.

## Sleeping

**Hotel Xelajú** (☎ 7948 0482; 9a Calle; s/d US\$5/8, with bathroom US\$8/14) The Xelajú is right in the town center, between 6a and 7a Avs, facing the market, but it's secure: no rooms are let after 10pm and *'señoritas de clubes nocturnos'* are not allowed. It has clean fan-cooled rooms and its own generator for when the electricity fails.

**Hotel Lee** (☎ 7948 0685; 5a Av; s/d US\$5/9, with bathroom US\$8/14) This is a friendly, family-owned place, between 9a and 10a Calles, close to the bus terminals. The rooms are a bit cramped but clean, and have fans, TV, drinking water and Chinese art.





**Hotel Miami** (☎ 7948 0537; 3a Av; s/d with bathroom US\$5.50/8, with air-con US\$12/24; (P) (☒)) Not bad if you want to save your pennies to spend elsewhere... otherwise a bit grim.

**Hotel Europa** (☎ 7948 0127; 8a Av; s/d US\$7/12; (P)) Not quite up to the standards of the Europa 2 (and they aren't setting the bar that high, either), the Europa, between 8a and 9a Calles, scrapes in thanks to its quiet rooms and firm beds.

**Hotel Europa 2** (☎ 7948 1292; 3a Av; s/d with bathroom US\$8/10; (P)) The best of the budget options in the port area, this hotel, between 11a and 12a Calles, just 1½ blocks from the Muelle Municipal, is run by a friendly family and has clean rooms with fan and TV, arranged around a parking courtyard.

**Hotel Henry Berrisford** (☎ 7948 7289; cnr 9a Av & 17a Calle; s/d with bathroom US\$11/22) A big four-story modern concrete construction offering decent-sized rooms with cable TV. The lobby is an impressive sight and there are plenty of sitting areas scattered around.

**Hotel El Reformador** (☎ 7948 0533; reformador@inetnet.net.gt; cnr 7a Av & 16a Calle; s/d with bathroom US\$13/18.50, with air-con US\$22/28; (P) (☒)) Like a little haven away from the hot busy streets outside, the Reformador offers big, cool rooms set around leafy patios. Air-con rooms lead onto wide interior balconies. There is a restaurant (meals US\$5 to US\$8) here.

**Hotel del Norte** (☎ 7948 2116; 7a Calle; s/d with bathroom US\$16/21; (P) (☒) (☒)) A large, classically tropical wooden construction with mosquito-screened corridors wide enough to run a banana train through, the century-old Hotel del Norte is in a class by itself. Its weathered and warped frame is redolent of history and most of the floorboards go off at crazy angles. In the airy dining room overlooking the Bahía de Amatique you can almost hear the echoing conversation of bygone banana moguls and smell their pungent cigars. Spare, simple and agreeably dilapidated, this is a real museum piece. Meals are served with old-fashioned refinement by white-jacketed waiters, though the food isn't always up to the same standard. Pick a room carefully – some are little more than a wooden box, others have great ocean views and catch good breezes. There's a swimming pool beside the sea.

**Hotel Santa Fe** (☎ 7948 8799; hotelsanta-fe56@hotmail.com; 8a Av; s/d with bathroom US\$30/35; (P) (☒)) Going heavy on the pastels, this hotel's a bit on the twee side, particularly for this town, but

decent midrange options are scarce here. Rooms are spacious enough, with big, clean bathrooms and cable TV. It's located between 8a and 9a Calles.

## Eating

**Pepin Burger** (17a Calle; snacks from US\$2; (☒) closed Tue) Come here, between 8a and 9a Ays, for an almost mind-boggling array of snacks, fajitas, good-value burgers and more serious meals on an open-air upstairs terrace.

**El Cafecito** (13a Calle 6-22; mains US\$4-10; (☒) breakfast, lunch & dinner) This sweet little air-conditioned spot whips up some of the most interesting food in town. Portuguese dishes such as *feijoda* (stewed beans, pork, beef, chicken and other stuff; US\$6) and a good range of seafood and sandwiches.

**Rincon Uruguayo** (cnr 7a Av & 16a Calle; mains US\$4-12; (☒) lunch & dinner) Given that the concepts of 'big' and 'juicy' are so rarely applied to Guatemalan steak, this outdoor eatery comes as a relief. Chorizo, barbecue chicken and *chivitos* (steak sandwiches) are also available.

**Restaurante Safari** (☎ 7948 0563; cnr 1a Calle & 5a Av; seafood US\$6.50-10; (☒) 10am-9pm) The town's most enjoyable restaurant is on a thatch-roofed, open-air platform right over the water about 1km north of the town center. Locals and visitors alike love to eat and catch the sea breezes here. Excellent seafood of all kinds including the specialty *tapado* – that great Garifuna casserole (US\$6.50); chicken and meat dishes are less expensive (US\$3 to US\$6). There's live music most nights. If the Safari is full, the Canjejo Azul next door offers pretty much the same deal, in a more relaxed environment.

**Container** (7a Calle; snacks US\$3; (☒) lunch & dinner) The oddest café in town – made from two shipping containers, at the west end of 7a Calle, with fine bay views, thatched huts out over the water and plenty of cold, cold beer.

## Getting There & Around

### BUS & MINIBUS

**Transportes Litegua** (☎ 7948 1172; cnr 6a Av & 9a Calle) leaves for Guatemala City (US\$7, five to six hours, 295km), via Quiriguá and Río Hondo, 15 times between 1am and noon, and also at 4pm. *Directo* services avoid a half-hour detour into Morales.

Buses for Chiquimula (US\$4, 4½ hours, 192km), also via Quiriguá, leave every half-hour, from 4am to 4pm, from the corner of 6a Av and 9a Calle.

For Río Dulce, take a Chiquimula bus to La Ruidosa junction (US\$1, 50 minutes) and change to a bus or minibus (US\$1, 35 minutes) there.

Minibuses leave for the Honduras frontier (US\$1.30, 1¼ hours) every 20 minutes, from 5:30am to 6pm, from 6a Av outside the market. The paved road to the border turns off Hwy 9 at Entre Ríos, 13km south of Puerto Barrios. Buses and minibuses going in all directions wait for passengers at Entre Ríos, meaning that you can get to or from the border fairly easily, whichever direction you are traveling in. The minibuses from Puerto Barrios stop en route to the border at Guatemalan immigration, where you may be required to pay US\$1.30 for an exit stamp. Honduran entry formalities may leave you US\$1 to US\$3 lighter. Pickups shuttle between the border and the small Honduran town of Corinto, nearby, for about US\$1 (or you can walk the 2km, in about 15 minutes). From Corinto buses leave for Omoa and Puerto Cortés (US\$2.50, two hours) about every two hours. You can continue by bus from Puerto Cortés to San Pedro Sula and from there to La Ceiba, but it's touch and go whether you would make the 3pm ferry from La Ceiba to Roatán island in one day from Puerto Barrios, even if you took the first vehicle out in the morning.

## BOAT

Boats depart from the Muelle Municipal at the end of 12a Calle.

A ferry departs for Livingston (US\$2, 1½ hours) every day at 10am and 5pm. From Livingston, it leaves for Puerto Barrios at 5am and 2pm. Get to the dock from 30 to 45 minutes before departure for a seat, otherwise you could end up standing.

Smaller, faster *lanchas* depart from both sides whenever they have about a dozen people ready to go; they cost US\$4.50 and take 30 minutes.

Most of the movement from Livingston to Puerto Barrios is in the morning, returning in the afternoon. From Livingston, your last chance of the day may be the 2pm ferry, especially during the low season when fewer travelers are shuttling back and forth.

A *lancha* service of **Transportes El Chato** (☎ 7948 5525; 1a Av) departs from the Muelle Municipal at 10am daily for Punta Gorda, Belize (US\$18, one hour), arriving in time for the noon bus from Punta Gorda to Belize City.

Tickets are sold at El Chato's office. Before boarding you also need to get your exit stamp at the nearby immigration office (p257). The return boat leaves Punta Gorda at 4pm.

If you want to leave a car in Puerto Barrios while you visit Livingston for a day or two, hotels such as the Europa 2 (p259) and Miami (p259) provide off-street parking for US\$2.50 to US\$3 a day.

## TAXI

Most cabs charge around US\$3 for ridiculously short rides around town.

## PUNTA DE MANABIQUE

The Punta de Manabique promontory, which separates the Bahía de Manabique from the open sea, along with the coast and hinterland all the way southeast to the Honduran frontier, comprise a large, ecologically fascinating, sparsely populated wetland area. Access to the area, which is under environmental protection as the Área de Protección Especial Punta de Manabique, is not cheap, but the attractions for those who make it there include pristine Caribbean beaches, boat trips through the mangrove forests, lagoons and waterways, bird-watching, fishing with locals, and crocodile and possible manatee sightings. To visit, get in touch – a week in advance, if possible – with the nongovernment organization (NGO) involved in the reserve's management, **Funday** (Fundación Mario Dary; ☎ 7948 0435, in Guatemala City 2232 3230; www.guate.net/fundaymanabique; 17a Calle, Puerto Barrios).

Funday is helping to develop several ecotouristic possibilities in the reserve. It offers accommodation for groups of two to four people at the **Estación Biológica Julio Obiols** (1/2/3 nights per person US\$65/90/115) at the small community of Cabo Tres Puntas on the north side of the promontory, near a lovely beach. The price includes round-trip transportation from Puerto Barrios or Livingston (one hour each way from either place by *lancha*) and meals. Rooms have two to four beds and mosquito nets. If you want a program of trips around the reserve from here, you're looking at a total of about US\$100 per person per day. Another option is **camping** (per person US\$3), at the Estación Biológica or at the small community of Estero Lagarto on the south side of the promontory, or at El Quetzalito near the mouth of the Río Motagua at the eastern end of the reserve. At **Estero Lagarto**, villagers will provide a fresh fish

lunch (US\$3.25) or take you on a boat trip through the lagoons and mangroves (per person US\$7). Accommodations in local homes may become available here for about US\$6.50 per person. A visitors center offering information and meals is located at **Santa Isabel** on the Canal de los Ingleses, a waterway connecting the Bahía de Manabique with the open sea. Canoe trips along the canal are offered as well as fishing with locals and demonstrations of the local charcoal-making process. **El Quetzalito** – about one hour by pickup from Puerto Barrios then half an hour by boat down the Río Motagua – is a good area for bird-watching and crocodile spotting, and for fishing with locals.

If you want to organize your own transportation, a *lancha* from Puerto Barrios or Livingston will cost between US\$65 and US\$125 round-trip depending on the deal you strike. A small boat (four passengers) to Estero Lagarto might be US\$50.

## LIVINGSTON

pop 17,000

Quite unlike anywhere else in Guatemala, this largely Garifuna town is fascinating in itself, but also an attraction for a couple of good beaches, and its location at the end of the river journey from Río Dulce.

Unconnected by road from the rest of the country (the town is called 'Buga' – mouth – in Garifuna, for its position at the river mouth), boat transportation is logically quite good here, and you can get to Belize, the Cayes, Honduras and Puerto Barrios with a minimum of fuss.

The Garifuna (Garinagu, or Black Carib) people of Caribbean Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and southern Belize trace their roots to the Caribbean island of St Vincent, where shipwrecked African slaves mixed with the indigenous Carib in the 17th century. It took the British a long time, and a lot of fighting, to establish colonial control over St Vincent, and when they finally succeeded in 1796 they decided to deport its surviving Garifuna inhabitants. Most of the survivors wound up, after many had starved on Roatán island off Honduras, in the Honduran coastal town of Trujillo. From there, they have spread along the Caribbean coast. Their main concentration in Guatemala is in Livingston but there are also a few thousand in Puerto Barrios and elsewhere. The Garifuna language is a unique

mélange of Caribbean and African languages with a bit of French. Other people in Livingston include the indigenous Q'eqchi' Maya – who have their own community a kilometer or so upriver from the main dock – ladinos and a smattering of international travelers.

## Orientation & Information

Livingston stands where the Río Dulce opens out into the Bahía de Amatique. After being here half an hour, you'll know where everything is. The main street, Calle Principal, heads straight ahead, uphill, from the main dock, curving round to the right at Hotel Río Dulce. The other most important streets head to the left off this: Calle Marcos Sánchez Díaz heading southwest, parallel to the river, to the Q'eqchi' Maya community, and another street leading northwest from the town center to several places to stay, eat and drink. Though we use such street names here for ease of orientation, in reality no one uses them.

Several private businesses around the town will change cash US dollars and traveler's checks.

**Banrural** (Calle Principal; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Changes cash US dollars and traveler's checks. Several private businesses do, too.

**Happy Fish** (Calle Principal; per 30min/hr US\$1.30/2.60) Internet access available.

**Immigration office** (Calle Principal; ☎ 6am-7pm) Issues entry and exit stamps for travelers arriving direct from or going direct to Belize or Honduras, charging US\$10 for exit stamps. Outside business hours, you can knock for attention at any time.

**Labug@net** (Calle Principal; per 30min/hr US\$2/3) Internet access.

**Laundry** (Hotel Casa Rosada; per load US\$4) It can be difficult to get laundry properly dry in the rainy season.

Use mosquito repellent and other sensible precautions here, especially if you go out into the jungle; mosquitoes here on the coast carry both malaria and dengue fever.

## Dangers & Annoyances

Livingston has its edgy aspects and a few hustlers operate here, trying to sweet-talk tourists into 'lending' money, paying up front for tours that don't happen and the like. Take care with anyone who strikes up conversation for no obvious reason on the street or elsewhere.

Like many coastal locations in Guatemala, Livingston is used as a *punte* (bridge) for northbound drug traffic. There's very little in

the way of turf wars, and so on – the industry is fairly stable – but there are some big-time players around, and a lot of money at stake. Keep your wits about you.

The beachfront between Livingston and the Río Quehueueche and Siete Altares had a bad reputation for some years, but locals ‘took care’ of the troublemakers (we don’t really want to know details). It now makes a fine walk, with some great swimming at the end of it. You can go independently or as part of a tour.

## Sights & Activities

The **Museo Multicultural de Livingston** (admission US\$2; ☎ 9am–6pm Tue–Sun), upstairs on the municipal park in front of the public dock, has some excellent displays on the history and culture of the area, focusing on the ethnic diversity, with Garifuna, Q’eqchi, Hindu and Ladino cultures represented. While you’re down here, check out the open-air alligator enclosure in the middle of the park.

Beaches in Livingston itself are disappointing, as buildings or vegetation come right down to the water’s edge in most places. Those beaches that do exist are often contaminated. However, there are

better beaches within a few kilometers to the northwest. You can reach **Playa Quehueueche** by taxi (US\$2) in about 10 minutes: this beach near the mouth of the Río Quehueueche has been cleaned up by Exotic Travel (opposite). The best beach in the area is **Playa Blanca** (admission US\$2), around 12km from Livingston. This is privately owned and you need a boat to get there (see opposite).

## LOS SIETE ALTARES

About 5km (1½-hour walk) northwest of Livingston along the shore of Bahía de Amatique, Los Siete Altares (The Seven Altars) is a series of freshwater falls and pools. It’s a pleasant goal for a beach walk and is a good place for a picnic and swim. Follow the shore northward to the river mouth and walk along the beach until it meets the path into the woods (about 30 minutes). Follow this path all the way to the falls.

Boat trips go to the Seven Altars, but locals say it’s better to walk there to experience the natural beauty and the Garifuna people along the way. About halfway along, next to the rope bridge is **Gaviota’s Restaurant** (mains US\$5–7; ☎ lunch & dinner), serving decent food and ice-cold beers and soft drinks.

## LOCAL VOICES: JORGE LUÍS BALTHAZAR SALDAÑAS, GARIFUNA PERCUSSIONIST

The most easily accessible aspect of Garifuna culture is the music. Heavily influenced by West African rhythms, Garifuna music relies greatly on percussion. We talked to master percussionist Jorge Balthazar about how it is to be a musician in Livingston.

### When did you start playing music?

When I was a kid. My mother’s a music and dance teacher, so I was always around music. I started playing the maraca, then the turtle shell. I still play them, but now I like the *primera* (bass drum) best.

### Where do you play?

Sometimes we play in bars, but mostly we play at parties or at funerals, where we play the dead person’s favorite songs. We also play at festivals, to keep the old songs alive.

### Who writes the songs?

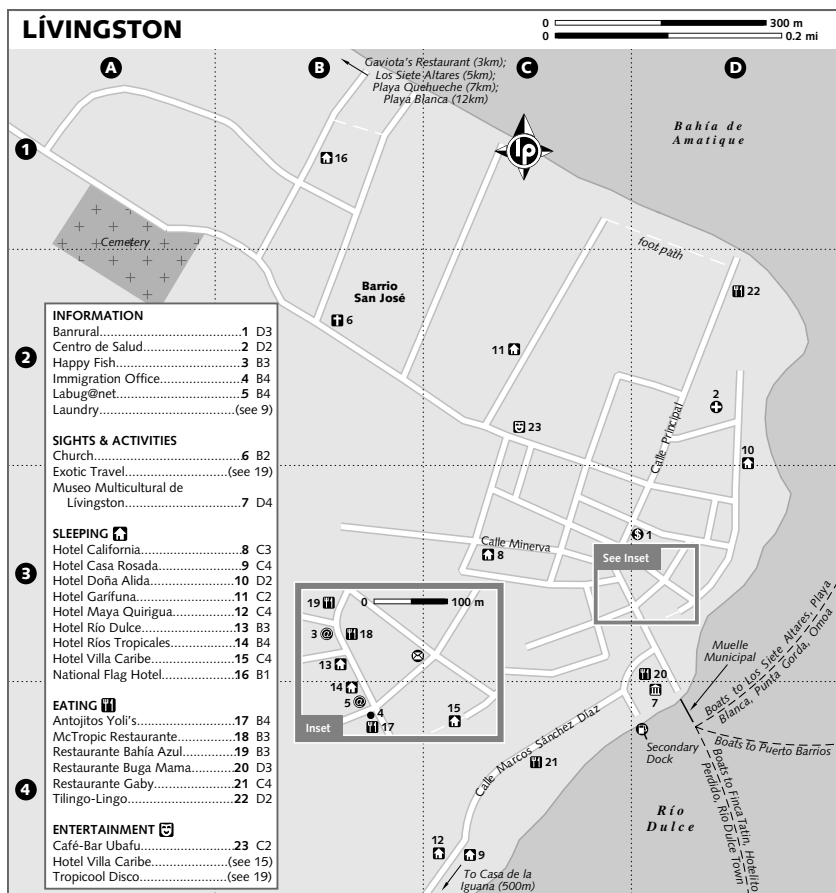
A lot of times, the songs come together very organically – somebody starts playing something, then somebody else joins in. It’s more like a jam session with people listening and coming together than somebody saying ‘OK, let’s sit down and write a song now.’

### Do you go on tour?

We do, but it’s complicated. People get us to play, but then they don’t want to pay us – they say we’re doing what we love, so why do we have to get paid?

### Is Garifuna culture strong in Guatemala?

In some ways it is, but technology means that the culture is changing. Traditionally, we were fishers and farmers – now we’re losing that. The language is another thing. They teach English in schools here, but not Garifuna. A lot of my friends can’t speak Garifuna. Some can read, but not speak, for others it’s the other way around. It’s not that they don’t respect it, just that the opportunities to learn aren’t there.





## RÍO DULCE TOURS

Four agencies in town offer day trips up the Río Dulce to Río Dulce town, as do most local boatmen at the Livingston dock. Many travelers use these tours as one-way transportation to Río Dulce, paying around US\$10. If you want to return to Livingston the cost is US\$15 to US\$18. It's a beautiful ride through tropical jungle scenery, with several places to stop on the way.

Shortly after you leave Livingston, you pass the tributary Río Tatin on the right, then will probably stop at an indigenous arts museum set up by Asociación Ak' Tenamit, an NGO working to improve conditions for the Q'eqchi' Maya population of the area. The river enters a gorge called **La Cueva de la Vaca**, its walls hung with great tangles of jungle foliage and the humid air noisy with the cries of tropical birds. Just beyond that is **La Pintada**, a rock escarpment covered with graffiti. Local legend says people have been tagging this spot since the 1700s, though the oldest in evidence is from the 1950s. If you're lucky, you might spot a freshwater dolphin in these parts. Further on, a **thermal spring** forces sulfurous water out of the base of the cliff, providing a chance for a warm swim. The river widens into **El Golfete**, a lake-like body of water that presages the even vaster expanse of Lago de Izabal further upstream.

On the northern shore of El Golfete is the **Biotopo Chocón Machacas**, a 72-sq-km reserve established within the Parque Nacional Río Dulce to protect the beautiful river landscape, the valuable forests and mangrove swamps and their wildlife, which includes such rare creatures as the tapir and above all the manatee. The huge, walrus-like manatees are aquatic mammals weighing up to a ton, yet they glide effortlessly beneath the calm surface of the river. They are very elusive, however, and the chances of seeing one are very slim. A network of 'water trails' (boat routes around several jungle lagoons) provide ways to see other bird, animal and plant life of the reserve. A nature trail begins at the visitors center (US\$2.50) and winds its way through forests of mahogany, palms and rich tropical foliage.

Boats will probably visit the **Islas de Pájaros**, a pair of islands where thousands of waterbirds live, in the middle of El Golfete. From El Golfete you continue upriver, passing increasing numbers of expensive villas and

boathouses, to the town of Río Dulce, where the soaring Hwy 13 road bridge crosses the river, and on to El Castillo de San Felipe on Lago de Izabal (p254).

You can also do this trip starting from Río Dulce with *colectivo lanchas* (p254).

## Festivals & Events

Livingston is packed with merrymakers during **Semana Santa**. **Garífuna National Day** is celebrated on November 26 with a variety of cultural events.

## Sleeping

### BUDGET

Don't sleep on the beach in Livingston – it isn't safe.

**Hotel Maya Quirigua** (☎ 7947 0674; Calle Marcos Sánchez Díaz; s/d US\$3/6, with bathroom US\$4.50/9) Run by a friendly family, the basic rooms here are good enough for the price. There's a shady garden area and good views from the rooftop. Downstairs rooms are a bit grim.

**Hotel Río Dulce** (☎ 7947 0764; Calle Principal; r per person US\$4, with bathroom US\$6) This authentic Caribbean two-story wood-frame building has bare but clean wooden rooms, in various colors, with fans. The wide verandas are great for watching the street life and catching a breeze, and the food in the restaurant below (mains from US\$4) is superb.

**Casa de la Iguana** (☎ 7947 0064; Calle Marcos Sánchez Díaz; dm US\$4.50, s/d with bathroom US\$8/13) Five minutes' walk from the main dock, this newcomer has some of the best-value cabins in the country. They're clean, wooden affairs, with simple but elegant decoration. Happy hour here rocks on and you can camp for US\$2 per person.

**Hotel California** (☎ 7947 0178/6; Calle Minerva; s/d with bathroom US\$6/8) Down a quiet street, the California offers good, basic rooms on the 2nd floor (ones on the 1st floor are a little stuffy). There's an OK restaurant and some shady places to hang out.

**Hotel Ríos Tropicales** (☎ 7947 0158; www.mctropic.com; Calle Principal; s/d US\$7/14, with bathroom US\$13/25) The Ríos Tropicales has a variety of big, well-screened rooms facing a central patio with plenty of hammocks and chill-out space. Rooms with shared bathroom are bigger, but others are better decorated.

**Hotel Garífuna** (☎ 7947 0183; Barrio San José; s/d with bathroom US\$7/10) About a five-minute walk from the main street, these big breezy rooms are a

solid budget choice. Beds are good, bathrooms are spotless and the folks are friendly.

**National Flag Hotel** (☎ 7947 0247; Barrio San José; s/d with bathroom US\$8) The big tiled rooms here are an excellent deal, even if the location is a bit remote. There are good views from the shady rooftop terrace.

### MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Hotel Casa Rosada** (☎ 7947 0303; www.hotelcasarosada.com; Calle Marcos Sánchez Díaz; r US\$20) The Casa Rosada (Pink House) is an attractive place to stay right on the river, 500m upstream from the main dock; it has its own pier where boats will drop you if you ask. The charming little wooden cabins are jammed up against each other, so there's not much privacy. But the garden area is pretty and the restaurant (mains from US\$5) has great views out over the water. The shared bathrooms are very clean. Also available are a laundry service and tours.

**Hotel Doña Alida** (☎/fax 7947 0027; s/d with bathroom US\$27/40; 🚽) In a great position just above the sea a few blocks from the center of town, the Doña Alida has a variety of rooms spread out over the cliff face. They're big and airy, with some charming decorations. As far as atmosphere goes, it's one of the best places to stay in town.

**Hotel Villa Caribe** (☎ 7947 0072; www.hotelvillacaribe.guatemala.com; Calle Principal; s/d US\$71/87, bungalows s/d US\$85/95; 🚽 📺 📺) The 45-room Villa Caribe is a luxurious anomaly among Livingston's laid-back, low-priced Caribbean lodgings. Modern but still Caribbean in style, it has many conveniences and comforts, including extensive tropical gardens, a big swimming pool and a large poolside bar. Rooms are fairly large, with modern bathrooms, ceiling fans and little balconies overlooking the gardens and river mouth.

### Eating

Food in Livingston is relatively expensive because most of it (except fish and coconuts) must be brought in by boat. There's fine seafood here and some unusual flavors for Guatemala, including coconut and curry. *Tapado*, a rich stew made from fish, shrimp, shellfish and coconut milk, spiced with coriander, is the delicious local specialty. A potent potable is made by slicing off the top of a green coconut and mixing in a healthy dose of rum. These *coco locos* hit the spot.

Calle Principal is dotted with many open-air eateries.

**Anojitos Yoli's** (Calle Principal; items US\$0.50-2; ☎ 8am-5pm) This is the place to come for baked goods. Especially recommended are the coconut bread and pineapple pie.

**Restaurante Gaby** (Calle Marcos Sánchez Díaz; mains US\$3-5; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) For a good honest feed in underwhelming surrounds, you can't go past Gaby's. She serves up the good stuff: lobster, tapado, rice and beans and good breakfasts at good prices. The *telenovelas* (soap operas) come free.

**McTropic Restaurante** (Calle Principal; mains US\$4-10; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Some of the best-value seafood dishes in town are on offer at this laid-back little place. Grab a table streetside for people-watching and sample some of the good Thai cooking.

**Tilingo-Lingo** (Calle Principal; mains US\$5-10; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) An intimate little place down near the beach. It advertises food from 10 countries, and makes a pretty good job of it, with the Italian and East Indian dishes being the standouts.

**Restaurante Bahía Azul** (Calle Principal; mains US\$6-12; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The Bahía's central location, happy decor and good fresh food keep it popular. The menu's wide, with a good mix of Caribbean, Guatemalan and Asian influences. It opens early for breakfast.

**Restaurante Buga Mama** (Calle Marcos Sánchez Díaz; mains US\$8-11; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This place enjoys the best location of any restaurant in town, and profits go to the Asociación Ak Tenemit. There's a wide range of seafood and other dishes on the menu, including a very good *tapado* (US\$9). Most of the waiters here are trainees in a community sustainable tourism development scheme, so service can be sketchy, but forgivable.

### Drinking

Adventurous drinkers should try *guifiti*, a local concoction made from coconut rum, often infused with herbs. It's said to have medicinal as well as recreational properties.

A handful of bars down on the beach to the left of the end of Calle Principal pull in travelers and locals at night (after about 10pm or 11pm). It's very dark down here, so take care. The bars are within five minutes' walk from each other, so you should go for a wander and see what's happening. Music ranges from punta to salsa, merengue and

electronica. Things warm up on Friday but Saturday is the party night – often going 'til 5am or 6am.

Happy hour is pretty much an institution along the main street, with every restaurant getting in on the act. One of the best is at **Casa de la Iguala** (Calle Marcos Sánchez Díaz).

## Entertainment

A traditional Garífuna band is composed of three large drums, a turtle shell, some maracas and a big conch shell, producing throbbing, haunting rhythms and melodies. The chanted words are like a litany, with responses often taken up by the audience. *Punta* is the Garífuna dance; it's got a lot of gyrating hip movements.

Quite often a roaming band will play a few songs for diners along the Calle Principal around dinnertime. If you like the music, make sure to sling them a few bucks. Several places around town have live Garífuna music, although schedules are unpredictable.

**Café-Bar Ubafu** Probably the most dependable. Supposedly has music and dancing nightly, but liveliest on weekends.

**Hotel Villa Caribe** Diners can enjoy a Garífuna show each evening at 7pm.

**Tropicool Disco** Next door to the Restaurante Bahía Azul, this is a small mainstream disco that sometimes pulls a crowd.

## Getting There & Away

Frequent boats come downriver from Río Dulce (p254) and across the bay from Puerto Barrios (p260). There are also international boats from Honduras and Belize.

Exotic Travel (p263) operates combined boat and bus shuttles to La Ceiba (the cheapest gateway to Honduras' Bay Islands) for US\$45 per person, with a minimum of six people. Leaving Livingston at 7:30am or earlier will get you to La Ceiba in time for the boat to the islands, making it a one-day trip, which is nearly impossible to do independently.

There's also a boat that goes direct to Punta Gorda on Tuesday and Friday at 7am (US\$20, one hour), leaving from the public dock. In Punta Gorda, the boat connects with a bus to Placencia and Belize City. The boat waits for this bus to arrive from Placencia before it sets off back for Livingston from Punta Gorda at about 10:30am.

If you are taking one of these early international departures, get your exit stamp from immigration in Livingston (see p261) the day before.

## AROUND LIVINGSTON

**Hotelito Perdido** (☎ 5725 1576; www.hotelitoperdido.com; dm US\$4, bungalows s/d US\$17/20), a beautiful new place a five-minute boat ride from Finca Tatin, is run by a couple of young travelers. The

### CATCH THE RHYTHM OF THE GARÍFUNA

Livingston is the heartland of Guatemala's Garífuna community, and it won't take too long before you hear some of their distinctive music. A Garífuna band generally consists of three drums (the *primera* takes the bass part, the other two play more melodic functions), a shaker or maraca, a turtle shell (hit like a cowbell) and a conch shell (blown like a flute).

The lyrics are often call and response – most often sung in Garífuna (a language with influences from Arawak, French and West African languages) but sometimes composed in Spanish. Most songs deal with themes from village life – planting time, harvests, things that happen in the village, honoring the dead and folktales of bad sons made good. Sometimes they simply sing about the beauty of the village.

Traditional Garífuna music has given birth to an almost bewildering array of musical styles, among them Punta Rock, Jugujugu, Calachumba, Jajankanu, Chumba, Saranda, Sambé and Parranda.

There are many local groups who play in Livingston, the best known of which are Ubafu, Gayuza, Ibimani and Zugará. Unlike some of Belize's Garífuna musicians, no musician from Livingston has ever become famous in the 'outside world.'

Punta Rock is by far the most widely known adaptation of traditional Garífuna rhythms, and you can hear 'Punta' in most discos throughout Central America. The dance that accompanies it (also called *punta*) is a frenzied sort of affair, following the nature of the percussion. The left foot swivels back and forth while the right foot taps out the rhythm. Perhaps coincidentally, this movement causes the hips to shake wildly, leading some observers to comment on the sexual nature of the dance.

ambience is superb – relaxed and friendly. The whole place is solar powered and constructed in such a way as to cause minimal impact on the environment. The two-story bungalows are gorgeous – simple yet well decorated, with a sleeping area upstairs and a small sitting area downstairs. At the time of writing, there were three (so book ahead!), with plans to construct one more. You can organize many of the activities available at Finca Tatin (see below) from here as well. Call to get picked up from Livingston (US\$4) or get dropped off by any boat going between there and Río Dulce.

**Finca Tatin** (☎ 5902 0831; [www.fincatatin.centramerica.com](http://www.fincatatin.centramerica.com); dm US\$5, s/d US\$8/13, with bathroom US\$15/20), a wonderful, rustic B&B at the confluence of Ríos Dulce and Tatin, about 10km from Livingston, is a great place for experiencing the forest. Four-hour guided walks and kayak

trips, some visiting local Q'eqchi' villages, are offered. Accommodation is in funky wood-and-thatched cabins scattered through the jungle. There are trails, waterfalls and endless river tributaries that you can explore with one of the *cayucos* available for guest use (US\$10 per day). Guided night walks through the jungle offer views of elusive nightlife, and cave tours are good for swimming and soaking in a natural sauna. You can walk to Livingston from here in about four hours, or take a kayak and staff from Finca Tatin will come pick you up (US\$13).

*Lanchas* traveling between Río Dulce and Livingston (or vice versa) will drop you here. It costs around US\$4 from Livingston, 20 minutes away. Or the *finca* may be able to send its own *lancha* to pick you up at Livingston (per person US\$4, minimum two people).