

Coclé Province



Coclé – land of sugar, salt and presidents. More sugar has been refined in this province, more salt has been produced here, and more Panamanian presidents have been born in Coclé than in any other province. These are facts in which the people of Coclé take great pride, but the province isn't just about political legacies and table condiments.

Coclé boasts a medley of landscapes from abandoned coastlines to towering cloud forests, with vast agricultural and pastoral land in between. Edging along the Pacific Ocean, the province is home to a couple of attractive beaches that see their fair share of weekend warriors from Panama City. Edging along the highlands is the mountain town of El Valle, a popular rural retreat. Away from the coast, but not quite into the foothills, is Penonomé, Coclé's bustling provincial capital and the best place in the country to shop for authentic Panama hats.

Often overlooked by travelers, Coclé lacks the stellar beaches of Bocas del Toro, the pristine national parks of Chiriquí and the cultural heritage of the Península de Azuero. However, although you certainly shouldn't miss out on Panama's top attractions, a visit to Coclé will provide you with an authentic off-the-beaten-path trip that is experienced by few travelers.

As not to disappoint those of you whose breath quickened at the earlier mention of salt and sugar, it *is* possible to tour a huge sugar refinery here, and you *can* look out upon salt flats all day. And of course, both can be enjoyed at mealtime, either as sweetener for a cup of Panama's finest or to bring out the flavors of a plate of hearty rice and beans.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Walking to waterfalls and cruising the handicrafts market in the highland retreat of **El Valle** (see opposite)
- Eating a whole fresh fish seaside and cruising the endless sands around **Playa Blanca** (p129)
- Shopping for an authentic Panama hat in the regional capital of **Penonomé** (boxed text, p132)
- Hiking through dense rainforest in the little-visited **Parque Nacional Omar Torrijos** (p133)
- Enjoying a wild panorama of peaks and spa pampering at **Posada Cerro La Vieja** (p133)



■ POPULATION: 235,241

■ AREA: 6075 SQ KM

■ ELEVATION: 1626M

EL VALLE

pop 6900

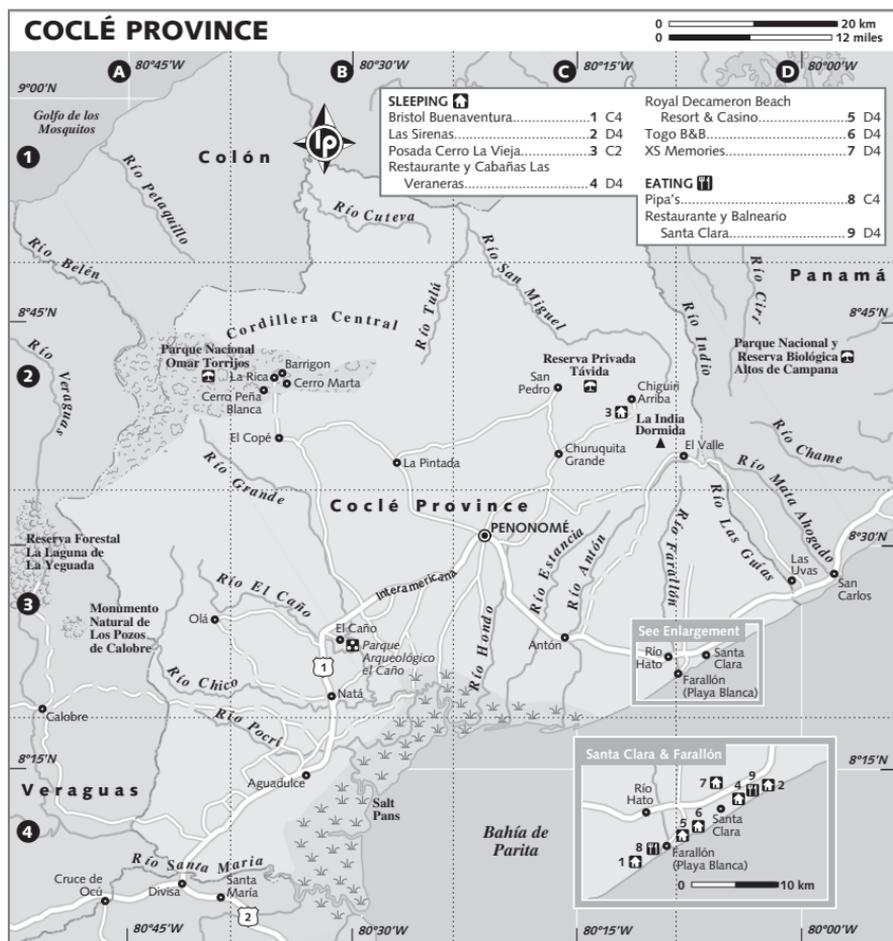
Officially known as El Valle de Antón, this picturesque town is nestled in the crater of a giant extinct volcano, and ringed by verdant forests and jagged peaks. Like the town of Boquete in Chiriquí (p188), El Valle is a popular weekend getaway for urbanites in need of a little fresh air and scenery. It's a superb place for walking, hiking or horseback riding, especially since there is an extensive network of trails leading from the town into the hills and around the valley. Nature lovers, and bird-watchers in particular, won't be disappointed – the nearby forests offer excellent bird-watching, and the valleys of El Valle are home to an impressive set of waterfalls as well as some rare golden frogs.

History

Three million years ago, this volcano erupted with such force that it blew off its top, creating a crater 5km across – one of the largest in the Americas. In the eons that followed, the crater gradually filled with rainwater to create a large lake. However, through erosion or collapse, a breach opened at the present site of Chorro de Las Mozas and the entire lake drained. The resulting flood created an extensive network of waterways, which attracted indigenous populations to the valley. Today, their early petroglyphs can still be seen throughout the valley.

Orientation

The road that heads north to El Valle from the Interamericana becomes Av Central once it hits



the eastern edge of the valley. Av Central is El Valle's main street, along which are numerous hotels and restaurants and most of the town's businesses. Many of the roads branching off Av Central lead to yet more hotels and restaurants.

Av Central ends west of the center of town. Here you can turn right and proceed 100m or so until the road forks. The branch to the left – Calle La Reforma – reaches the Cabañas Potosí after about 800m. The branch to the right – Calle del Macho – leads to the canopy tour, a waterfall and to some petroglyphs.

Information

ATP (☎ 983-6474; Av Central s/n) Operates a small information booth at the center of town next to the handicrafts market, though it is rarely staffed.

Banco Nacional de Panama (Av Central) Has an ATM.
Centro de Salud de El Valle (☎ 983-6112; Av Central s/n; ♿ 24hr) For your health needs, turn to this clinic near the western end of Av Central.

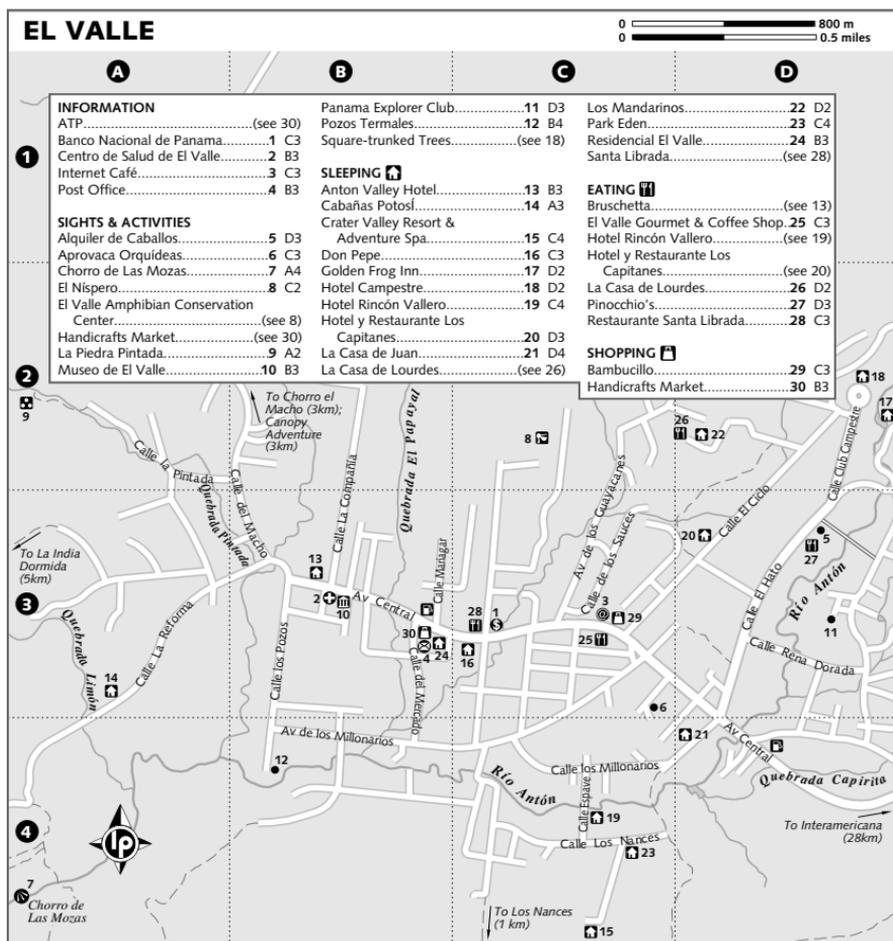
Internet cafe (Av Central; per hr US\$1; ♿ 8am-6:30pm Mon-Sat, 10:30am-2pm Sun) On the main road.

Post office (Calle del Mercado; ♿ 8am-4pm) Behind the handicrafts market.

Sights

WATERFALLS

Some of the biggest attractions of El Valle are the handful of waterfalls that cascade down the surrounding hillsides into the valley floor. The most accessible of these is the **Chorro de las Mozas** (Young Women's Falls), which is located about 1km outside the southwest corner of



town. This is the original site where the prehistoric lake breached to form these scenic cascades. Though the access is not well marked, these winding cascades with deep pools are gorgeous. It's popular with locals enjoying El Valle's year-round near-perfect spring weather.

The most famous waterfall in the El Valle area is the 85m-high **Chorro El Macho** (Manly Falls; admission US\$3.50; ☒ dawn-dusk), which is located a few kilometers north of town near the entrance to the canopy tour. As its somewhat humorous name implies, this towering waterfall is more dramatic than its dainty counterpart, and makes for some excellent photographs. Here below the falls, you'll find a large swimming pool made of rocks, surrounded by rainforest and fed by river water. There is also a series of short hiking trails here that wind into the surrounding forest.

For an unforgettable aerial view of El Macho, El Valle's famed canopy tour is a truly hair-raising experience – for more information, see p124.

ROCK PAINTINGS

Located in the northwestern corner of the valley, **La Piedra Pintada** (Colored Stone) is a huge boulder adorned with pre-Columbian carvings. Locals often fill in the grooves of the petroglyphs with chalk to facilitate their viewing, but their meaning isn't clearer. That doesn't prevent children from giving their interpretation of the petroglyphs for US\$2 (in Spanish only).

One of these interpreters, Seneida Milena Rivera, says she learned the 'story of the rock' at school. Amid a 10-minute explanation of the graffiti-like carvings, she takes her bamboo pointing stick and identifies an x carved into the rock. It represents the burial site of a powerful chief who died many centuries ago, she says. 'The site moos like a cow every time it rains,' she adds.

The trail to the rock is well worn and easy to do without a guide. But due to thefts from vehicles left near the trail entrance, it's best to come by bus even if you've got your own wheels. The site can be reached by a yellow school bus with 'Pintada' above the windshield. It passes along Av Central every 30 minutes, from 6am to 7pm (US\$0.25 one way).

HANDICRAFTS MARKET

El Valle is home to one of Panama's largest **handicrafts market** (Av Central; ☒ 8am-6pm), which was completely renovated in 2007. Mostly Ngöbe-Buglé, but also some Emberá and

PANAMA'S NATIONAL FLOWER

While hiking through the forests around El Valle, be sure to look for Panama's national flower, a terrestrial orchid known as the *flor del espíritu santo* or the 'holy ghost orchid.' This stunning flower, which was given its unforgettable name by Spanish missionaries during the colonial era, is perfectly shaped like a red-spotted dove emerging from ivory petals.

The flower is most commonly found along the forest floor beside a trail, but it can also be found growing on the branches of large trees. The orchid blooms from July to October, and has an unforgettable aroma. Please do not pick the flowers or dig up the bulbs as the holy ghost orchid is threatened by overharvesting throughout its range due to its aesthetic and cultural value.

Wounaan, bring a variety of handicrafts to sell to tourists (most of whom are Panamanians from the capital). If you're self-catering, the market also stocks a good selection of fresh produce from around the country. Although the market runs every day, stop by on Sunday for the full-on affair.

One of the most popular items up for sale in the markets are *bateas*, which are large trays carved from a local hardwood and used by the Ngöbe-Buglé for tossing rice and corn. You can also find figurines, colorful baskets made from palms, gourds painted in brilliant colors, clay flowerpots, Panama hats, and birdcages made of sticks.

ZOO

About 1km north of Av Central is a zoo named **El Nispero** (☎ 983-6142; adult/child US\$2/1; ☒ 7am-5pm). If you're sensitive to caged animals, you should probably skip this one. With that said, El Nispero is one of the best places for seeing Panama's golden frogs (*ranas doradas*). These endangered amphibians are unbelievably striking in color, and extremely photogenic. They are also one of Panama's most important cultural symbols, and have long been revered by the indigenous peoples of the country. Unfortunately, they are extremely sensitive to human intrusion and climate change, so as their numbers continue to deplete, it's increasingly unlikely that you'll see them in the wild.

More a conservation center than a zoo, the excellent **El Valle Amphibian Conservation Center** (EVACC; ☎ 6676-8094; www.houstonzoo.org/amphibians) was created in conjunction with the Houston Zoo to save amphibians from a deadly virus currently threatening them around the world. Run by a dedicated team of conservationists, the center exhibits native Panamanian species and, in particular, the golden frog. The research area is private and devoted to quarantine, treatment and captive breeding efforts. It is located in the grounds of El Nispero.

HOT SPRINGS

Located on the west side of town (follow the signs), **Pozos Termales** (Thermal Baths; Calle los Pozos; admission US\$1; ☎ 8am-5pm) is the perfect place to soak the afternoon away. In a remote, forested area, the recently renovated complex features a series of pools with varying temperatures and supposed curative properties. After your bath, there is an area (a bucket, to be more precise) for applying healing mud to your skin. The next step is to take the requisite photo or two, and then head to the showers to rinse off. If you're looking to detox or simply scrub down, this is the perfect place.

MUSEO DE EL VALLE

On the eastern side of El Valle's conspicuous church is the very modest **Museo de El Valle** (Av Central; admission US\$0.25; ☎ 10am-2pm Mon-Sat), which contains exhibits of petroglyphs and ceramics left by the indigenous peoples who lived in the area hundreds of years ago. There is also some religious art (the museum is owned by the church next door), mostly statues of Christ and the Virgin, as well as some historical and geological information on El Valle's volcano.

SQUARE-TRUNKED TREES

People who stand to gain from increased tourism to the area like to mention El Valle's *árboles cuadrados* (square-trunked trees), which can be found directly behind the Hotel Campestre. After a short 10-minute hike through the forest, you'll come across a thicket of trees that aren't exactly round, but they're not exactly square, either. You might want to see them for yourself and then ponder, 'What's the big deal even if they are square?'

GARDENS

For the best selection of *orquídeas* (orchids) in the area, visit the pleasant **Aprovaca Orquídeas**

(admission free; ☎ 9am-4pm). Some 32 volunteers work to maintain the lovely flowers inside the greenhouse and the grounds, and they welcome visitors to show off the 96 varieties of orchids cultivated – it's well worth a visit. Look for the 'Orquídeas' sign on the way into town.

Activities

HIKING

Ringed by 1000m-tall mountains, and surrounded by humid cloud forest, El Valle is a hiker's paradise. From the town center, an extensive network of trails radiates out into the valley and up into the hills, and there are possibilities for anything from short day hikes to overnight excursions.

Serious trekkers should consider excursions to the tops of Cerro Cara Coral, Cerro Gaital and Cerro Pajita to the north, Cerro Guacamayo to the south, and Cerro Tagua to the east.

It's also possible to make an ascent to the top of **La India Dormida**, where there are well-defined, safe trails. In local myth, the 'Sleeping Indian' was a local maiden who fell in love with a conquistador. After her father refused to allow their marriage she took her own life. She was buried in the hills, which eventually took the shape of the mountain rising over the valley. Legend has it that she is awaiting the day when her forbidden love can be pursued.

For the most part, the valley floor has been cleared for agricultural and pastoral land, though the peaks remain covered in dense forest. Although it is possible to hike independently, trails are not always clearly marked, and it is recommended that you seek out local advice before hitting the trails.

CANOPY TOURS

Although canopy tours are about as prevalent as rice and beans in Costa Rica, they're still quite new to the Panama tourist scene. For the uninitiated, a canopy tour consists of a series of platforms anchored into the forest canopy that are connected by zip lines. Although they were originally used by biologists to study the rainforest canopy, today they function primarily as a way for gringos to get their eco-kicks.

The **Canopy Adventure** (☎ in El Valle 983-6547, in Panama City 612-9176; canopy ride US\$53; ☎ 8am-4pm) uses cable zip lines to take harnessed riders whizzing through the rainforest dozens of meters above the jungle floor. You'll ride from

one platform to another (there are four in all), at times gliding over Chorro El Macho.

Although its ecological merit is somewhat questionable, there's no denying the rush you'll get as you soar through the air with your legs flailing to and fro. Of course, unless you like to expose your private parts to strangers, don't do this in a dress or short shorts.

BIRD-WATCHING

The forests around El Valle offer numerous opportunities for bird-watching, especially if you're looking for hummingbirds – commonly spotted species include the green hermit, the violet-headed hummingbird and the white-tailed emerald.

Rates for a bilingual naturalist guide are around US\$60 per person per day. To hire a naturalist guide, see p296. A reputable locally based guide is **Mario Urriola** (☎ 6569-2676).

HORSEBACK RIDING

Near the Hotel Campestre you'll see a sign for **Alquiler de Caballos** (☎ 646-5813; horse rental per hr US\$7), with a horse mural painted on the side of a building. The stable here has over 30 horses, which make for some fine transportation to explore the nearby mountains. Guides speak Spanish only. Call ahead for free transport from your hotel.

Tours

Based at Crater Valley Resort, the **Panama Explorer Club** (☎ 983-6939; www.pexclub.com) is an

adventure tourism outfit that offers a wide range of activities. Available tours include hiking La India Dormida (US\$20 per person, three to four hours), climbing and rappelling (US\$20 per person, three to four hours), river kayaking (US\$36 per person) and mountain-biking tours (US\$10 to US\$15 per person).

Sleeping

Although reservations are generally not necessary, be advised that El Valle can get busy on weekends and on national holidays as urban dwellers flee the capital and head for the hills.

Due to the chilly climate, all of the rooms in El Valle have hot-water showers.

BUDGET

La Casa de Juan (☎ 6453-9775; www.lacasadepanama.blogspot.com; Calle Cocorron No 4; dm/d US\$10/20) This bare-bones Sanford and Son setup brims with the clutter of ATV vehicles, outdoor weight-lifting equipment and wagon wheels, but it is the sole hostel-style option that's passable. Though decrepit, the house is clean and Señor Juan is a social host also offering guided walks.

Cabañas Potosí (☎ 983-6181; Calle La Reforma; campsite US\$10, r US\$30, 4-person cabin US\$43; (P)) A great option for a peaceful sleep, Cabañas Potosí is situated about 1.5km west of the town center. These peaceful, parklike grounds offer lovely views of the craggy ridges ringing the valley. The four stand-alone wooden cabins with stone columns and Adirondack chairs have

GOLDEN FROG REFUGE

A symbol of good fortune since pre-Columbian times, the golden frog is also an icon of Panama's incredible wildlife. Then one day these already rare frogs started to disappear. It turned out that kitrid, a deadly microscopic fungus, was the culprit. The problem was not just local. The fungus has reached epidemic levels on five continents, decimating the population of not only frogs but also toads and salamanders.

The fungus enters the animals by infecting their skin cells. Since kitrid kills over 90% of the creatures that it comes into contact with, it would seem that there's little to be done. But scientists have found that, while it cannot be prevented in the wild, kitrid is effectively treated in captivity.

The disease has brought these creatures dangerously close to extinction. With collaboration from the Houston Zoo, the **El Valle Amphibian Conservation Center** (EVACC; www.houstonzoo.org/amphibians) set about collecting all the frogs they could find to protect those that weren't already infected and heal those that were. It was the biggest amphibian rescue mission in anyone's memory.

At first the frogs were homeless, since a research center was yet to be constructed. Luckily, a high-end hotel in El Valle volunteered to house them in the meantime (we won't speculate on the room-service bills). Now the amphibians have their own home, where scientists and volunteers work around the clock taking care of them and researching their condition.

EVACC features educational exhibits and houses 40 species. To visit, see listing on opposite page.

two beds apiece with en suite. Campers have level ground and a rushing stream nearby.

Santa Librada (☎ 6591-9135; Av Central; d US\$15) Behind the popular restaurant, a passageway leads to three basic but clean doubles, adding another much-needed value option ideal for couples.

MIDRANGE

Don Pepe (☎ 983-6425; hoteldonpepe@hotmail.com; Av Central; s/d US\$35/45; ☎ 📺 📶) Located next door to Residencial El Valle, the recently renovated Don Pepe offers bright rooms (those on the 3rd floor are best) with new tiled baths, firm mattresses and crafts touches. A sprawling roof deck with hammocks is great for a siesta or stargazing. There's also wi-fi and an onsite internet cafe.

Residencial El Valle (☎ 983-6536; residencialevalle@hotmail.com; Av Central; d/tr/q US\$44/55/66; ☎) Visitors become loyalists, given the high level of service offered at this motel-style lodging. This long-standing hotel offers clean no-fuss rooms and like the nearly identical Don Pepe next door, it has a nice roof deck and bike rentals. Attached is a popular restaurant.

Hotel y Restaurante Los Capitanes (☎ 983-6080; Calle El Cido; s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$44/66/99; ☎ 📶) Owned and managed by a former captain in the German merchant marine, this spick-and-span destination runs like a well-oiled ship. With excellent valley views, octagonal rooms have firm beds, leatherwork tables and spacious hot-water bathrooms. Amenities include an excellent restaurant and a kiddie pool for the little ones.

Los Nances (☎ 983-6126; Calle El Nance; d incl breakfast US\$50; ☎ 📺) This secluded private residence sits high above the valley floor and offers lovely views of the surrounding hillsides. When we visited, Los Nances was under extensive renovations – its prices should rise to match the area B&B competition upon opening. It's best to phone ahead to let them know you're coming, and it's not a bad idea to ask for directions since the house can be a bit tricky to find.

Anton Valley Hotel (☎ 983-6097; www.antonvalleyhotel.com; Av Central; d/ste US\$68/88; ☎ 📺 📶) More like a home away from home, this friendly main-street inn sprints the extra mile for its guests. Renovated rooms have high-quality linens and orthopedic mattresses, plus original details like bamboo beds and stonework. Breakfasts are not included, but are sure to

satisfy, with a tasty range from crispy Belgian waffles and fruit plates to egg dishes named for their fans and creators. Owners and staff are easily accessible and provide excellent information on local attractions and day trips.

Golden Frog Inn (☎ 983-6117; www.goldenfroginn.com; ste incl breakfast US\$77-121; ☎ 📺 📶) This deluxe lodge is the perfect place to luxuriate after a long day of play. Start with the swimming pool and migrate to the open-air living spaces and gorgeous library. Privacy and serenity come first, though the American owners do know how to pamper. An amazing five-course breakfast starts the day. Stroll the expansive grounds to check out the exquisite flora and fauna, including orchids and a cinnamon tree. Massages are organized onsite and adjoining trails mean you can hike right out the hotel door.

Hotel Campestre (☎ 983-6146; www.hotelcampestre.com; Calle Club Campestre; d US\$80; ☎ 📺) Dating from the 1920s, the oldest hotel in town is a rustic affair in a lovely rural setting with forested walking paths. The hotel is clearly in transition. The main building has been removed, leaving a series of ample motel-style rooms that are clean but admittedly dated. Look for new developments, since it is rare to find a locally owned and socially conscious hotel. When the kitrid fungus threatened to wipe out all local amphibians, the hotel volunteered to temporarily house the golden frogs that scientists were able to save. Be assured that their stay in Room 29 is long over, and no one orders crickets by room service anymore.

Hotel Rincón Valleró (☎ 983-6175; www.rinconvalleró.com; Calle Espave; d incl breakfast US\$92, ste incl breakfast US\$116-152; ☎ 📺) Centered on a flower-ringed pond, a handful of cabins are decked in satin bedcovers and knick-knacky style. Guests can take advantage of the sauna, spa bath and swimming pool, though we have no idea what to make of the rabbit hutches. In the main building, you'll find a relaxed restaurant (see opposite) serving an eclectic mix of food as well as several sitting areas overlooking the gardens.

TOP END

Park Eden (☎ 938-6167; www.parkedn.com; Calle El Nance; d incl breakfast US\$110, 2-/4-person cabin incl breakfast US\$143/165, 5-person house US\$247; ☎ 📺) A beautiful country retreat run by an American-trained designer and his Ecuadorean wife, this gorgeous home offers three tastefully appointed rooms, plus a separate two-story house, a cottage and a little room behind the cottage. Regardless

of which room you choose, the friendly couple and their gardens are simply a delight. Breakfast includes the option for waffles, *carimañolas* (yucca roll with chopped meat and boiled eggs), eggs and bacon, fruit and juices. Bikes are available for US\$2.50 per hour.

Crater Valley Resort & Adventure Spa (☎ 215-2330; www.crater-valley.com; d incl breakfast from US\$128; 📍 🚶 🏊 🛏) With offerings like rock climbing, guided rainforest hikes, a swimming pool and spa, Crater Valley caters to everyone from the active to the inert. Surrounded by beautifully tended grounds, guest rooms are all different and executed with varying degrees of care – some have peeling paint and dated fixtures. All feature hammock patios. Prices fluctuate depending on the time of year, the day of the week and the size of the room, so it's best to book ahead.

Los Mandarinos (☎ 983-6645; www.losmandarinos.com; d US\$138-171, ste US\$226; 📍 🚶 🏊 🛏) In El Valle's lush countryside, these Tuscan villas target your desire to rejuvenate while lounging around a sumptuous setting. Winding walkways link imposing stone and Spanish tile lodgings, though they look slightly better at a distance. Some weathering might do this place good. Modern rooms are decked in finery, some with king-sized beds, oversized tiles and stone baths. The fountain of youth concept follows through with a ritzy 'anti-aging' spa (though strangely not with the Irish pub). Guests are split between those making the health pilgrimage and well-to-do families on vacation.

La Casa de Lourdes (☎ 983-6450; d US\$150-200) A classic country villa, insulated by fields that make it quiet and secluded, this is the real deal. Though service can be uneven, La Casa is a unique small-scale offering. Four rooms have modern styles, including playful animal prints and oversized photos. Bathrooms feature bathtubs. Best booked in advance, it's located past the grounds of Los Mandarinos, near the restaurant of the same name.

Eating

Restaurante Santa Librada (Av Central; mains US\$2-4.50) Cheap and cheerful, the Santa serves hearty portions of Panamanian staples such as *lomo de arroz* (beef with rice) and *bistec picado* (spicy shredded beef), as well as sandwiches and breakfast. Try the *sancocho de gallina* (a stewlike chicken soup); it's locally famous.

Pinocchio's (☎ 983-6975; Av Central; pizzas US\$3-8; 📍 🕒 11am-9pm Thu-Sun) This much-loved pizzeria

is the best spot in El Valle for pizza pies with a range of toppings. You can also get rotisserie-cooked chicken or meaty burgers, and save room for the tasty lemon pie.

Bruschetta (Av Central; bruschetta US\$3.50-13; 📍 🕒 11am-10pm Wed-Mon) A good bet, Bruschetta features generous versions of its namesake as well as fresh salads, tacos and sandwiches. Start with a glass of carrot-orange juice. This local favorite is now located at the Anton Valley Hotel.

El Valle Gourmet & Coffee Shop (Av Central; sandwiches US\$5; 📍 🕒 9am-6pm Thu-Sun) With gourmet sandwiches and smoothies, this is also a good stop to stock up on picnic items before heading for the trails. You can find goat cheese, cured meats and olives here.

Hotel y Restaurante Los Capitanes (Calle El Cido; mains US\$6-15) Serving pasta, seafood and tasty German staples such as sauerkraut and *imbiss* (meat-loaf), this open-air restaurant has a relaxed and quiet setting. Don't miss the freshly baked cakes and fruit shakes. The long list of imported beers includes dark and dreamy *Warsteiners*.

La Casa de Lourdes (☎ 983-6450; mains US\$6-17; 📍 🕒 noon-3pm & 7-10pm) Run by a celebrated Panamanian chef, Lourdes tempts you with inventive cuisine and sheer elegance. The seasonal menu is always changing, but includes offerings like mesclun salad with roast mango, beef with watercress and sesame oil, and sea bass with jalapeño. The location is the perfect celebration destination, with tables set around a garden patio in a large, elegant colonial building.

Hotel Rincón Vallero (Calle Espave; mains US\$6-21) A good bet for families, this hotel restaurant has fresh patio seating beside a koi pond. It serves up plates of fresh seafood including shrimp, *ceviche* and grilled corvina alongside an extensive wine and cocktail list. Diners are given swimming-pool access.

Shopping

Bambucillo (Av Central, Coop La Libertad No 3; 📍 🕒 9am-6pm Wed-Sun) An artisan shop and community roundtable, Bambucillo sells a fun and funky selection of unique crafts, recycled art and jewelry made locally. In addition, owners Carlos and Veronica offer artisan and recycling workshops to kids and the local community. You can grab tasty vegetarian bites at the snack bar.

Getting There & Away

To leave El Valle you can hop aboard a bus traveling along Av Central; on average, they

depart every 30 minutes. The final destinations are painted on windshields of the bus. If your next destination isn't posted, catch a bus going in the same direction and transfer. To reach El Valle from the Interamericana, disembark from any bus at Las Uvas (marked by both a sign for El Valle and a pedestrian overpass), about 5km west of San Carlos. Minibuses pick up passengers at this turnoff and travel to El Valle (US\$1.50, one hour, every 30 minutes).

Getting Around

Despite El Valle's small size, taxis ply Av Central all day long. You can go anywhere in town for US\$2. Many hotels offer bike rentals, which are a great way to get around.

SANTA CLARA

Although the beach at Santa Clara consists of sparkling white sand and towering coconut palms, somehow the tourist crowds seemed to have passed on by. Needless to say, this is a great destination if you want to lounge about for days on end without having to worry about someone stealing your stretch of sand.

Santa Clara itself was once little more than a sparsely populated fishing village edging between patches of dry tropical rainforest and the vast blue expanse of the Pacific. Upscale beach villas now dot the landscape. However, there's plenty of local flavor here to soak up in between beach sessions, making a nice change from some of the country's more popular destinations.

Orientation

The tiny community of Santa Clara is located 11km southwest of the Interamericana turnoff for El Valle. There are two Santa Clara turnoffs from the Interamericana; one is posted for the town and the other is posted for the beach (Playa Santa Clara). The first turnoff you'll see as you come from the east is the turnoff for town.

Sleeping & Eating

If you go down the first turnoff for Santa Clara from the Interamericana for about 1km, you'll see signs for Balneario Santa Clara, Las Veraneras and Las Sirenas.

Restaurante y Balneario Santa Clara (Map p121; ☎ 993-2123; campsite per person US\$3; 📍) This popular campsite is a steal – for only a few bucks per night, you can get a private *rancho* on the beach as well as access to clean toilet and

shower facilities. It's US\$2 to use the facilities for day visits. Even if you're not camping here, this is one of the few restaurants (meals US\$5 to US\$12) in the area, and the catch of the day – whatever it is – tastes fantastic when served in front of a Pacific sunset.

XS Memories (Map p121; ☎ 993-3096; www.xs.memories.com; campsite per person US\$4, motor-home hookup US\$20, d from US\$55; 📍 📍 📍) You won't find many RV resort/sports bars in Panama but this American-owned outfit definitely has the market cornered. Three spacious guest rooms feature air-con, platform beds, hot water, and tile floors. There are also over 20 hookups for motor homes providing water, sewers and electricity. Campers can pitch their tents and all can partake of an inviting swimming pool smack in front of the sports bar. The cluttered bar is a kind of homegrown TGI Fridays, serving good, juicy cheeseburgers, grilled steaks and pork chops to the drone of football. Follow the billboard to get here – it's just north of the turnoff for Playa Santa Clara, 100m from the Interamericana.

Restaurante y Cabañas Las Veranera (Map p121; ☎ 993-3313; 5-person cabin from US\$79; 📍 📍 📍) These *cabañas* on a slope set back from the beach come in different sizes and designs. The loveliest are the split-level thatch cabins built on stilts, which overlook the crashing waves. Amenities include hot water, cable TV and a swimming pool. The small thatched restaurant-bar (mains US\$4 to US\$12) fronts the beach. It's the perfect setting for fresh *ceviche* topped off with a sundowner, but service is achingly slow.

our pick Las Sirenas (Map p121; ☎ 993-3235; traduca@cwpanama.net; 4-person cabin US\$121; 📍 📍 📍) Hidden in a scenic stretch of coastline, Las Sirenas emanates peace and seclusion. Its 11 well-spaced cottages are set in terraced gardens with sea views. Each is ultraprivate and precious, with modern accents and vaulted ceilings. The hosts prove attentive, and amenities include air-conditioning, palatial hot-water bathrooms, and fully equipped kitchen and dining areas. Since there is no restaurant on the premises, you should be prepared to self-cater. The hillside complex also features a playground, badminton and volleyball, just 150m from the crashing surf.

Getting There & Away

To get to Santa Clara, just take any bus that passes through and tell the bus driver to drop

you in town. When it's time to leave Santa Clara, just stand at any of the bus stops in town and hail a bus going in the direction you want to go. From Santa Clara, you can catch onward buses west to Antón (US\$0.50, 30 minutes, every 30 minutes) or Penonomé (US\$1, one hour, every 30 minutes). It's also easy to catch a ride on buses heading as far as David (US\$10, 5½ hours, every hour) and points along the way. Heading east, you can find buses to San Carlos (US\$1.25, 30 minutes, every 20 minutes), Chame (US\$1.25, 45 minutes, every 20 minutes) and Panama City (US\$3, 1¾ hours, every 20 minutes).

Getting Around

Except for late at night, there are always taxis parked beside the turnoff on the Interamericana for Santa Clara (the town, not the beach). You can take one for US\$2 to get to any of the places mentioned previously. The beach is 1.8km from the Interamericana.

FARALLÓN (PLAYA BLANCA)

A picture-perfect stretch of powder-white sand, the village of Farallón, most commonly known as Playa Blanca, sits about 3km west of the Santa Clara turnoff. A decade ago, Farallón was a fishing village with the ruins of the Panamanian military base that was destroyed during the US invasion to oust Noriega. However, resort fever has recast Playa Blanca as one of the hottest beach destinations in Panama.

Visitors are urged to go beyond the resorts – lots of the original village charm is still here, though it is apparent that apartments, condos, gated communities and shopping malls have created an alternate reality. Needless to say, locals are divided about whether or not this sudden spate of development is exactly what the town needs, though it's unlikely that the boom will stop anytime soon. And, it's no small wonder that Farallón survived as long as it did, especially considering that Playa Blanca is one of the most beautiful beaches along the Pacific coast.

Our pick Togo B&B (Map p121; ☎ 6613-5233; www.togopanama.com; d incl breakfast from US\$132; 📞 📺 📶) is a lovely little getaway. It occupies a renovated beach home with recycled materials used to create a sleek and stylish design. Rooms are ample and airy, with cool tile baths, gorgeous original artwork and private terraces. The owners might mix you a mango cocktail or offer a

glimpse of surrounding grounds (Noriega used to be the next-door neighbor). The prime spot on the property is a lush rainforest garden laced with hammocks. Breakfasts offer generous portions of fresh fruit, eggs and *tortilla frita*. Guests can borrow a bike or rent kayaks. A private passageway crosses the street to the beach. It's adults-only and gay-friendly.

Panama's answer to Vegas, the **Royal Decameron Beach Resort & Casino** (Map p121; ☎ 993-2255; www.decameron.com; all-inclusive d from US\$232; 📞 📺 📶 🍷) is a whopper, with 600 rooms and enough pools, bars, clubs and restaurants to count on both hands. Strolling a gated compound affixed with a bracelet ID may not be your idea of travel. But if you like buffet food and Latin nightlife, replete with clubs and casinos, you'll be *en tu salsa*, as they say. Families find plenty to do, including a nightly kids' show. If you're planning on staying at the Decameron, check out the discounted all-inclusive packages that are sometimes available if you book in advance. Transportation to and from Panama City is included.

Like heaven but more expensive, the neighboring resort **Bristol Buenaventura** (Map p121; ☎ 304-8888; www.thebristol.com/buenaventura; d from US\$395; 📞 📺 📶 🍷) boasts 126 luxury rooms and eight villas located around trails, open space and artificial lagoons. Any whim is yours for the asking, from strawberries and champagne in your room to beach butler service and couples' massages. Private condos and townhouses sit within the complex, which boasts tennis courts, a world-class spa and a Jack Nicklaus golf course. Five distinct restaurants plot to keep you onsite, with menus designed by an award-winning Panamanian chef. As with the Decameron, go online to save yourself a few dollars before arriving.

If you're just visiting for the day, and you don't have the cash to blow on a night of hedonistic luxury, the Decameron offers day passes that give you full access to the facilities. Of course, beaches are public land in Panama, so as long as you don't get into trouble, no one is going to stop you from laying out in front of either hotel and working on your tan.

For a relaxed, resort-free lunch, check out **Pipa's** (Map p121; mains US\$8; 🕒 11am–9pm), a sandy thatched beach restaurant with double hammocks and picnic tables, perfect for an icy cold beer and a whole fried sea bass served up with plantains. The seafood is ultrafresh and the service is some of the friendliest in Panama.

They also rent a few small **cabins** (☎ 6567-7386; cabin US\$30; 🚻) behind the restaurant.

ANTÓN

pop 9000

Antón, 15km west of Farallón, is in the center of a lush valley that's sprinkled with rice fields and cattle ranches. Although it has little to offer the tourist, except of course its natural beauty, its annual **patron saint festival** (January 13 to 16) and its folkloric festival **Toro Guapo** (October 13 to 15) are the best in the province. The people of Antón seemingly live for these events. It's worth stopping by to partake in the festivities if you find yourself in the area.

As you drive into Antón along the Interamericana, you'll notice several hotels and restaurants as well as a bank and a couple of gas stations. Also along this stretch, the **Hotel Rivera** (☎ 987-2245; d US\$32; 📞 🚻 🚿) is a decent place to rest for the night. Cinderblock rooms with sparse furnishings are anything but special, though the air-con works and the hot water is occasionally turned on. Of course, it's hard to complain at this price, and the inviting pool is a nice amenity, especially when the summer sun is beating down.

Westbound buses including those heading to Penonomé can stop in Antón if you ask the driver in advance.

PENONOMÉ

pop 17,000

The provincial capital of Coclé Province is a bustling crossroads city with a rich history. Founded in 1581, Penonomé blossomed so quickly that it served as the temporary capital of the isthmus in 1671 after the destruction of the first Panama City (now known as Panamá Viejo) and until Nueva Panamá (now known as Casco Viejo) was founded a few years later.

Today, the lifeline of the city is the Interamericana, which bisects Penonomé and ensures a steady stream of goods flowing in and out. If you're heading west, it's likely that you will pass through here at some point, though it's worth hopping off the bus for the city's two principal attractions, namely its annual festivals and its traditional Panama hats. Penonomé also serves as good jumping-off point for the nearby artisan town of La Pintada (p132).

Orientation

Penonomé straddles the Interamericana 144km west of Panama City and 16km

northwest of Antón. On the eastern side of town, the highway forks around an Esso gas station. One branch, Av Juan Demostenes Arosemena, goes to the right, and the other, the Interamericana, goes to the left.

Av Juan Demostenes Arosemena is the city's main street. Along it are two banks, a post office and the town church. The avenue actually ends at the church, which faces the central plaza. During Carnaval, the plaza and every street for three blocks around it are packed with people.

Information

For banking, try BBVA on the Interamericana or Banco Nacional de Panamá and HSBC, both along Av Juan Demostenes Arosemena. All have ATMs.

The **post office** (Av Juan Demostenes Arosemena) is in the Palacio Municipal behind the church. There's a **mercado público** (public market; 🕒 4:30am-3:30pm) that's fun to browse near the central plaza. There is no tourist office in town.

The city's principal **hospital** (Interamericana) is at the eastern end of town.

Festivals & Events

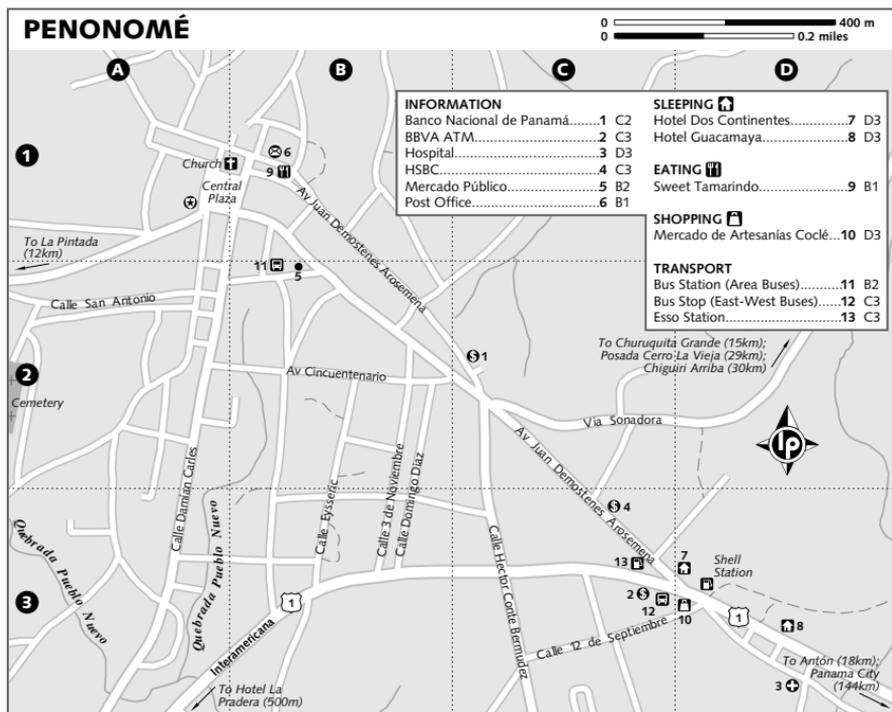
Held during the four days preceding Ash Wednesday, **Carnaval** is a huge happening in Penonomé. In addition to traditional festivities which include dancing, masks and costumes and a queen's coronation, floats here are literally *floated* down a tributary of the Río Zaratí.

Less popular but still a big crowd pleaser is Penonomé's **patron saint festival**. This festival is generally held on December 8 and 9 (or the following Saturday if both these dates fall on weekdays). Following a special mass, Penonomé's Catholics carry a statue of the saint through the city's streets. The mass and procession seem incidental to the celebration taking place outside the church for two days.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Dos Continentes (☎ 997-9326; fax 997-9390; Interamericana; s/d US\$28/33; 📞 🚻) Near the point where the Interamericana forks, the sprawling Hotel Dos Continentes is secure and spacious but rooms are plain and some mattresses sag. Ask for a room in the back for considerably less street noise. The onsite restaurant is popular for cheap and cheerful *típico* (US\$5); natives swear its fried chicken is the best in Panama. Internet is available for extra.

Hotel Guacamaya (☎ 991-0117; hguacamaya@cwpan.ama.com.pa; Interamericana; s/d US\$33/45; 📞 🚻) A few



doors down from the Hotel Dos Continentes, rooms at the Guacamaya are slightly more expensive, though they're significantly more spacious. Regular rooms with modern furniture are nice enough, though it's worth a few extra dollars for a larger room that overlooks the mountains. There is a good restaurant on the premises with standard Panamanian offerings.

Hotel La Pradera (☎ 997-0106; hotelpradera@cwpanama.net; Interamericana; s/d US\$35/43; (P) (♿)) This spanking-new yellow colonial feels ritzy for Penonomé, and is undoubtedly the best value of the midrange options. Smart rooms include cable TV, air-conditioning, a lounge chair and desk.

Mercado Público (Av Juan Demostenes Arosemena s/n; mains US\$2; (☎) breakfast Sat & Sun) The city market serves hearty breakfasts on weekends, with *hojaldras* (fried dough), *bistec encebollado* (steak with onions and spices) and eggs.

Sweet Tamarindo (☎ 6671-1546; Av Juan Demostenes Arosemena s/n; mains US\$7-9; (☎) noon-11:30pm) A hot spot for fancy fare and a bottle of wine, this friendly colonial-style bistro offers an ample menu of pastas, fish and steak. Local ingredients are showcased in dishes like the *fiesta*

de mariscos, with seafood in coconut curry, chicken stuffed with local cheese and cilantro, and the yummy tamarind cheesecake dessert. There's also shady patio seating.

Getting There & Away

Buses traveling to and from Penonomé via the Interamericana use a small parking lot opposite the Hotel Dos Continentes as a passenger pick-up and drop-off point. Buses pass through in either direction every 15 minutes. Area buses, such as those to Churuquita Grande (US\$0.85, 45 minutes, every 30 minutes), Aguadulce (US\$1.50, 30 minutes, every 20 minutes), La Pintada (US\$1, every 30 minutes), San Pedro, Chiguirí Arriba (US\$1.50, 80 minutes, seven per day) and El Copé (US\$2, one hour), use a station two blocks southeast of the central plaza. From Penonomé there are frequent buses to Panama City (US\$4.35, 2½ hours, every 20 minutes) and David (US\$8, 4½ hours, every 35 minutes).

Getting Around

Due to its size and importance, Penonomé has no shortage of taxis. The best place to

hail one is by the Esso gas station, near the entrance to town. You can also find one near the central plaza. The fare for any destination in town is not usually more than US\$3, and often it's less.

LA PINTADA

This small foothill town, just 12km northwest of downtown Penonomé, boasts an artisans' market and a cigar factory. If you're staying in Penonomé for the night or simply passing through the area, it's worth stopping at La Pintada to pick up some attractive handicrafts and a few fresh-rolled cigars direct from the source.

La Pintada's famous **Mercado de Artesanías La Pintada** (Paintado Artisans' Market; ☎ 983-0313; 🕒 9am-4pm) specializes in Penonomé-style Panama hats. The material used in Panamas occasionally varies from one town to the next, though here hats are made of *bellota* (palm fiber) and *pita*, a fiber related to cactus. There are several *bellota* and *pita* plants growing in front of the market, so you can see what they look like. Other items of particular interest are dolls wearing handmade folkloric costumes, *seco* (the local firewater) bottle covers made from hat palm, and handmade brooms.

The market is easy to find. As you drive through La Pintada on the main road from Penonomé, you'll come to a very large soccer field on the left side of the road. The market is on the far side of this field.

The second obligatory stop in La Pintada is the **Cigars Joyas de Panama** (☎/fax 983-0304; joyapan@yahoo.com). The factory's owner, Miriam Padilla, began growing tobacco in La Pintada with three Cubans in 1982, though they went their separate ways in 1987 when the Cubans emigrated to Honduras to open a cigar factory. Left to her own devices, Miriam sent choice samples of her tobacco to tourists and other people she'd met in Panama over the years, seeking investors for a factory. Today Miriam and her son, Braulio Zurita, are La Pintada's largest employers, employing 80 workers who make a total of 22,000 cigars a day. The employees work at rows of desks in a long, concrete-sided, aluminum-roofed, one-story building the size of a large home, which is the pride of the neighborhood.

The cigars are made in an assembly process that begins at one end of the building with leaf separation from stem, and ends at the other end of the building with the packaging of the final product. From here, the cigars are shipped primarily to the USA, France and Spain. Here, you can buy a box of Joyas de Panama's highest-quality cigars for half the price you would find them outside the country. The cigars also come flavored – with a hint of vanilla, rum or amaretto. Miriam and Braulio speak English, and cigars are clearly much more than a business to them.

To get to the factory from the artisans' market, just drive southeast from the market,

PANAMA HATS

A Panama hat, or simply a Panama, is a traditional brimmed hat made from a Panama-hat palm (*Carludovica palmata*). Although originally from Ecuador, the hat became popular in Panama during the construction of the canal when thousands of Panamas were imported for use by the workers. After American president Theodore Roosevelt donned a Panama during his historic visit to the canal, the hats became the height of fashion.

Unlike the better-known Panamas from Ecuador, which are woven from crown to brim in one piece, this kind is made by a braiding process, using a half-inch braid of palm fiber, usually of alternating or mixed white and black. The finished braid is wound around a wooden form and sewn together at the edges, producing a round-crowned, black-striped hat. It's a common sight in the rural parts of Panama, and it's not uncommon for political contenders to don hats periodically to appear as 'one of the people.'

Penonomé is known throughout Panama as the place to buy the hats that bear the country's name. The highest-quality Penonomé hats are so tightly put together that they can hold water – prices range from US\$10 up to US\$150. Surprisingly, there's no one place to buy these hats in Penonomé as they are made in outlying towns and brought to the city for sale. However, many are sold by hat vendors standing outside stores and restaurants near the Esso gas station by the entrance to town. You can also try the **Mercado de Artesanías Coclé** (🕒 8am-4pm) at the eastern end of town and the Mercado de Artesanías La Pintada in the nearby town of La Pintada (see above).

straight toward Penonomé (ignore the Pana American Cigar Co, which is en route to Joyas de Panama). You'll come to Café Coclé, on your right; take the well-maintained dirt road just beyond it (the road that initially parallels the paved road, not the next right). Follow this road about 1km until you see a simple thatched-roof restaurant on the right side of the road immediately followed by the open-sided cigar factory with a corrugated metal roof.

RESERVA PRIVADA TÁVIDA

The Reserva Privada Távida is a private mountain reserve that's part of the Mesoamerican corridor. Once used for livestock, the area is now undergoing reforestation and offers ample trails for hiking or horseback riding, including one spectacular waterfall.

Sleeping & Eating

our pick **Posada Cerro La Vieja** (Map p121; ☎ 983-8900; www.posadalavieja.com; s/d US\$83/98, 2-person cabin at waterfall US\$242; 📍 📶 🚰) This incredible mountain lodge sits atop a summit with sweeping views. Surrounded by gardens, green valleys and shrouded peaks, it resembles the famous karst formations outside Guilin, China, more than Central America. The property sits inside Reserva Privada Távida. A favorite of Panama's politicians, the lodge has housed former presidents and the owner has no shortage of stories to tell. You can get here via the paved road to Chiguirí Arriba, 29km to the northeast of Penonomé.

Guests have their pick of rooms in the main lodge, nearby cabins or two exclusive cabins set by a stunning waterfall. The spacious cabins are coolly modern, with large windows, colonial-inspired furnishings and private terraces. The thatched waterfall cabins, some 10 minutes away by 4WD, luxuriate in privacy. With views and walks right out the door, the site has an al fresco dining area and hammock terrace where you'll want to laze the hours away. There is a delicious swimming hole under Cascada de Távida, so bring your suit. These cabins have fully equipped kitchens in addition to air-con, cable TV and hot-water showers, which you will find in the main cabins too.

At the restaurant you will find quality dining, with a selection of Chilean wines and produce fresh from local organic gardens. A holistic spa offers everything from manicures and facials to mud baths with mountain views and herbal oil massages.

Activities

Guided hiking tours (from US\$10) from Posada Cerro La Vieja range from easy nature walks to arduous treks, taking in river, waterfall and forest scenes. Area wildlife includes three-toed sloths, night monkeys, deer and armadillos. Four species of toucan and many species of hummingbird also live here, and can occasionally be seen from the comfort of the creek-fed swimming pool.

Getting There & Away

To get here from central Penonomé, take the well-marked turnoff for Churuquita Grande, several hundred meters northwest of the Hotel Dos Continentes. Proceed past Churuquita Grande and follow the signs to Chiguirí Arriba and the Posada Cerro La Vieja.

Alternately, go to Penonomé's area bus station and take a 'Chiguirí Arriba' bus (US\$1.50, 80 minutes) or *chiva* (pickup truck with bench seating in the back). Buses depart at 6am, 10am and 11am and 12:30pm, 2pm, 4:30pm and 6pm.

PARQUE NACIONAL OMAR TORRIJOS & LA RICA

Simply put, Parque Nacional Omar Torrijos (or simply El Copé for its gateway) is one of Panama's hidden gems, though difficult access and relative obscurity have kept the tourist crowds away. The park encompasses some of the most beautiful forests in Panama, with montane forest on the Pacific side of the Continental Divide and humid tropical forest on the Caribbean side.

El Copé is also home to the full complement of Panama's wildlife, including such rare bird species as the golden-olive woodpecker, red-fronted parrotlet, immaculate antbird and white-throated shrike-tanager, as well as all four species of felines, Baird's tapirs and peccaries.

One of the wonderful surprises to greet visitors to El Copé is the excellent condition of the park's trail system, renovated by US Peace Corps volunteers, Autoridad Nacional del Ambiente (ANAM) rangers and members of Panama Verde (a Panamanian student ecological group). Another surprise: this park offers the easiest and surest point from which to see both the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans (from the lookout above the cabin).

Orientation & Information

There is a **ranger station** (admission US\$5; 🕒 6am-8pm) just inside the entrance of the park where

visitors can pay for accommodations and admission fees. Permits to camp in the park are payable at the ranger station.

Hiking

Next to the ranger station you'll find two side-by-side trails – the leftmost trail follows the ridgeline and summits a nearby mountain in about an hour. Here, you'll be rewarded with panoramic views of both oceans and the surrounding canopy.

If you take the rightmost trail, you'll be following the Caribbean slope of the Continental Divide, though be advised that this trail does not end, and should under no circumstances be attempted without a guide. However, if you can arrange a guide through the ranger station, this is a fantastic trail that passes several rivers, winds up and down several mountain peaks and penetrates deep into the heart of the forest.

Behind the ranger station, you'll find the entrance to a short interpretative trail that points out local species of trees and plants. This trail is only about 500m in length, but it's a great introduction to the flora of the region.

Another hiking option is to spend a night with the Navas family – see below.

Be advised that there are poisonous snakes in the park including the infamous *fer-de-lance* – as a precaution, inform others of your intentions, always hike in boots and stick to the trails.

Sleeping & Eating

About 200m up the road from the ranger station is a small **cabin** (campsite US\$5, r per person US\$5) with four beds and a kitchen with simple cooking facilities and basic toilet and cold-water shower. It also has a loft and living room, allowing a total of 10 to sleep comfortably if you have your own gear. Either way, you'll need a sleeping bag – it cools off at night in the mountains so bring some warm clothing as well. If you've brought your own tent, there is a groomed spot alongside the cabin where you can pitch for the night.

Another excellent way of visiting the park is taking advantage of the services of the friendly Navas family. They rent rooms in their **house** (☎ 983-9130; per person incl 3 meals & guide US\$30) in Barrigon or **cabaña Albergue Navas** (☎ 983-9130; per person incl 3 meals & guide US\$30) in La Rica, a beautiful community inside the park. Accommodations at both places are rustic, but

very well maintained and inexpensive, with all meals included. The family – Santo and Anna Navas and their sons – work as guides, as they have done in the past for scientists and bird-watchers. They help to maintain the park and its trails and their knowledge and love of the area is quite apparent.

Barrigon can be reached by car or public transportation from El Copé. From Barrigon it's a two- to three-hour hike or a horseback ride to La Rica, where you'll find a cool and pleasant community with a beautiful river and swimming holes, with access to secluded, orchid-covered waterfalls, virgin rain- and cloud forest, and excellent bird-watching.

From La Rica, you can take day hikes to the summits of Cerros Marta and Peña Blanca, visit the impressive waterfalls of Chorros de Tife and even hike to the ruins of the plane that crashed, killing president Omar Torrijos.

La Rica is remote (no phone, electricity or road), and the hiking is strenuous, but it is a nature-lover's dream and comes highly recommended. All the arrangements can be made through Santo and Anna Navas (Spanish only). Call ahead, or ask around for the Navas family when you reach Barrigon.

Getting There & Away

The turnoff for this national park is on the Interamericana, 18km west of Penonomé. From the turnoff, it's another 32.8km to the park's entrance. The road, paved for the first 26km, winds through rolling countryside dotted with farms and small cattle ranches. The paved road ends at the small town of El Copé. The remaining 6.8km of the drive to the park is on a dirt road that's so bad that a 4WD vehicle with a very strong motor and excellent tires is needed. There is no public transportation to the park. If you don't have a car, catch a bus from Panama City (US\$5.50, three hours) or Penonomé (US\$1.50, one hour) to El Copé and transfer from there in a minibus to Barrigon (US\$0.25, 15 minutes), the closest village to the park. From there it's a one-hour hike into the park.

If you're driving, take the turnoff as marked from the Interamericana and proceed 26km. You will then see a sign directing you to the park (to the right) and another to the park's Sede Administrativa (administrative office). There's no reason to go to the administrative office, so stay to the right and continue until you reach the park's entrance.

PARQUE ARQUEOLÓGICO DEL CAÑO

This **archaeological park** (adult/child US\$1/0.25; ☎ 9am-noon & 12:30-4pm Tue-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) is one of only two sites in the country that are open to the public (the other is Barriles, in Chiriquí Province, p199). Although the site is extremely modest in comparison to large-scale excavations in other countries in Central America, this is perhaps the best place in Panama to get a sense of the country's indigenous traditions.

The site was excavated during the 1920s by an American who allegedly left with most of the objects he came across. The objects that weren't pilfered are now kept in a small **museum**, which contains dozens of pieces of pottery, arrowheads and carved stones. The objects are believed to date from a culture that lived in El Caño about 1500 years ago. The few signs at the museum are in Spanish only, and the site's caretaker can offer little reliable information about El Caño's history.

In addition to the museum, there is a small **excavation pit** in the park, which contains a burial site where five skeletons were found in the exact same position as visitors see them today. Nearby there's also a field containing dozens of stone columns that were lined up and stood on end in recent years, though their significance to the lost culture is unknown.

The turnoff for the town of El Caño is on the Interamericana, about 8km north of Natá. The park is another 3km from the turnoff, down an occasionally mud-slicked road. El Caño is not served by bus, but you can take a taxi here from Natá for US\$8 one-way. For info on getting to Natá, see boxed text, p136.

AGUADULCE

pop 8300

Aguadulce's name is a contraction of *agua* and *dulce* (meaning 'sweet water'), and it is said that this bustling city was named by Spaniards who were pleased to come across a freshwater well amid the arid landscape. Today, the town is known more for its *dulce* as the town is surrounded by fields and fields of sugarcane. From mid-January to mid-March of each year, the cane is cut and then refined at several large refineries in the area. One of these mills, the Ingenio de Azúcar Santa Rosa offers tours – a must-do if you're in the area during the grinding season.

There are salt flats south of downtown, and until recently there was also a sizable salt

works here. Unable to compete with the lower prices of Colombian salt however, the salt works here closed its doors in 1999. Today, the flats now serve as a crucial habitat for marsh and shore birds, and the area is rapidly becoming popular with roseate spoonbills and wood storks, as well as local and international bird-watchers.

Orientation

Aguadulce is located smack in the center of hot, dry country, 10km south of Natá. Like so many cities and towns in Panama, Aguadulce sits beside the Interamericana, though its downtown is 1km from the highway.

The main road into town from the highway is Av Rafael Estevez. The Hotel Interamericana marks the turnoff. There are always taxis here, and the parking lot next to the hotel is also the town's main bus stop.

To get to Aguadulce's central plaza, drive south on Av Rafael Estevez several blocks until it ends at its intersection with Calle Alejandro T Escobar. Turn left here, onto Calle Alejandro T Escobar, drive 3½ blocks to Av Rodolfo Chiari and then turn right. The central plaza and church will appear on your left, four blocks later.

Information

Banco Nacional de Panamá (Av Rodolfo Chiari) Has an ATM.

HSBC (Av Rodolfo Chiari) Has an ATM.

Post office (Av Rodolfo Chiari) Near the central plaza, just around the corner from the Museo de la Sal y Azúcar.

Sights & Activities

INGENIO DE AZÚCAR SANTA ROSA

The **Santa Rosa Sugar Refinery** (☎ 987-8101/2; ☎ 7am-4pm Mon-Fri, 7-11:30am Sat), located 15km west of Aguadulce, is a must-see if you're in the area from mid-January to mid-March. During grinding season, the refinery processes over 6500 tons of raw sugarcane per day.

Because the land here is hilly and rocky, the cane must be harvested by hand. Four thousand people are hired to help with harvesting and production, and they bring the cane in as fast as they can, 24 hours a day, six days a week (on Sunday everyone goes to church). Most of the cane is harvested on company land, but the mill still buys about 3% of its cane from *campesinos* (farmers), who bring it in on carts pulled by tractors and oxen. Around

EXPLORE MORE: PANAMA'S OLDEST CHURCH

Founded on May 20, 1522, Natá is the oldest surviving town in Panama. The conquistadors came here to claim Natá's prodigious quantities of gold. Today, little remains of its rich history aside from a few colonial houses and the lovely, well-preserved **Iglesia de Natá**, one of the oldest churches in the Americas.

Upon the founding of Natá, 60 soldiers took up residence and divided up the local indigenous population as slaves. Indigenous artisans are responsible for the church's remarkable carvings. If you look closely at the altar of the Virgin, you'll notice the influence of their culture in the sculpted fruit, leaves and feathered serpents on its two columns. The position of the carved angels at its base signifies the power the artisans felt the angels possessed.

To the right of the altar, the Holy Trinity painting was created in 1758 by the Ecuadorian artist José Samaniego. For many years the painting was kept censored from public view, since its Trinity shows three Christ-like individuals, a considerable breach of Church canon.

The church was restored in 1995, though new renovations are pending (you may notice the distinct smell of bat guano in the rafters). During the 1995 restoration, three skeletons were discovered under the floor beneath the Trinity painting. Surprisingly, their identity remains a mystery and no one knows how many other skeletons may be lying beneath the floor.

The four belfry bells date from the 20th century. The originals, made of solid gold, were stolen years ago. The rough original columns that support the roof are made of *nispero*, a hardwood found in Bocas del Toro Province. The smooth new columns are also made of *nispero*, while the entire ceiling was replaced with pine and cedar.

Natá can be reached by all the buses that use this stretch of the Interamericana; they pass in either direction every 15 minutes or so. Natá is 30 minutes from Penonomé and 15 minutes from Aguadulce.

135kg of cane enters the mill each second via a huge conveyer belt that's continually fed from trucks coming in from the fields. By day's end, the yield of refined sugar is around 675,000kg (1.5 million pounds). All this cane is sent through grinders that resemble a stack of studded rolling pins – except that each one weighs 20 tons and is about the size of a Buick. They spin quickly, and the cane that passes through them is crushed flat.

Occasionally the machine chokes. A 10-second choke results in a pileup of 1350kg of cane, and jackhammers are required to remove the clog. To give you an idea of the grinders' power: when a choke starts to occur, railroad ties are pushed into the grinders. In the fraction of a second it takes for the ties to pass through, they are chewed up as if they were breadsticks, but even as they're pulverized, they act as battering rams, punching bunched-up cane through the machines.

Also on the property is a replica of the original house of the mill's first owner, built in 1911. This museum is nicely done, and contains many exhibits on the history of sugar production in the New World. All its furniture and articles on display are originals.

To book tours, ask for Gonzalo Pérez (he speaks English and Spanish). The refinery would like at least 24 hours' notice to receive visitors.

If you're driving from Aguadulce, the turnout for the mill will be on the right-hand side of the Interamericana and marked by a sign (there's an Esso station opposite). Take the road 500m, and you'll come to a white guard station with a tiny chapel in front of it. Give your name to the guard and follow instructions.

You can also take a taxi from Aguadulce (which could cost US\$16 if the driver waits for you and takes you back to town), or you can catch any bus headed in the direction of the refinery and tell the driver to drop you at the Ingenio de Azúcar Santa Rosa (US\$0.75, 20 minutes, every 15 minutes). Be forewarned that the walk from the guard station to the mill is more than 1km, down a paved road lined with mature teak trees.

TIDAL FLATS

Located 9km from downtown Aguadulce, the tideland is quite expansive. When the tide is out, you can walk nearly 2km before reaching the ocean. But be careful; once the tide turns, it rises rather quickly, and it's frighteningly

easy to be swept out to sea if you're caught in the rush. If you've walked 1km or so beyond the pools and notice the tide rising, head inland immediately.

Once the site of a salt works, today the tidelands serve as an important habitat for various species of birds. When the tide is out, the bird-watching here is fantastic – several species of marsh and shore birds descend on the area in search of food. In fact, the flats are also famous for their jumbo shrimp, which are harvested in great abundance and served in restaurants throughout the country. When the tide is in, keep an eye out for sea lions, which are occasionally spotted swimming near the pools.

The best way to get here is by taxi. Tell the driver to take you to Restaurante Johnny Tapia. From Johnny Tapia, walk south (away from town) toward a clearing in the mangroves.

MUSEO DE LA SAL Y AZÚCAR

This rather unusual **museum** (☎ 997-4280; Plaza 19 de Octubre; adult/child US\$1/0.25; 🕒 9am–5pm Tue–Sat, 2–5pm Sun) faces the central plaza. As its name suggests, the Museum of Salt and Sugar documents the history of Aguadulce's salt

and sugar industries. A good portion of the exhibits also detail the role Aguadulce's salt and sugar have played in Panamanian life.

The museum also contains artifacts including guns, uniforms and swords from the Colombian civil war (1899–1903). It also displays a number of pre-Columbian artifacts, mostly ceramics and tools found in the cane fields nearby. Signage is in Spanish only.

TURIS CENTRO

This modest **recreation area** (☎ 997-3720; 🕒 11am–8pm) is 4km from downtown Aguadulce, on the road to Restaurante Johnny Tapia. Here, in the middle of salt flats and scrub brush, you can rent bikes and skates, or hire paddleboats for the small pond. There's also a children's playground and an inexpensive open-sided restaurant. A taxi here costs about US\$4.

Festivals & Events

Aguadulce's biggest celebration is **Carnaval**, which is held the four days before Ash Wednesday, and features parades, floats, Miss Aguadulce ceremonies, and lots of music, dancing and drinking. Other big events include

SUGAR IN THE RAW

The origins of the sugar industry are in the European colonization of the Americas, particularly on the islands of the Caribbean. Although it was possible for Europeans to import sugar from the colonies in Asia, the advent of slavery in the New World meant that sugarcane could be grown for a fraction of the cost. This in turn led to lower prices for the European consumer, which took precedence over the lives of the slaves forced to work in the fields.

During the 18th century, European diets started to change dramatically as sugar increased in popularity. Coffee, tea and cocoa were consumed with greater frequency, and processed foods such as candies and jams became commonplace items. The demand for increased production fueled the slave trade, though the actual process of refining sugar became increasingly mechanized.

In industrialized countries, sugar is one of the most heavily subsidized agricultural products. Sugar prices in the US, EU and Japan are on average three times the international market cost as governments maintain elevated price floors by subsidizing domestic production and imposing high tariffs on imports. As a result, sugar-exporting countries are excluded from these markets, and thus receive lower prices than they would under a system of free trade.

Brazil, which exports more than a quarter of the world's supply of refined sugar and heads a coalition of sugar-exporting nations, has repeatedly lobbied the World Trade Organization to reform the market. For countries like Panama however, sugar production is mainly a domestic industry as it's not profitable to export sugar to countries that levy a high tariff on imports.

Harvesting sugarcane manually is exhausting work as the stalks can grow to a height of 4m, and their thick stalks are fibrous and difficult to cut down. However, it's becoming increasingly common in Panama for sugarcane to be harvested using self-propelled harvesting machines, which has made it difficult for rural farmers to find employment.

The next time you're driving through cane country, look for signs advertising *juugo de caña* as there's nothing quite like a glass of fresh sugarcane juice.

the **patron saint festival** on July 25 and the city's **founding day** on October 18, 19 and 20.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Interamericano (☎ 997-4363; fax 997-4975; Interamericana; d with fan/air-con US\$20/40; (P) ♿ 🚻 📺 📶) Near Av Rafael Estevez, this roadside budget hotel offers dimly lit cookie-cutter rooms. They are not much to look at, but you can't beat the price. The perk of staying here is the well-cared-for swimming pool with a poolside bar-restaurant.

Hotel Carisabel (☎ 997-3800; cnr Calle Alejandro T Escobar & Carretera Nacional; s/d/tr US\$27/33/38; (P) ♿ 🚻 📺) Near the downtown area, the recently renovated Carisabel has Aguadulce's best accommodations. Airy motel-style rooms have spacious tiled bathrooms and steamy showers. There's also an inviting little pool as well as popular bar-restaurant serving Panamanian fare.

Restaurante Johnny Tapia (seafood US\$2.50-6) One of the best places to enjoy Aguadulce's nationally famous jumbo shrimp is this very casual beachside diner just past the salt flats, 9km

from downtown Aguadulce. Named for its ebullient owner-waiter, this relaxed spot offers everything from shrimp *ceviche* and shrimp salad to shrimp soup and pan-fried shrimp.

Getting There & Away

Buses arrive and depart from the small parking lot beside Hotel Interamericano on the highway. Destinations west include Divisa (US\$1.25, 30 minutes, every 30 minutes), where you can change for buses to Chitré, Santiago (US\$2.50, one hour, every 30 minutes) and David (US\$8, four hours, every 45 minutes). Destinations east include Natá (US\$0.75, 15 minutes, every 20 minutes), Penonomé (US\$1, 30 minutes, every 20 minutes) and Panama City (US\$5.25, three hours, every 20 minutes). A taxi from the parking lot into town costs US\$1.

Getting Around

Taxis are the best way to get around Aguadulce if you don't feel like walking. Fares rarely exceed US\$4, although you can expect to pay a little more at night. Always agree on a price before entering a taxi.