El Salvador

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Ruta de las Flores** Charge the western highlands: hiking cafétales, stepping in hot springs and chowing at the weekend food fairs (p301)
- **Playa El Tunco** Ride four great breaks, string a hammock under the palms and soak up the lax atmosphere (p293)
- **Parque Nacional Imposible** Steal stunning ridge-top views and splash in river pools hiking from the park’s remote backdoor (p300)
- **Alegría** Immerse yourself in the idyllic tiny-town life of El Salvador’s mountain-top flower capital (p306)
- **Punta Roca** Nail the longest break in Central America, or at least buy a real surfer a beer to hear about it (p290)
- **Off the beaten track** Put your trust in an ex-guerrilla guide while exploring the rugged territory of the former FMLN stronghold of Perquin (p313)

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 21,040 sq km (smallest in Central America)
- **ATMs** Plentiful, using Cirrus & Plus systems
- **Budget** US$25-30 per day
- **Capital** San Salvador
- **Costs** Budget hotel US$10, bottle of beer US$1.50, 3-hr bus ride US$1.60, bean & cheese pupusa US$0.35, surfboard rental US$10 per day
- **Country Code** 503
- **Electricity** 110V AC at 60 Hz (same as USA)
- **Famous for** Guns, ex-guerrillas, surf spots
- **Head of State** President Antonio Elías Saca
- **Languages** Spanish, Náhuatl
- **Money** US dollar
- **Phrases** Que chivo (how cool); un cachete (a favor); guano (alcohol)
- **Population** 6.7 million (most populated in Central America)
- **Time** GMT minus 6 hours, no daylight savings time
- **Traveler’s Checks** Cashed at banks; show passport and original receipts
- **Visas** Tourist cards at border or airport US$10

TRAVEL HINTS

If you want to blend in with locals, travel with a duffel bag and wear neat clothes and long pants. A simple, ‘buenos días/buenas tardes’ and ‘¿Cómo va?’ (Good morning/afternoon. How’s it going?) launches any encounter (in the market, a hotel or elsewhere) the right way. It might open doors.

OVERLAND ROUTES

From Guatemala, enter through Anguiaút, San Cristóbal or La Hachadura. From Honduras, El Poy or El Amatillo are best; you can exit El Salvador via Perquin, but you cannot enter there.

Resilient, real and sometimes raw, El Salvador is caffeine for the senses. It’s hard to digest it all: the frank talk of war survivors next to whimsical folk art; and the rickety Rhode Island school buses recast as psychedelic chariots, toting passengers to the pavement without hitting one full stop.

For a traveler El Salvador is something of a puzzle. It needs time for you to absorb and unravel. You have to be careful. But there is no reconciling the homicide statistics and the not-so-distant war with such, well, friendliness. It is too tempting to invent some explanation. Here, like in most industrialized countries, you won’t find abundant wildlife or primary forest. Yet, tromping a landscape of countless volcanoes, mountains, swimming holes and a wild Pacific coast offers real off-the-brochure adventure.

El Salvador emerged from a decade-long civil war and various natural disasters doggedly pursuing stability. Many residents found it abroad – where nearly a third of El Salvador’s nationals now live and work, sending home monthly contributions known as remesas. Other Guanacos (as they call themselves) stood their ground. One local said, ‘We have the war. We keep going. We have Hurricane Mitch. We have Hurricane Stan. Then we have some earthquakes, but Salvadorans, we keep on going.’

Resilience. It should be the mantra of every traveler.

CURRENT EVENTS

Remittances from abroad are soaring, creating a boom in everything from commerce to construction. The new thing is custom resorts for hermanos lejanos (distant brothers and sisters) sweating it out for Uncle Sam, who prefer sweating it out for Uncle Sam, who prefer

TOURISM

- **From Indigo to Independence**

Spanish rule started with a year-long struggle against the Pipil. The Spaniards prevailed and laid claim to the land, transforming it into plantations of cotton, balsam and indigo. Agriculture boomed throughout the 1700s, with indigo the number one export. A small group of Europeans, known as the ‘fourteen families,’ controlled virtually all of the colony’s wealth and agriculture, enslaving indigenous peoples and Africans to work the land.

Conflict simmered under this gross imbalance of power. A revolt against Spain in 1811 was led by Padre (Father) José Delgado. While it failed, it had planted a seed of discontent. Independence was gained 10 years later, on September 15, 1821, when El Salvador became part of the Central American Federation.

Though governments came and went, the wealthy held tight to their fortunes and...
THE SEARCH GOES ON

When government forces razed villages during the civil war, they didn’t always kill everyone. Some children, taken from their mothers’ arms or found helpless on the killing field, were spared. Those survivors were either divvied up as prizes among military officers or exported for adoption in the USA and Europe.

Many of these children grew up not knowing who their families were or even that they were adopted. Even surviving family members were at first reluctant to request an official search right after the war, fearing for their own safety.

In light of governmental indifference, the organization Pro-Búsqueda formed to find displaced children and reconnect them to their original families. Through a combination of DNA tests, family accounts, adoption files and newspaper reports, Pro-Búsqueda has managed to solve 317 cases. An estimated 5,000 children were displaced by the war, Pro-Búsqueda has many cases still pending.

For more information, contact Pro-Búsqueda (☎ 2235 1039; www.probusqueda.org).

control. The same clique continued to comprise the ruling elite and, though slavery was abolished, many indigenous became landless and poverty-stricken. Pushing for land reform, Anastasio Aquino led an indigenous rebellion in 1883. Though it was subdued and Aquino executed, he became a national hero. El Salvador withdrew from the Central American Federation in 1841, but Independence Day continues to be celebrated on September 15.

In Comes Coffee

In the late 19th century, synthetic dyes underwritten by the indigo market and coffee took the main stage. A handful of wealthy landowners expanded their properties, displacing more indigenous people. Coffee became the most important cash crop and cafetaleros (coffee growers) earned purses full of money that was neither taxed nor redistributed at reasonable wages to the workers. By the 20th century, 95% of El Salvador’s income derived from coffee exports, but only 2% of Salvadorans controlled that wealth.

The 20th Century

Intemperate efforts by the poor majority to repress El Salvador’s social and economic injustices were met with severe repression. The vindictive government vigorously eradicated union activity in the coffee industry during the 1920s.

In January 1932, Augustín Farabundo Martí, a founder of the Central American Socialist Party, led an uprising of peasants and indigenous people. The military responded to increasing guerrilla activity by creating ‘death squads.’ Thousands of Salvadorans were kidnapped, tortured and murdered.

In 1979 a junta of military and civil leaders overthrew President Carlos Humberto Romero and promised reforms. When promises were not met, opposition parties banded together as the Frente Democrático Revolucionario (FDR) and allied with the FMLN, a revolutionary army composed of five guerrilla groups. In 1979 a united FMLN offensive swept up bridges, cut power lines and destroyed coffee plantations and livestock — anything to stifle the economy. When the government ignored an FMLN peace proposal, the rebels refused to participate in the 1984 presidential elections, in which Duarte won over D’Aubisson. For the next few years the PDC and FMLN engaged in peace talks unsuccessfully. Death squads continued pillaging, and the guerrillas continued to undermine the military powers and jeopardize municipal elections.

MARA SALVATRUCHA

The front-page of El Salvador’s dailies is plastered with gang busts or grisly reports of the newly fallen. Usually the credit is given to Mara Salvatrucha, considered one of the most dangerous criminal gangs in the Americas. Known for gruesome beheadings, machete murders and tattooed death squads, the group actually has its roots in the USA.

In the 1980s, Salvadoran refugees new on the block in the slums of Los Angeles were getting regularly beaten up and victimized by Mexican gangs. In response they formed Mara Salvatrucha. Mimicking the tactics of their U.S. counterparts, they spread to Honduras and El Salvador, most often as death squads known as MS-13. The opposing 18th street gang eventually became known as Mara 18 or M-18. Today these gangs have an estimated 100,000 members between them, mostly in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Mexico and the USA.

Maras started by dabbling in petty crime and theft. Between 2000 and 2004, the US government attempted to eliminate the gang problem by exporting some 20,000 illegal immigrants, felons and known gang members to Central America. Without family, education, jobs or even Spanish, it didn’t long for maras to return to gangs and upping the stakes. Over time they have expanded into the Colombian and Mexican drug cartels, the sex trade and the traffic of illegal immigrants.

In Central America, gangs had a reputation for warring between opposing groups, with little consequence to the public. The Salvadoran government’s first plan Mano Dura (operation hard hand) sought to curb gang activities by giving police broad powers. On Christmas Eve 2004, Mara Salvatrucha responded with the brutal murder of 28 passengers in a Honduras bus assault, leaving a note that slammed antimara laws.

The current president Antonio Saca campaigned and won on plan Super Mano Dura (operation Super Hard Hand), which expanded already broad police powers. Now having tattoos and looking homely is reason enough for arrest. Yet, with an average of 10 murders per day, El Salvador remains one of the most violent countries in the world.

What gives? While the public continues to clamor for crackdowns, a lack of funding for forensics training and a lack of willingness of neighbors to testify means that even a slew of zealous arrests with little in the way of convictions. Judges are reluctant to hold suspects with no evidence beyond the tattoos on their arms and face. The same gang members are captured hundreds of times and let out hundreds of times, in what has become a way of life.

The 20th Century

La Matanza (the Massacre) exterminated 30,000 individuals, including Martí who was killed by firing squad. The FMLN (Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional) revolutionary army would later take up his name in his honor.

Over the course of the 1970s, landlessness, poverty, unemployment and overpopulation became serious problems. In government, the polarized left and right tangled for power through coups and electoral fraud. In 1972, José Napoleon Duarte, cofounder of the Christian Democratic Party (Partido Demócrata Cristiano; PDC), ran for president supported by a broad coalition of reform groups. When his victory was denied amid allegations of fraud, protests followed. The military averted an attempted coup, and the right responded to increasing guerrilla activity by creating ‘death squads.’ Thousands of Salvadorans were kidnapped, tortured and murdered.

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the chapel of the San Salvador Divine Providence Cancer Hospital. His murder ignited an armed insurrection that same year that was to turn into a civil war.

Civil War

El Salvador became enmeshed in violence. The rape and murder in late 1980 of four US nuns performing relief work in El Salvador prompted the Carter administration to suspend military aid. But in 1981, the newly elected Reagan administration, bristling from the threat of Nicaragua’s socialist revolution, pumped huge sums into the moribund Salvadoran military (over US$500 million in 1985 alone). Uncle Sam’s support would effectively prolong the conflict. When guerrillas gained control of areas in the north and east, the military retaliated by decimating villages. In 1981, the US-trained elite Atlacatl Battalion exterminated 757 men, women and children in El Mozote (p317), Morazán. As many as 300,000 citizens fled the country.

In 1982, Major Roberto D’Aubisson, founder of the extreme-right Arena party, became president of the legislative assembly and enacted a law granting the legislative body power over the president. D’Aubisson created death squads targeting trade unionists and agrarian reform supporters. In response, the FMLN offensive blew up bridges, cut power lines and destroyed coffee plantations and livestock — anything to stifle the economy. When the government ignored an FMLN peace proposal, the rebels refused to participate in the 1984 presidential elections, in which Duarte won over D’Aubisson. For the next few years the PDC and FMLN engaged in peace talks unsuccessfully. Death squads continued pillaging, and the guerrillas continued to undermine the military powers and jeopardize municipal elections.
The Price of Peace
Hope for peace neared in 1989, when the FMLN offered to participate in elections if the government agreed to a postponement to ensure democratic polls. Their calls were ignored and Alfredo Cristiani, a wealthy Arena businessman, was elected president. The FMLN’s response was a major attack on the capital. In retaliation, the military killed an estimated 4000 ‘leftist sympathizers’ among these enmies of the state were six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter, shot to death at the Universidad Centroamericana on November 16.

UN-mediated negotiations began between the government and FMLN in April 1990. Among the first agreements was a human-rights accord signed by both parties. Yet, violent deaths actually increased in 1991 when a UN mission arrived to monitor human rights.

On January 16, 1992, a compromise was finally signed. The FMLN became an opposition party, and the government agreed to various reforms, including dismantling paramilitary groups and death squads, replacing them with a national civil police force. Land was to be distributed to citizens and human-rights violations to be investigated. But instead, the government gave amnesty to human-rights abusers.

During the course of the 12-year war, an estimated 75,000 people were killed, and the US government gave a staggering US$6 billion to the Salvadoran government’s war effort.

Modern Currents
The FMLN has mostly proven to be a model example of a former guerrilla organization transitioning to mainstream politics. The leftist party scored large victories in the 2000 and 2003 congressional elections, although it didn’t gain a majority. On the presidential level, Salvadorans continue to prefer conservatives, electing Antonio Elias Saca in 2004.

This may have something to do with the current national obsession: gangs and crime. Saca’s campaign hinged on the anti-gang plan ‘Super Mano Dura’ (a tougher follow-up to the last administration’s blockbuster, ‘Mano Dura’). Among these enemies of the state were six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter, shot to death at the Universidad Centroamericana on November 16.

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The Culture
Most travelers who have been to El Salvador rate its people as the best part. Straight-talking, strong-minded and hard-working, Salvadorans are also extremely helpful and almost universally friendly (even gangbangers can rustle up charm when interviewed). Salvadorans have a powerful sense of justice and freely express their opinion. The civil war still looms large in the national psyche, as it must – not only are the memories too searing to forget, but many wartime leaders (and their disciples) remain in positions of power. At the same time, Salvadorans are genuinely dismayed to learn that many foreigners know little about El Salvador beyond the war. They will eagerly volunteer information and assistance.

Lifestyle
With a strong work ethic, Salvadorans have quickly raised their country from the wreckage of civil war to nearly the top of Central America’s economic ladder. Remittances sent home from Salvadorans living abroad, which annually total three billion dollars (16% of national GDP), provide a significant boost and are changing the way Salvadorans live and work. Poverty and unemployment persist, with 30% of the population below the poverty line, mostly in rural areas. That said, El Salvador enjoys the highest minimum wage in Central America (about US$150 per week) and is notably more prosperous than neighboring countries.

People
Salvadorans show more European physical traits than other Central Americans, due largely to the brutal repression of indigenous people and minor Afro-Caribbean influence. Roughly 94% of the population is mestizo (a mixture of Spanish and indigenous) but fair features are not uncommon. Indigenous people are descended from the Pipils, with Toltec and Aztec roots. Government brutality against them has taken its toll, and they now represent only 1% to 5% of the population. Few speak Náhuatl or wear traditional dress.

Posting for Peace
Holy scenes, strange birds, unabashed rainbow colors: the childlike images of Fernando Llort Choussy have come to symbolize hope in a war-torn Central America. Compared to Miro and Picasso, Llort differs with earnest iconography and flat tropical hues in a style dubbed as primitive modern.

Ironically, this strong Latin American identity was forged when he went to France to study architecture and then theology. Religious symbols are recurring motifs in his artwork. He prefers the rough and everyday to the exalted, saying, ‘The hands in developed societies are not worth anything anymore.’

When Llort returned to El Salvador in the early 1970s, he arrived to the tensions and violence leading up to the civil war. Llort moved to La Palma, a distant mountain town in the north, to take refuge. The apparent simplicity of a life in harmony with nature further informed his style. He started La Semilla de Dios (God’s seed), a workshop to teach others his craft and professionalize local artisans.

Llort has since lived in San Salvador and abroad, but the workshop is still going strong in his former studio. You can find his work on the face of the Metropolitan Cathedral in San Salvador as well as in the White House, MoMA and the Vatican.

Using the pen name Salarrué, lauded writer Salvador Efraín Salazar Arrué’s Cuentos de Barro (Tales of Mud), published in 1933, marks the beginning of Central America’s modern short-story genre. For further information about these and other modern writers, see Concultura (www.dpi.gob.sv), the country’s official arts and culture board, which has a bibliography of Salvadoran authors.


Religion
El Salvador, like the rest of Latin America, is experiencing an explosive growth of evangelical churches. Their fiery services seem to have brought fresh energy to faith. Town square services with booming speakers are becoming an all-too-typical way of spreading ‘the word.’ Yet, the country remains over 80% Catholic, and has a long tradition of liberation theology. Before and during the war, priests and missionaries were often outspoken critics of government repression – many, such as Archbishop Oscar Romero, were killed for their stands.

Environment
The Land
The Land of Volcanoes, El Salvador has two volcanic ranges spanning east to west, spicing the views, as well as daily life, with a little drama. Much of the land is deforested but
National Parks & Reserves
El Salvador has only four official national parks, but there are a number of locally or privately administered reserves.

- Parque Nacional Los Volcanes (Cerro Verde) - a volcano crater forest with amazing views of nearby Izalco and Santa Ana volcanoes. Highlights include emerald toucanets, motmots and hummingbirds. (See p294.)
- Parque Nacional Montercito-El Trifinio - a mountainous cloud forest reserve at the borders of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. Wildlife includes pumas, spider monkeys and agoutis. Giant ferns, orchids and bromeliads are abundant. (See p298.)

Environmental Issues
Overpopulation and the exploitation of the land for export crops (such as coffee, sugar and cotton) continue to propel El Salvador's massive deforestation. High population density remains the principal obstacle to the regeneration of ecosystems. Today, 17% of the country is forested, with only 2% to 5% of that primary forest. As a result, many native species have become endangered or extinct.

Deforestation and unplanned urban sprawl intensify the effects of natural disasters. In recent years El Salvador has been repeatedly pummeled by Mother Nature, producing a laundry list of disasters. In 1998, floods caused by Hurricane Mitch produced 200 fatalities and 70,000 homeless, acutely damaging the lower Rio Lempa. Earthquakes in 2001 brought on landslides and destroyed buildings, killing 1159 people and destroying or damaging almost 300,000 homes.

Before the earthquakes, environmental groups had issued increasingly dire warnings about those very issues for a house-filled hillside in the wealthy neighborhood of Santa Tecla. When the earthquake hit, the slope collapsed, burying dozens of houses and untold numbers of people in a suffocating wall of mud.

Most recently, the eruption of Santa Ana volcano in October, 2005, coupled with Hurricane Stan’s torrential rains, unleashed scores of landslides, with the largest loss of life in poor areas built on steep slopes or riverbanks.

Río Lempa, a crucial watershed, suffers from pollution, as do many other rivers and lakes. Meanwhile, uncontrolled vehicle emissions challenge urbanites’ respiratory functions in any metropolitan area. In 2006, the government vowed to take on the most visible problem – trash. The lack of proper disposal sites means gangs of vultures circling roadside dumps are a common sight.

Turicentros
The Instituto Salvadoreño de Turismo (ISTU) created turicentros (recreational complexes) between the late 1950s and 1970s, most near lakes and natural springs or in forests. Most have swimming pools, restaurants and no-frills cabins. As most are close to a main town, they attract crowds on weekends. The price is the same for all: US$50 admission, US$70 parking and US$4 cabin rental (day use only). All are open 8am to 4pm. Contact the Ministerio de Trabajo in San Salvador (see p279) for reservations.

SHAKE, RATTLE & ROLL
In 2001 a massive earthquake centered off the Salvadoran coast rocked Central America. Measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale, it killed 800 Salvadorans and leveled entire towns and many historical buildings. In the upmarket suburb of Santa Tecla in San Salvador, the quakes triggered a landslide which crushed homes and trapped all in its path. Its deforestation had made the hillside unstable. In all, more than 100,000 were left homeless.

Though much of the damage has been repaired, travelers will notice lingering effects. Churches remain in rubble and walls tell-tale cracks. During the research of this edition, tremors nearly 100,000 were left homeless.

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El Salvador’s discerning immigration officials scrutinize entry and exit stamps, so avoid cutting corners. Request a 90-day visa in advance if you’d like one, otherwise you may be given less time.

**Air**
The **Aeropuerto Internacional Comalapa** (Tel 2339 8264) is located 44km south of San Salvador. A major Central and Latin American hub, it is also a gateway to North American cities.

**TACA** (Tel 2267 8222), **American Airlines** (Tel 2298 0777), **United Airlines** (Tel 2279 3900), **Continental** (Tel 2207 2040), **Delta Air Lines** (Tel 2275 9292) and **Copa Airlines** (Tel 2209 2672) are among others providing services to El Salvador.

**Boat**
El Salvador shares the Golfo de Fonseca with Honduras and Nicaragua. Boats occasionally ferry passengers between La Unión (El Salvador), Coyolito, Amapala or San Lorenzo (Honduras), and Potosí (Nicaragua). Going by sea does not save time since there are no scheduled passenger boats and land crossings are relatively close.

**Bus**
In San Salvador most international buses leave from the **Terminal Puerto Bus** (Map p28; Alameda Juan Pablo II at 19a Av Norte). Take city bus 29, 101D, 7C or 52 to get there. Other departure points are indicated below. Santa Ana and San Miguel also have international bus services.

For private transfers, contact **Suchitoto Tours** (Tel 2513 1667; suchitoto.tours@gmail.com). The owner Miguel takes travelers direct to destinations in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras and provides a wealth of information.

**GUATEMALA & MEXICO**
The **Tica Bus** that runs to Guatemala City continues to the Mexican border at Tapachula, Chiapas. From San Salvador, the trip takes 12 hours and costs US$23 one way.

Border crossings to Guatemala are La Hachadura, Las Chinamas, San Cristóbal and Angüitá. Ordinary buses go just to the border, international buses continue to Guatemala City.

From the **Terminal Puerto Bus** in San Salvador, second-class bus lines provide daily service to Guatemala. Departures are hourly from 4am to 3pm daily (US$10, five hours).

**King Quality** (Tel in San Salvador 2271 1361) offers deluxe service to Guatemala City from the same terminal, featuring air-con, movies and a meal (one way/round-trip US$26/33), departing at 6am and 3:30pm; Comfort Lines has similar service (one way US$82), departing at 7:30am and 1:30pm.

**Tica Bus** (Tel 222 4808; www.ticabus.com; 8am-4:30pm) has service to Guatemala City at 6am (US$11, five hours) from the **Hotel San Carlos** (Map p28; Tel 2222 8975; Calle Concepción btwn 10a & 12a Aves Norte). Reserve one to two days in advance and arrive at the San Carlos a half-hour early. Tica Bus is inside the hotel.

**Pullmantur** (Map p28; Tel 2241 1300; www.pullmantur.com in Spanish; Hotel Sheraton Presidente; Av La Revolución, Zona Rosa) also serves Guatemala City. Departures are Monday through Saturday at 7am and 3pm, and Sunday at 7am and 3pm (US$26/41 for executive/1st class, 4½ hours). Purchase tickets at the Pullmantur office in the hotel.

Ordinary buses to the borders leave San Salvador from the **Terminal de Occidente**, usually connecting through Sonsonate, Santa Ana, Ahuachapán or Metapán.

For **La Hachadura**, take bus 205 to Sonsonate (US$0.70, 1½ hours) and transfer to bus 259 (US$0.80, 1½ hours) to the border.

For Las Chinamas, take bus 202 to Ahuachapán (from Santa Ana, use bus 210) and transfer to bus 263.

For **San Cristóbal**, bus 498 leaves from the **Terminal del Occidente** five times daily. Alternatively, take bus 201 to Santa Ana, where bus 236 leaves every half-hour for the border. Either way, the trip takes about three hours and costs US$2.50.

**HONDURAS**
Border crossings to Honduras include El Poy, El Amatillo and Sahabanetas/Pergüin. Note that there is no Salvadoran immigration post at Sahabanetas/Pergüin. It is OK to leave the country here only if you don’t plan on returning.

International buses to Honduras leave from Terminal Puerto Bus in San Salvador. (International buses can also be picked up in Santa Ana and San Miguel; see p297 and p311.) Air-conditioned **King Quality** buses leave every day for Tegucigalpa at 6am and 1:30pm (US$28, six hours) and San Pedro Sula at 5am and 12:30pm (one way/round-trip US$28/41, six hours).

Ordinary buses to the border leave from the **Terminal de Oriente**. For El Poy, bus 119 leaves the **Terminal de Oriente** via La Palma (US$1.60, three hours), departing every half-hour from the terminal. At the border, you can pick up a bus or colectivo (shared taxi) to Nueva Ocotepéque and continue by bus from there.

For El Amatillo take bus 306 or 346 from San Salvador via San Miguel (US$3, four hours; express service also available). After crossing the border, you can catch a bus to Tegucigalpa or Choluteca. Microbuses also go from El Amatillo to the Nicaraguan border at Guasaule (US$5, two hours).

**NICARAGUA, COSTA RICA & PANAMA**
Tica Bus leaves the Hotel San Carlos at 6am and arrives in Managua, Nicaragua, between 5pm and 6pm (US$25 one way). If continuing on, spend the night and leave the following morning at 3am. The bus arrives in San José, Costa Rica, between 3pm and 4pm (US$42 one way from San Salvador). It then leaves at 10pm for Panama (US$61 one way from San Salvador), where you arrive between 3pm and 4pm the following day, making for a grand total of three days of bus travel.

**King Quality** has daily services to San José, Costa Rica (US$48, 18 hours) leaving at 3:30am from the Terminal Puerto Bus.

**Car & Motorcycle**
If you drive into El Salvador, you must show a driver’s license (an international driving permit is accepted) and proof that you own the vehicle. You must also fill out extensive forms. Car insurance is available and advisable but not required. Vehicles may remain in El Salvador for 30 days. If you wish to stay longer, it’s best to leave the country and drive back in rather than attempt to deal with the Transport Ministry.

**GETTING AROUND**

**Boat**
You’ll need to use a boat to get around the Bahía de Jiquilisco in eastern El Salvador for any trips in the Golfo de Fonseca, near La Unión. Otherwise, water transportation is rare.

**Bus**
Intercity buses are retired American school buses, scrubbed and painted wild colors. Most bus terminals are as chaotic and dirty as the area around them. Information is rarely posted, but other passengers can point you in the right direction. It can be hard to determine which bus on a given route is leaving first – engine revving and false starts play for passengers. Try following the crowd. There are no ticket offices; purchase your ticket on the bus once you’re seated.

Buses run frequently to points throughout the country and are very cheap (US$0.40 to US$4). Some weekend fares increase up to 25%. Routes to some eastern destinations have different categories: ordinario, especial and super especial. The latter two options cost more, but they are faster and more comfortable. Most intercity bus services begin between 4am and 5am and end between 6pm and 7pm.

**Car & Motorcycle**
Most roads in El Salvador are paved and a pleasure to drive. By driving around the country you can see more in less time. The downside is searching for unmarked roads and turnoffs. Gas is not cheap either. A gallon of regular unleaded is about US$3.30.

Get in the habit of lightly honking, especially when passing or before turning a curve. Also watch for signals from other cars, usually a hand waving for you to pass them or for them to cut you off. Police set up checkpoints, especially on roads to border crossings. Car jacking is a problem, as is getting parts stolen off your parked car. Don’t drive alone in areas of ill repute and park in safe places. Car insurance is a good idea, but not required.
HISTORY
San Salvador was founded in 1525 by the Spanish conqueror Pedro de Alvarado, about 30km northeast of where it now stands, near Suchitoto. It was moved to its present site three years later, and declared a city in 1546. It was here in San Salvador in 1811 that Father José Matías Delgado first called for Central American independence. Once this was achieved, San Salvador became the capital of the united Provinces of Central America from 1834 to 1839 when El Salvador gained its own independence. It has since been the capital of El Salvador.

Natural disasters have beleaguered the city, including more than a dozen major earthquakes (and hundreds of smaller ones). San Salvador was destroyed by tremors in 1854 and 1873, by the eruption of Volcán San Salvador in 1917 and yet again by floods in 1934. The earthquake of October 10, 1986 caused considerable damage, and the most recent on January 13, 2001, contributed its share. From assassinations to student protests, San Salvador served as a flashpoint in El Salvador’s long civil war. In November 1989, the FMLN’s 'final offensive' brought bitter fighting into the city streets. To quell the attack, government forces bombed neighborhoods thought to harbor guerrillas and their supporters. Hundreds of civilians and soldiers on both sides died. The attack and counterattack left parts of the city in shambles, and proved that neither the government nor the guerrillas would win the war militarily. After a 26-month stalemate, peace accords were signed in 1992.

The declining economy during the war sparked an internal migration from the countryside to the city of mostly poor families and laborers; today over a quarter of the population of El Salvador inhabits the metropolitan area of the capital. Though San Salvador produces nearly 65% of the national GDP, unemployment is high and people do whatever they can to get by – vendors of all ages ply the streets and major intersections, selling everything from candy to cell phone chargers. On buses, vitamins and other supplements are marketed with vigor and creativity.

ORIENTATION
San Salvador follows the same grid pattern as most Central American cities. Unfortunately, signage is sparse in the central area (check for names on the street curbs). From the point at the cathedral, Av España goes north and Av Cuartelín south; Calle Arce runs to the west and Calle Delgado to the east.

Avenidas (avenues) run north–south, and change from ‘Sur’ (South) to ‘Norte’ (North) when they cross the major east–west artery (Calles Arce and Delgado). Likewise, avenues are odd- or even-numbered depending on whether they are east or west of the north–south artery (Avs Cuartelín and España). So, 5a Av Sur is south of Calle Arce and west of Av Cuartelín (because it’s odd-numbered). Calles (streets) are similarly ordered, only using ‘Oriente’ (East; abbreviated ‘Ote’) and ‘Poniente’ (West; abbreviated ‘Pon’ or ‘Pte’). It’s confusing to the visitor at first, but you’ll quickly learn the ordinariness of it. The odd-even thing can be tricky, ie 25a Av is one block from 27a Av, but it’s more than 25 blocks from 26a Av!

Av España leads up to 29a Calle Poniente, which heads west to the Universidad Nacional de El Salvador at the intersection of Blvd de los Héroes and Calle San Antonio Abad. Av Cuartelín crosses Blvd Venezuela, which links the east and west bus terminals, and continues south to Parque Balboa and Puerta del Diablo, crossing the airport highway along the way. From the city center, 1a Calle Poniente and Calle Rubén Dario, to the north and south of Arce respectively, are the main roads to the wealthier west.

GETTING INTO TOWN FROM THE AIRPORT
Shuttles operated by Taxis Acaya (Map p28; airport 2239 9282, in town 2271 4937; cta 19a Av Norte & 3a Calle Poniente) offer the best way to/from the airport. The trip costs US$4 and takes 45 minutes. In San Salvador, shuttles leave from Taxis Acaya behind the Puerto Bus Terminal, at 6am, 7am, 10am and 2pm. From the airport, they depart at 9am, 1pm and 5:30pm.

Microbus 138 (US$0.60, 45 to 60 minutes, every 10 minutes) passes the airport traveling to and from the city center. Pick it up just south of Plaza Barrios in town. The bus doesn’t enter the terminal area and the stop is easy to miss. Politely pester the driver and his assistant to stop at the airport. If heading into town, cut through the parking lot to reach the highway (a 75m walk) and a bus shelter. Once downtown, a taxi costs US$4 to US$7. Bus 30 goes to Metrocentro and Blvd de los Héroes (from Plaza Barrios walk two blocks north, turn right one block to Parque Liberdad).

You can also go directly from the airport to La Libertad – it’s about the same distance as San Salvador. Take bus 133 to the puente a Comalapa (Comalapa overpass) a few minutes away. A path leads up onto the intersecting road; from there it’s 100m to the town of Comalapa, where bus 187 or 495 goes every 20 minutes to La Libertad (US$0.35).

A taxi between San Salvador or La Libertad and the airport costs US$20 – don’t bother trying to bargain.
Near the center:

**Ciber Snack** (Map p281; cnr 2a Av Sur & 4a Calle Ote; per hr US$1; 7:30am-6:30pm Mon-Sat)  

**Infocentros** (Map p281; 19a Av Norte; per hr US$1; 7am-8:30pm Mon-Fri, 7am-6pm Sat) International calls available.

**Laundry**

**Lavapronto** (Map p283; Calle Los Sisímiles 2949; 7am-6pm Mon-Fri, 7am-5pm Sat) Charges US$54 per load. Many hotels do laundry as well.

**Medical Services**

**Hospital Bloom** (Map p283; 2225 4114; Blvd de los Héroes at Av Gustavo Guerrero/25a Av Norte) Public hospital with long lines. Specializes in children’s treatment.

**Hospital de Diagnóstico** (Map p278; 2226 8878; Calle 21 Pte at 2a Diagonal) Considered one of the country’s best hospitals, relatively inexpensive.

**Hospital Diagnóstico Escalón** Map p278; 2264 4422; 3a Calle Pte) Recommended by the US embassy.

**Money**

Banks and 24-hour ATMs are found throughout the capital, issuing US dollars.

**Banco Credomatic** (Map p283 & p281) Branches located in the centro and next to the Super Selectos supermarket, in the Centro Comercial San Luis, off Calle San Antonio Abad. Changes traveler’s checks or gives cash advances on MasterCard.

**Banco Cuscatlán** (Map p283 & p281) ATMs that accept all cards are located in Metrocentro Mall and Galerías Mall, where you may be charged a fee. Branches change traveler’s checks and can give cash advances on Visa cards.

**Casas de Cambio** (Map p281) Changes foreign currency.

**Dispensa de Don Juan** (Map p281) Near Plaza Barrios, has several ATMs and is probably the most secure place to withdraw money in the centro.

**Post**

**Correos Central** (Map p281; Centro Gobierno; 7:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) A smaller branch is in Metrocentro by the Blvd de los Héroes entrance (Map p283).

**Tourist Information**

**Corsatur** (Map p281; 2243 7835; corsatur@salnet.net; 8:30am-noon, 1-4pm Mon-Sat) Inconveniently located outside the city; offers maps, brochures and a sometimes-handy magazine. Its airport branch is usually unmanned.

**ISTU** (Map p281; 2222 8000; istu@mh.gob.sv; Calle Rubén Darío 619; 6:30am-noon, 1-4pm Mon-Sat) General information about El Salvador’s national parks and turcentros.

**Ministerio de Trabajo’s Auxiliary Office** (Map p278; 2298 8739; Calle Nueva Dos 19; 8am-12:30pm, 1:30-5:30pm) Inconveniently located outside the city; offers maps, brochures and a sometimes-handy magazine. Its airport branch is usually unmanned.

**Peace Corps** (2207 6000; www.peacecorps.gov) These days this US volunteer organization is dedicating
PEOPLE PACKING HEAT
Enter El Salvador and you’ll wonder if you’ve stumbled onto an NRA convention. Banks, hotels and even bikini boutiques are patrolled by clean-shaven guards packing M16s and 9mm pistols. While the war is long over, this security-obsessed country employs over 18,000 security guards. In addition, there are countless private citizens accessorizing with arms, easily purchased in gun shops at the mall among the boutiques. Yet the tide might be turning. In an effort to curb violence, the legislature passed a series of measures banning guns in public areas in December, 2006. Will it affect availability? Maybe not. Of the estimated 500,000 firearms in El Salvador, 60% are illegal. A 10-month period in 2006 saw 3000 murders in the country. The stricter measures of President Anthony Saca’s Super Mano Dura (Super Hard Hand) policy create more arrests but few convictions. To combat violence, law enforcement will have to somehow quell that old culture of combat and the conditions that lead to crime.

more efforts to creating sustainable tourism in rural areas. If you want to get off the beaten track, they may be a good resource, although the office is not equipped for public visits. Volunteers are certainly receptive to visitors to tourism projects. At the time of research the office was being moved so call for further information.

Salvador (Map p278; 2279 1515; www.salva natura.org in Spanish; 33 Av Sur 640; 8am-12:30pm, 2-5:30pm Mon-Fri) Friendly and helpful staff manage Parque Nacional El Imposible and Parque Nacional los Volcanes. Call before visiting either park.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES
Travelers may not experience it first-hand, but crime is a serious problem in San Salvador. Pick-pocketing occurs in broad daylight. Travel light, skip flashy jewelry and watches, and stay aware of your belongings, especially on buses, in market areas and street crowds. If you are robbed, just hand over the goods. If you are robbed, just hand over the goods.

If you are robbed, just hand over the goods.

SIGHTS
City Center
El centro overloads the senses with blaring beats, sputtering traffic and crowds squeezing through the artery of busy markets. It is far more interesting than the sterile suburbs, and long-term makeovers are finally starting to bear fruit. The main plaza is Plaza Barrios, where local protests usually begin or end. Two blocks east is Parque Libertad, where a winged statue of Liberty holds court.

CATEDRAL METROPOLITANA
Fernando Llort painted the colorful campesino motif façade of this beige stucco building (Map p281). Its blue and yellow checked dome faces Plaza Barrios and marks the center of the city’s street grid. Completed in 1999 after years of renovation, the cathedral stands on the site of an earlier version that burned in 1956. Archbishop Oscar A Romero’s tomb is underneath, visited by Pope John Paul II in March 1993.

IGLESIA EL ROSARIO
In spite of appearances, which show a dilapidated hanger, this austere construction (Map p281) is one of the most interesting churches in the country. A soaring arched roof with stained-glass panels covers a unique interior adorned with scrap-metal figures. More stone and metal statues stand on the side across from the entrance. The father of Central American independence, Padre Delgado, is buried here.

OTHER HISTORICAL BUILDINGS
Government headquarters before the dev- astating 1986 earthquake, the ornate Palacio Nacional (Map p281) occupies the west side of the plaza. Built in the early 20th century of Italian marble, the palace displays the classical style fashionable at the time. The imposing Biblioteca Nacional (Map p281) is on the plaza’s south end. The Teatro Nacional (Map p281) east from the cathedral along Delgado, was erected in 1917 and functioned as a movie house for 50-odd years before an opulent renovation added ornate gilt boxes, sensuous ceiling mural and red velvet galore. West down 6a Calle Poniente, you’ll see the Gothic towers of the decaying Iglesia El Calvario (Map p281).

West of the Center
Calle Rubén Dario heads west from the center, changing names a couple of times along the way. Bus 52 rumbles down the entire length of this road. When the street is Alameda Roosevelt, it passes pleasant Parque Cuscatlán (Map p278), where women sell pupusas and kids kick soccer balls. Further along, it passes Estadio Flor Blanca (Map p278), the national stadium, where soccer matches and the occasional rock concert are held. At 65a Av, you come to Plaza las Américas (Map p278), with the statue El Salvador del Mundo (Map p278). Symbolic of the country, it depicts Jesus on top of the world. Continuing west the road becomes Paseo Gral Escalón, going through the fashionable Colonia Escalón. Further west you hit Plaza Masferrer.

MUSEO NACIONAL DE ANTROPOLOGÍA
This outstanding anthropology museum (Map p278; Av La Revolución; admission US$1.50; 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) has two floors of well-presented exhibits.
on the Maya, Salvadoran history, arts, religion and economy. Prehistoric rock carvings occupy an adjacent garden. All explanations are in Spanish; so it’s well worth bringing a dictionary.

**MUSEO DE ARTE DE EL SALVADOR (MARTE)**
The modern-art museum (Map p278; adult/student US$1/0.50; 2pm–9pm Tue–Sun, closed in May, 2003; and houses a permanent collection of top Salvadoran painters. Rotating exhibits are topical and highly politicized, featuring mostly Latin American artists. Getting here is an uphill walk from the anthropology museum, just behind the large Monumento a la Revolución.

**CENTRO MONSEÑOR ROMERO**
At Universídade Centroamérica José Simeón Cañas ("La UCA"), the Centro Monseñor Romero (Map p278; Calle de Mediterraneo; admission free; 8am–noon, 2–6pm Mon–Fri, 8–11:30am Sat) is a well-organized museum that pays homage to the martyred archbishop. The center is housed in the former quarters of six Jesuits, who, along with their maid and her daughter, were slain in their sleep by military forces in 1989. The Jesuits are buried in the chapel just a few meters away. UCA students give tours. While you’re there, walk over to Iglesia de Guadalupe, a pretty church on the highway, where you can catch a bus.

**HOSPITAL LA DIVINA PROVIDENCIA**
Also known as El Hospitalito (Map p278; Av B at Calle Toluca; admission free; 8am–noon & 2–5pm) Monsenor Romero was assassinated by government agents while giving mass in this chapel on March 24, 1980. The chapel is still in use. Romero lived his last years in this public hospital, eschewing more prominent assignments and bodyguards. You can tour four small rooms, explaining everything from the history of sorpresas, miniature scenes of life hidden under carved forms of eggs or fruit (see p307). Cuadros (paintings) depict village life, more recently including humorous takes on illegal immigration and marriage and sex. To get more up close, ask for the names and addresses of known artists who receive visitors to their village workshops.

**ACTIVITIES**
Friendly and bilingual Julio and Gabi Vega of Akwatera (2263 2211; www.akwatera.com) offer tailor-made land- and water-based ecotours, including horseback riding and mountain biking, and surfing and kayaking.

**BOULEVARD DE LOS HÉROES**
Formed ‘against the chaos of amnesia,’ the Muséum de la Palabra y la Imagen is a 1km downhill walk to the garden. It’s a 10am-6pm Tue–Sun) documents El Salvador’s culture and history. Exhibits are incredible if searing, including modern-art installations and black-and-white war photos. Content includes the revolutionary movement of the 1970s and ’80s and portraits of indigenous groups and women in history. Director Carlos Henríquez Consalvi, a Venezuelan-born journalist, was the founder and front voice for Radio Venceremos, a radio station crucial to the pro-guerrilla cause. There’s a reconstructed radio station and an interesting library with DVDs in English.

**MUSEO DE ARTE POPULAR**
A little gem of a museum (Map p278; Av San José 125; admission US$1; 10am–5pm Tue–Fri, 10am–6pm Sat) dedicated to El Salvador’s quirky folk art. The curator personally guides guests around small rooms, explaining everything from weaving techniques to the history of sorpresas, miniature scenes of life hidden under carved forms of eggs or fruit (see p307).

**IGLESIA DE LA CEIBA**
Also called El Salvador’s only rafting outfit Ríos Aventuras (Map p278; 2298 0335; www.riosaventuras.com sv in Spanish; Av Olimpia 3597) offers white-water rafting down the Rio Lempa, Rio Paz, along the Guatemalan border and Rio Bandera. Rapids range from easy class I–II to class III–IV in winter. Trips include three hours of rafting, plus breakfast, lunch, snacks and transportation from San Salvador. Cost per person US$60.

**COURSES**
Melida Anaya Montes Spanish Language School (CIS, Map p278; 2235 1330; www.cis-elsalvador.org; Colonia Libertad, Av Bolivar 103) Named after a prominent educator who became an FMLN commander amid growing government repression, this language school incorporates social and political themes. Language classes meet for four hours daily and cost US$100 per week, plus a one-time US$25 application fee and a weekly US$12.50 administration fee. Homestays for US$70 a week, including two meals per day, are available.
Volunteering
Centro de Intercambio y Solidaridad (CIS; 5223 1330; www.cis-elsalvador.org; Colonia Libertad, Av Bolívar 103) There are opportunities for volunteers to help teach English to low-income Salvadorans (see p327) or observe elections (with conversational Spanish). There’s a 10-week minimum commitment and teachers get half-price Spanish classes in return.

Sleeping
Upmarket lodgings are concentrated in Zona Rosa and Colonia Escalón, also close to some hotspots for dancing and dining. Safe and convenient, the Blvd de los Héroes area offers reasonable lodgings close to the Universidad Nacional and lively bohemian bars, restaurants and nightlife. The working-class area around the Universidad Tecnológica (south of the Puerto Bus terminal) offers shabby streets and easy access to the airport shuttle and international buses. The city center has few charms, parts are downright tattered and dangerous after dark.

City Center
With most rooms let by the hour and the sketch-factor high at night, the centro (Map p281) is the preference of few travelers. Here’s a few options if you can’t resist its gritty vitality.

Hotel Internacional Custodio (5221 5810; 10a Av Sur 109; $ per person with/without bathroom US$5/9) The friendly Bible-reading owner hopes to remodel this run-down behemoth, but the rumor is longstanding. At least rooms are spacious and the sheets bright white though ridden with holes. Avoid the musty 1st floor.

Hotel San Carlos (5222 1664; Calle Concepción 121; $ per person US$12) Conveniently located at the Tica bus terminal, this dive sports pancake-thin mattresses in cramped rooms. At least they’re decently clean with private bathroom.

Hotel Nuevo Panamericano (5221 1199; 8a Av Sur 113; US$15; P C) Not a deal for singles, these 26 tidy tile rooms show some wear. Some are stuffed with beds. The clients here seem to love stilettos – you decide why that is.

The best features are the bouncy mattresses and rooftop terrace with views. Showers are solar-powered. There’s no sign but you’ll find it behind El Soplón Tipico.

Near Universidad Tecnológica
This area west of el centro (Map p278) is safer and more relaxed than downtown. It’s near the Universidad Tecnológica, where there’s a bunch of cheap eats and internet cafés. It’s convenient to the Terminal Puero Bus for international buses. Take taxis at night.

Hotel American Guest House (5271 0224; 17 Ave Norte 119; s/d with US$12/14; with bathroom US$15/20) An old-fashioned home where large, dark rooms have hardwood furniture and bubbling wallpaper. It’s entertaining to browse the mix of tacky and truly compelling antiques. There’s an onsite cafetería.

Hotel Pasión Luna (5221 4786; 3a Calle Poniente 1037; $ with fan US$12/17) Good value with attentive staff, but not as charming as the Villa Florencia next door. Bathrooms lack shower curtains and the decor is plain. Rooms in the back are quieter.

Hotel Villa Florencia (5221 1706; www.hotelvillaflorencia.com) A lovely colonial place in top shape, with remodeled rooms with terracotta tiles and fresh linens. Enjoy the sunny fern-lined courtyard and new upstairs rooms with great light. It’s next to a quiet funeral home.

Zona Rosa & Colonia Escalón
Casa Florida (5223 0156; www.hotelazuehuallazuma.com; 3a Av Norte 3, s/d US$18/25, with air-con US$20/28; with bathroom US$25/35; with bathroom US$27/35) Basking in familial warmth, this guesthouse is the best value in town. The rooms are bright and spacious, with fresh white linens, towels and clean, hot showers.

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Boulevard de los Héroes
You can easily walk to bars and restaurants on Calle San Antonio Abad or Blvd Universitario, or take the Metrocentro mall. Buses to the bus terminals, Zona Rosa and the center (and from there, the airport) all pass here. All are on Map p283.

Ximena’s Guest House (5269 2481; www.ximena guesthouse.com; Calle San Salvador 202; dm US$6-8, US$12/15) San Salvador’s pioneer guesthouse is still lovely and bohemian but starting to show wear and tear. Beware of the extras – window screens cost US$2, as does hourly internet access, and the food (varied and vegetarian-friendly) ain’t cheap. It’s still a good place to meet other travelers.

Almohada (5221 8021; almohadajosep@yahoo.com; Calle Berlin 220; dm US$7; P) ‘The Pillow’ is popular with visiting non-profit groups. Atmosphere is coaxed out of tie-dyed curtains, hardwood furniture and bubbling wallpaper. It’s entertaining to browse the mix of tacky and truly compelling antiques. There’s an onsite cafetería.

Hotel Villa Florencia Zona Rosa (5221 1706; www.hotelvillaflorencia.com in Spanish; 3a Calle Poniente 1023; s/d US$15/19/21) A lovely colonial place in top shape, with remodeled rooms with terracotta tiles and fresh linens. Enjoy the sunny fern-lined courtyard and new upstairs rooms with great light. It’s next to a quiet funeral home.

Las Cofradías
There are opportunities for volunteers to help teach English to energetic Maria Lidia. Singles are small but cheery and immaculately kept, doubles are average size. In a convenient, safe and quiet location. Breakfast is US$2 extra.

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Zona Rosa & Colonia Escalón
Casa Florida (5223 0156; www.hotelazuehuallazuma.com; 3a Av Norte 3, s/d US$18/25, with air-con US$20/28; with bathroom US$25/35; with bathroom US$27/35) Basking in familial warmth, this guesthouse is the best value in town. The rooms are bright and spacious, with fresh white linens, towels and clean, hot showers. Guests get a half-hour of free internet, breakfast and ample assistance in English.

International Guest House (5226 7343; guesthouse@hotmail.com; 3a Av Norte 9; s/d US$18/35; P C) A large guesthouse with secure, low-lit rooms showing worn tile and mismatched fixtures. The plus includes a large, covered patio out back, friendly service and free internet. It’s popular with groups.

El Torogoz (5225 4172; 3a Av Norte 78; eltorogoz@esat.net; s/d with breakfast US$24/37; P C) Prices have climbed at this pleasant family hotel and the shared bathrooms and slow service might make you wonder why. But nice features include a brick courtyard with plants, cable TV and a small swimming pool.

Hotel Florida (5226 2540; www.floridahotelflorida.com; Pasaje Los Almendros 115; s/d with fan US$24/30; s/d with air-con US$35/60; P) Modern and sunny, this friendly hotel might not be the bargain it once was, but it is still reliable and clean.

The center has plenty of eateries but few standouts. For a quick bite check out the sidewalk comedores (main US$3-5) a block west of Plaza Barrios fishing up panes de pollo (big chicken sandwiches) and bistec encebollado (onion grilled beef).

Le Croissant (Map p278; 1a Calle Pte 3883; Colonia Escalón; pastries US$1.50-3; 11am-3pm) Crusty, fresh baguettes and a gorgeous selection of pastries will tempt even the not-hungry traveler. There’s no seating, so grab it to go.

Cafetería Arco Iris (Map p278; 59a Av Sur; mains US$2; P) Breakfast & lunch Mon-Sat) A lesson in the art of the nowadays café. Coffee and common kitchen are great features.

Las Vacas Gordas (Map p278; 2264 6148; Calle de Miaroa, Colonia Escalón; buffet US$6; Dinner) A lesson in everything Salvadoran. Bring your hunger (it’s all you can eat) and stack a handmade potter plate with tamales de clote (corn tamales), riguras (tortillas in a corn husk), gallina (hen) and neguedos (plantains and yucca with honey and cinnamon).

Café Maquilishuat (Map p281; Simón Centro, 1st fl; mains US$2-6; 7:30am-7pm) Upmarket for a cafetería (with hand-painted ceramics and flatscreen TV), this super-sparkling eatery offers a welcome escape from the hubbub. Grab a pastry or dine on típica, usually meat, crepes or rice, washing it down with atole (cinnamon rice milk).

La Ventana (Map p278; 2264 4885; 83 Av Norte 510 at 9a Calle Poniente; mains US$4-9; 8am-1am Tue-Sat, 10-12:30am Sun) A hip and hot eatery where the food falls second to atmosphere. The deck seating and bohemian backdrop. The menu offers German sausages, pastas, pizzas and Mexican fare. Service can be pitifully slow and indifferent.

La Posada del Rey (Map p278; 2264 5245; www.posadadelreycomer.com in Spanish; Pasaje Bordeloy, Colonia Escalón; mains US$44/70; P C) On the swanky side of town you’ll find this fortress-like hotel with a placid atmosphere and top service. Carved colonial furniture and bucolic paintings of the countryside set the scene for a real treat. Rooms are well-appointed and sunny and there’s free wireless and an upmarket onsite restaurant. Prices may be negotiable at slow times.
**Boulevard de los Héroes**

Calle San Antonio Abad has the best dining options but the many spots in and around the Metrocentro mall are clean and convenient. All are on Map p283.

**Pupusería la Ceiba** (Calle San Antonio Abad; mains US$1.5; 7am-9pm Sun) Whether you’re grabbing a dollar breakfast of tamales, coffee and eggs or downsizing a few hot pupusas, this corner café is a bargain.

**Casablanca Café** (Calle San Antonio Abad; mains US$2.5; 7:30am-5pm Mon-Sat) What this cement cafeteria lacks in ambience it makes up for with tasty comida a la vista ranging from coconut chicken to mashed beans and more.

**Mister Donut** (MetroSur; mains US$2.4; 6am-8pm)

There’s a surprising retro appeal to this updated donut shop in the mall, upgraded to serve sandwiches and tamales in leatherette booths.

**Sol y Luna** (cnr Blvd Universitario & Av C; mains US$2-4; 8am-5:30pm) Enjoy rare vegetarian fare served in hearty cafeteria-style. Loaves of cashew-almond bread, salads and fruit shakes round out the options.

**La Luna Casa y Arte** (Map p283; 2260 2921; www.lalunacasayarte.com; Calle Berlin 228; mains US$2.5; 7am-2am Mon-Fri, 4:30pm-2am Sat) It’s an arts venue (right) that happens to have outstanding grilled sandwiches, home-made soups and salads. The coffee bar and desserts prove worthy too.

**Las Fajitas** (Blvd Universitario; mains US$3-6; 7pm & dinner) Tex-Mex goes festive with paper cutouts and wooden benches. The pinchos (beef-kababs) are juicy and gigantic, and the tacos come with a range of salsas to sample.

**Salvatore’s** (35a Av Norte; mains US$3-6; 7pm & dinner) Come to this convenient neighborhood joint for cheap personal pizzas or whopping plates of pasta.

**El Sopón Típico** (Pasajes la Palmas & los Almondos; mains US$5; 10:30am-9pm) Whet your appetite for roasted chicken, fresh corn tortillas and home-made curtido (spicy pickled cabbage). The adventurous can go for rabbit, rooster or roasted goat. Fresh and tart arrayeju (beef-kababs on hooks and brightly embroidered cotton). Scrutinize crafts since quality varies widely.

**New boards and accessories, as well as unlimited beta on surf breaks, are available at**

**Pacific Surf & Sport** (Map p287; 2245 1584; Blvd El Hipodromo 14, Zona Rosa; 11am-8pm Mon-Sat).

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

**Air**

Aeropuerto Internacional Comalapa, 50km south-east of San Salvador, is a major Central American hub. Airline offices in San Salvador include:

- **American Airlines** (Map p278; 2298 0777; Edificio Centroamericana, Alameda Roosevelt)
- **Continental** (Map p283; 2207 2040; Metrocentro Mall, 2nd fl)
- **Copa Airlines** (Map p283; 2209 2672; World Trade Center 1, cnr 89a Av Norte & Calle del Mirador)
- **Delta Air Lines** (Map p287; 2275 9292; World Trade Center 1, cnr 89a Av Norte & Calle del Mirador)
- **TACA** (Map p278; 2207 8222; Galerías Escalón, street level)
- **United Airlines** (Map p278; 2279 3900; Galerías Escalón, street level)

**Bus**

San Salvador has three main terminals for national long-distance buses. Buses serving all points east and a few northern destinations arrive and depart from the **Terminal de Oriente** (Map p278; Avenida Juan Pablo II, on the eastern side of the city. Buses serving all points west, including the Guatemalan border, arrive and depart from the **Terminal de Occidente** (Map p278; Blvd Venezuela near 49a Av Sur). In the south of the city the **Terminal de Sur** (Map p278; Autopista a Comalapa), also called Terminal San Marcos, serves destinations to the south and southeast.

See p274 for information on international buses leaving from the hotels and Terminal Puerto Bus.

**TERMINAL DE ORIENTE**

To get to the terminal, take bus 9, 29 or 34 from the city center; bus 29 or 52 from Blvd de los Héroes; bus 7C or 34 from Terminal Puerto Bus.

**ENTERTAINMENT**

Look for *Diario de Hoy’s Thursday pullout section Planeta Alternativa* for weekly concert and event listings.

**Cinemas**

Hollywood films with Spanish subtitles dominate the theater while some bars listed earlier have alternative movie nights. Major newspapers have schedules. Wednesday is half price.

**Cine Reforma** (Map p283; 2225 9588; Blvd Universitario) Discounts on random Tuesdays.

**CineMark** (Map p283; 2261 2001; Metrocentro, 3rd fl, Blvd de los Héroes; admission US$3)

**Cinépolis** (Map p278; Galerías Escalón) A new 11-screen megaplex.

**La Luna Casa y Arte** (Map p283; 2260 2921; www.lalunacasayarte.com in Spanish; Calle Berlin 228; admission free) Screenings at 8pm Wednesday.

**Multicinemas Majestic** (Map p281; 2222 5965; Av España; admission US$1.75)

**Theater**

**Teatro Lúes Poma** (Map p283; 2241 1029; Metrocentro; admission US$3) A modern playhouse with great offerings, strangely set at the mall.

**SHOPPING**

The gallery of La Palma artist Fernando Llor is four long blocks south of Plaza Masferrer.

**El Arbol de Dios** (Map p281; Av las Magnolias 206; 9:30am-9pm Mon-Sat) Houses an extensive collection of his work, including sophisticated pieces unlike his simpler and better-known wood paintings.

A garden array of Che and Romero T-shirts, cheap shoes and artesanía can be found in this army barracks turned public market **Mercado Ex-Ármatel** (Map p281; Calle Delgado; 7:00am-6pm Mon-Sat, 7:30am-2pm Sun). Swag includes hammocks on hooks and brightly embroidered cotton. Scrutinize crafts since quality varies widely.

**LOCAL MUSIC PICKS: CESAR’S SEVEN**

If music is the universal language, get fluent in Salvadoran beats. With the music scene in San Salvador thriving, it’s worth checking out a band or two (you can later say you knew them back when). To start you off, Cesar, a budding musician from Juayúa, offers his top picks:

- **Anastacio y los del Monte**
- **Reggae Hermanos Flores**
- **Cumbia Tantocpac Pre-Hispanic**
- **Fusion Lapa**
- **Traditional rock Adhesivo**
- **New wave ska El Atico**
- **Progressive rock Armando Solorzano**

Latin pop

If you don’t come upon these bands playing live in your travels, find them online at the CD store. The best pulse on local music is www.musica.com.sv.

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GETTING AROUND

Bus
San Salvador’s extensive bus network, from large smoke-spewing monsters to zippy microroutes, can get you just about anywhere. Fares are US$0.17 to US$0.23.

Buses run frequently from 5am to 7:30pm daily; fewer buses run on Sunday. Services stop between 7:30pm and 8:30pm; microroutes run later around 9pm. After 9pm you’ll have to take a taxi.

In the center, it is fastest to walk a few blocks away from Plaza Barrios to catch your bus, as the traffic is hopelessly snarled most of the time. But if you have bags, it’s safer and easier to get on a bus as soon as possible. Key routes include:

Bus 9 Goes down 29a Av Norte alongside the Universidad de El Salvador. Then it turns east toward the city center, heading past the cathedral and up Independencia past Terminal de Oriente.

Bus 26 Passes Plaza Barrios and Parque Zoológico on its way to Terminal del Sur.

Bus 29 Goes to Terminal de Oriente via the center. Buses stop between Metrocentro and MetroSur. All head downtown and is the best way to get to and from bus 138 to the airport. Pick it up on behind Terminal Oriente.

Bus 30 Heads downtown and is the best way to get to and from bus 138 to the airport. Pick it up on behind Metrocentro or at Parque Libertad in the center.

Bus 30B A very useful route, especially from Blvd of the Héroes. The bus goes east on Blvd Universitario, by Universidad Nacional, then southwest down Blvd de los Héroes to Metrocentro. From there, it goes west along Alameda Roosevelt, past the El Salvador del Mundo monument and continues west along Paseo Gral Escalón past Galerías mall. It then turns south at 79a Av and continues along Blvd del Hipódromo to Av Revolución, passing through the Zona Rosa and near the art and anthropology museums, then returns on Alameda Araujo, Roosevelt, and 49a Av Sur back to Metrocentro.

Bus 34 Runs from Terminal de Oriente to Metrocentro then down to the Zona Rosa, turning around right in front of Marte art museum. Passes Terminal de Oriente on return.

Bus 42 Takes you to the anthropology museum and La Ceiba de Guadalupe. The bus goes west along Calle Arce from the cathedral and continues along Alameda Roosevelt. At El Salvador del Mundo, it heads southwest along Alameda Araujo, passing the Mercado de Artesanías and Museo Nacional de Antropología David J Guzmán, and continues down the Carr Interamericana, passing La Ceiba de Guadalupe.

Bus 44 The bus to take to the Terminal de Occidente. The route heads southwest down Blvd de los Héroes past Metrocentro and down 49a Av. For the Terminal de Occidente get off at Av Venezuela and walk a few blocks west. The bus passes lower and upper entrances to UCA, and La Ceiba de Guadalupe, heading up Alameda Araujo, past Metrocentro to downtown.

Bus 101 Goes from Plaza Barrios in the center, past MetroSur, past the anthropology museum, past La Ceiba de Guadalupe and on to Santa Tecla.

Car & Motorcycle
Avoid driving through the city center. The traffic gets snarled in daytime and the area is unsafe at night. It’s quickest to take major thoroughfares. One-way streets have an arrow painted on the pavement or signage. For details on car hire, see p275.

Taxi
Taxis are plentiful but unmetered so negotiate a price in advance. A ride in town should cost about US$4 to US$6 during daytime. Rates go up a few dollars late at night. License plates beginning with “A” indicate a registered taxi, in theory they can be held accountable for problems. If you don’t spot a passing taxi, call Taxis Acaya (Map p281; 2271 4937) or Acontaxis (2270 1176).

AROUND SAN SALVADOR

On San Salvador’s outskirts, old mists with new in the oddest of ways. If you could climb the pyramids, the panorama would be obstructed by live wires and Pollo Campero. Ruins stride up to the highway (or vice-versa), as if no one ever considered separating the sacred from the here and now.

The roughneck port of La Libertad acts as the gateway to dozens of fast, powerful and fun surf breaks that incite wide grins. With the gateway to dozens of fast, powerful and fun surf breaks that incite wide grins. With

EL BOQUERÓN
Quezaltepeque (Volcán San Salvador) has two peaks. The higher peak, at 1960m, is called Picacho. The other, Boquerón (Big Mouth), is 1893m high and has a second cone with its crater – 45m high and perfectly symmetrical – formed in 1917. A paved road to the top affords an easy climb with unbelievable views as your reward. Bring a bag to pick up litter if you’re so inspired.

Get an early start as busing from San Salvador takes a couple of hours. From Parque Cuscatlán, take bus 101A or B to Santa Tecla. From there, bus 103 departs from 6a Av Sur to the village of Boquerón. The bus comes sporadically, but pick-ups depart from the same place. The summit is 1km beyond the village.

RUINAS DE SAN ANDRÉS
In 1977 a step pyramid and a large courtyard with a subterranean section were unearthed in this site (admission US$3; 9am-5pm Tue-Sun), inhabited by Maya between AD 600–900. Experts believe that up to 12,000 people lived here. The city once dominated the Valle de Zapotitán and possibly the neighboring Valle de las Hamacas where San Salvador is now situated.

The ruins are interesting and peaceful, if not terribly impressive. Recently, cement walls protecting the original structures were restored back to the original stone and mortar. The main pyramid is called the Campana San Andrés for its bell shape. A trench in front of Estructura 3 shows how the platform was built – 45m high and perfectly symmetrical – formed in 1917. A paved road to the top affords an easy climb with unbelievable views as your reward. Bring a bag to pick up litter if you’re so inspired.

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CIHUATÁN
The modest ruins of Cihuatán (admission US$3; 9am-4pm Tue-Sun) were once an immense urban area alongside the Rio Guazapa, possibly the largest pre-Columbian city between Guatemala and Peru. The city thrived for 100 years before being sacked and burned by unknown invaders in the 10th century AD. It was likely occupied by Maya, Lenca and other groups joined together for commerce during an unstable period. A partial excavation shows evidence of two separate ceremonial centers and hundreds of buildings, a pair of ball courts and a large mound where a pyramid once stood, all surrounded by a low defensive wall.

From the Terminal de Oriente, take bus 119 toward Chalatenango and get off about 4km beyond Las Aguileras; ask the driver to let you off at Las Ruinas. It’s a 900m walk to the site.
get off at km 33, at a small black sign for the ruins. If combining this with a visit to Joya de Céren, visit Joya de Céren first, then catch any bus on the highway for the short distance to San Andrés.

**JOYA DE CÉREN**

Called the Pompeii of America, UN World Heritage Site Joya de Céren (www.chuanatan.org; admission US$5; 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) was a small Maya settlement buried under volcanic ash when the Laguna Caldera Volcano erupted in AD 595. Fleeting residents left behind a wealth of everyday items that provide clues into ancient planting, homebuilding and food storage.

The main compound consists of five small structures – for the layperson it's somewhat overwhelming. The remodeled museum offers a good collection of artifacts and models of the villages. One compelling piece is a small dish showing fingerprints smeared in the remains of an interrupted meal.

The site is 36km west of San Salvador – take bus 108 from Terminal de Occidente and get off after crossing the bridge over the Río Sucio.

**LOS PLANES DE RENDIEROS**

Within this district you will find the popular Parque Balboa (admission US$0.80), a 28-hectare park preserved for families. There are trails for short walks, a skating rink, playgrounds and pre-Columbian-style sculptures. It is 12km from the city center.

Two kilometers past Parque Balboa is Puerta del Diablo (Devil’s Door). Two towering boulders, reputedly once a single stone split in two, form a lookout with fantastic views, minus those of garbage strewn about. During the war this was an execution point, the cliffs offering easy disposal of the bodies.

Take bus 12 ‘Mil Cumbres’ from the east side of the Mercado Central, at 12a Calle Poniente. If you’re driving, head down Av Cuscatlán until you see the signs.

**Panchimalco**

Toltec immigrants founded this tranquil town in a lush valley. The baroque church, completed in 1725 by indigenous craftsmen, features interesting woodwork; check out the indigenous Christ. Local cultural pride is evident in two cultural centers along 1a Av displaying ceramics and dance costumes. Both host cultural events open to the public.

Panchimalco is renowned for its religious festivals, particularly Palm Sunday, when residents march through the streets bearing decorated palm fronds. Early May’s Feria de Cultura de las Flores y las Palmas features palm artistry, folk dancing and fireworks.

Bus 17 departs for Panchimalco from Av 29 de Agosto on the south side of the Mercado Central in San Salvador.

**LA LIBERTAD**

pop 20,100

This run-down port cranks to life early, with hardcore surfers toting their boards, lone fishermen casting at the rocky shore and women working market stalls. This is La Libertad at its most compelling. If you don’t surf and aren’t terribly interested in learning how, you may not find much of interest here. Though El Salvador is promoting it heavily as a tourist destination, this grit-worn city cries out for an extreme makeover, and why not, the surfing’s world class. Shiny additions of a well-lit skate park in the center, new pick-ups emblazoned with ‘Bendición de Dios’ (God’s blessing) and a new, ahem, mall at the east end of town at least show some effort.

**Information**

Banco Agricola (Barrios east of the market or El Faro mall) has a traveler’s checks; there’s a new 24-hour ATM at El Faro mall.

Cyber Fenix (2a Calle Pte; per hr US$1;  9am-8pm) Below the Surf Club Inn.

**Post office** (2a Calle Oriente) Near 2a Av Norte.

**Dangers & Annoyances**

La Libertad has become increasingly unsafe thanks to gang activity and a long-standing drug trade. Pick-pockets and assaults are on the rise. Avoid the area southeast of the plaza at night (there’s better nightlife at the restaurants east of the Lighthouse mall). A local surfer warns about frequent assaults and aggressive dogs by the cemetery on the walk to the point at Punta Roca. Surfers should go accompanied and not bring valuables. Dogs can be deterred by throwing rocks (near them, not at them).

Strong rip currents proliferate throughout the coast. Lifeguards only work weekends in La Libertad and Playa San Diego. Black clams raised in the estuary hold a high concentration of toxins; avoid eating them if you want to keep catching waves.

**Activities**

**BEACHES**

The closest beach to the capital, La Libertad fills up with city dwellers on weekends. In the rainy season (March to October), the beach is rocky, covered with large black boulders, and the rip tide, along with sewage, makes the water uninviting. In the dry season, the rocks get covered in sand, but the boulders are still whipped by the waves. If you just want to frolic in waves, hit the Costa del Balsamo or go 4km east to sandy Playa San Diego.

**SURFING**

You’ll find world-class surfing at Punta Roca, a lively right-hand break smack in front of town. Beginners launch at Playa La Paz (November to February), El Zonte or El Sunzal. Top surf spots with accommodations are found on the Costa Balsamo (p293). For surfboard rental and repair, try:

Habítlas de Tablas de Surf ( 2335 3214; 3a Av Norte 28-7) Not for broken femurs, Saul’s hospital repairs, buys and sells boards, in addition to offering surfing lessons. Just knock if it appears closed.

**HIKING**

About 4km east of La Libertad along the Cojola Malapa road, Parque Nacional Walter T Deininger (admission US$0.80, guided US$12;  7am-noon-1pm & 1-5pm) is named for the German settler who donated the land. It includes two types of forest: caducifolio, which sheds its leaves in summer, and galería, which retains its foliage year-round. A well-maintained 18km trail skirts the park; you must be accompanied by a ranger. Signs mark trails to Río Amayo, ‘the Mystery Cave’ and a lookout showing the forest cascading to the sea. Deer, raccoon and the endangered tepezcuintle (paca) can be spotted, in addition to many bird species, including the togoroz (blue-crowned motmot), El Salvador’s national bird.

To visit Parque Deininger, you supposedly must obtain a permit from ISTU ( 2222 8000) in San Salvador (p279) five days prior to arrival. You might just try showing up and talking with the guard. It’s a 15-minute ride from La Libertad – catch bus 187.

**Sleeping**

Since strolling around at night is inadvisable, choose your lodgings carefully.
EL SALVADOR’S TOP FIVE SURF SPOTS

With 16 right-point breaks and 82° water swarming with sea turtles, what’s not to love? Our favorites:

**Punta Roca** Yes, Central America’s best wave, oft compared to South Africa’s J Bay. A rocky bottom makes it fast and strong. Bring just your board – theft is common on the walk to the point (see p291)

**Las Flores** A fast sandy point break best at low tide. Picture a hollow take-off ending on a black sand beach. A 300m ride is possible – welcome to the Wild East.

**Punta Mango** Short, strong and vertical, this aggressive Indo-men Hawaiian-style break is best reached by boat from Las Flores beach or via bus from El Cuco.

**Playa El Sunzal** Enjoy these consistently big waves alongside a sea of brethren surfers and even kayakers (see opposite).

**Playa Mizata** A sharp, réefy right point break alongside a fun beach break. There’s easy road access but check it out from the cliff (see p294).

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**Posada Margot** (3a Av Sur btwn 2a & 4a Calles Poniente; s/d with shared bathroom US$55) The Margot is a shambly but not unclean accommodations option. Expect to see corrugated tin walls and ripped screens. Definitely bring your own toilet paper.

**La Posada Familiar** (2335 3552; 3a Av Sur at 4a Calle Poniente; s/d US$10/12, s/d with bathroom US$12/15)
Clean but cage-like rooms around a raked dirt courtyard. The plain singles are sad cells, check your fan before settling in.

**Surf Club Inn** (2346 1004; 2a Calle Pte; s/d with bathroom US$12/15)
If you can get over the tinted windows and mismatched velveteen furniture, these large cement rooms with sturdy mattresses are good value. Use the air-con to combat slight smells of mildew. It’s inside a commercial plaza with a handy laundromat downstairs.

**Hotel Rick** (2335 3542; 5a Av Sur; d US$25; )
These basic lodgings are kept in tip-top shape, though the bathrooms are just open stalls. The 2nd floor is brighter and airier.

**Hotel Pacific Sunrise** (2346 2000; www.hotelpacificsalvador.com; Calle El Obispo at Carr Litoral; s/d US$45/57)
This is a basic family-run lodging with concrete rooms that are passably clean, set in a sandy yard with chickens. Guests can cook here (but not the chickens!)

**San Patricio** (2389 6107; Carr Litoral Km 44; s/d US$40/50)
This is a basic family-run lodging with concrete rooms that are passably clean, set in a sandy yard with chickens. Guests can cook here (but not the chickens!)

**Eating**

*Pupusería El Buen Asado* (3a Av Norte btwn El Calvario & 2a Calle Pte; mains US$3-4; 7am-9:30pm) If pupuserías could be fashionable, this place, serving big bean breakfasts, quick tacos and pupusas, would fit the bill.

*La Esquina de Nester* (cnr 2a Calle Pte & 3a Av Norte; mains US$3-4; 10am-10pm) This tiny taquería (taco café) dishes up authentic Mexican tacos stuffed with shrimp or beef or al pastor (with roasted pork).

**Punta Roca** (5a Av Sur at 4a Calle Poniente; mains US$4-10; 8am-8pm, later on weekends) This is a local institution, with a surfer-family at the helm. The cook serves up superb *matricadas* (seafood soup) and shrimp cocktails on the beachfront.

**La Curva de Don Jere** (2335 3436; Calle San Diego; mains US$8-10; 9am-10pm) For fine dining facing the crashing surf, try this place, 200m south of Shell, featuring occasional mariachi bands and live music on weekends.

**La Dolce Vita** (2335 3592; Calle San Diego; mains US$11; 9am-10pm) La Dolce Vita, 225m south of Shell, also has a great beachfront location where Garmine serves up enormous seafood platters and pasta plates.

**Super Selectos** (Mall El Faro; 7:30am-8pm) For self-caterers.

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**Getting There & Away**

There is no bus terminal. Bus 102 goes to San Salvador (US$0.55, one hour).

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**San Diego** (US$8.00, every 15 minutes from 5:40am to 6pm). Buses leave from 4a Av Norte at 2a Calle Oriente.

For Playa El Zonte or Playa Mizata take bus 192 (US$0.50, every 30 minutes from 7am to 5:30pm).

**La COSTA DEL BÁLSAMO**

The Balsam Coast stretches from La Libertad west to La Sunzalapa. Once there was a whole industry here surrounding the valuable aromatic oil extracted by burning the bark of live balsams. Today only a handful of trees remain and cotton has become the main cash crop.

From La Libertad, the road west twists around rocky headlands, giving glimpses of sheltered coves and sandy beaches (mostly private). Weekend hordes head for Playas Conchalito and El Majahual, the latter a wide swath of black sand bordered by endless seafood shacks and parking lots. Wait and you will find better options further on, a whole 50km of uninterrupted beaches.

Bus 80 goes as far as Playa El Sunzal. Beyond that, take the less frequent bus 192.

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**Sleeping & Eating**

**PLAYA COCHALIO**

**Centro Obrero Dr Humberto Romero Alveguere** (Ruta 2; free with permit). This worker’s center has plain rooms and flimsy cots, fronting a rocky beach. Shacks by the beach gate serve food. Guests must obtain prior written permission from the Ministerio de Trabajo en San Salvador (p279).

**PLAYA EL TUNCO**

With a broad beach, narrow sandy streets and colorful matchbox homes, cool little El Tunco offers guests the most dining and lodging options of all the surf villages.

**La Lemba** (7729 5628; www.surf libre.com; dm/d US$5/10; dm/d/tr with bathroom US$11/21) Surfer José has crafted a great budget option with this new narrow two-story featuring wooden decks and cathedral ceiling rooms. The extras alone – cheap surf lessons/rentals (US$10/week), weekday kitchen use and free Zona Rosa bus pick-up in San Salvador – make it worthwhile.

**Papa’s Lodge** (2389 6233; www.papayasurfing.com; s/d US$18/24) A chill guesthouse run by local surf legend Jaime Delgado, aka Papa. Small, clean rooms with shared bathroom have cement block walls and step out onto a shady river deck backed by mangroves. The surf shop offers repairs and lessons.

**Tortuga Surf Lodge** (2389 6125; www.tortugasurf lodge.net; campsites US$6, d with/without bathroom US$27/22) Steps from the surf, Tortuga’s red tile rooms are spacious and spotless. Bamboo railings, hand-carved furniture and cold beers (US$1.25) are nice touches.

**Tektani Kal** (2389 6388; www.tekikanikal.com; s/d 8am-8pm, later on weekends) This basic family-run lodging with concrete rooms that are passably clean, set in a sandy yard with chickens. Guests can cook here (but not the chickens!)

**San Patricio** (2389 6107; Carr Litoral Km 44; s/d US$40/50) Run by a sweet family, this more modern hotel offers a shady cement porch and rutty pool, but the rooms could stand a real good scrubbing.

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**PLAYA EL ZONTE & BEYOND**

El Zonte is less developed than El Tunco but more ambient than Playa Sunzal. Show patience and courtesy – sometimes the surfer gets a little crowded here.

**Esencia Nativa** (2302 6258; esencianativa@yahoo.com; s/d with fan US$10/15, 20, with bathroom & air-con US$30; ) A cheerful boho atmosphere with ample (though sandy) lounge spaces. Big rooms have snug single beds and extras include a ping-pong table, surf classes and open-air café serving burgers and seafood.

**Horizonte Surf Resort** (2323 0999; horizontesurfcamp@hotmail.com; s/d with air-con US$30/35; ) No longer a budget paradise, the Horizonte still offers a clean, kick-back retreat. Perks include the manicured pool area,
outdoor bar/common area, cheap surf lessons and board rentals (US$10 per day).

Playa Mızata sits 35km beyond El Zonte, home to some lovely and lesser-known right and left breaks (see p292). There are a few food shacks but no accommodations. The next spot of interest is Los Cobanos, a series of small coves with El Salvador’s best beaches and diving. To get here take the half-hourly bus 257 from Sonsonate (US$0.50, 40 minutes).

WESTERN EL SALVADOR

Western El Salvador is a stunning must for travelers. Start with Santa Ana – the country’s seat of old money is a colonial city with dusty, sprawling markets and a dapper gentleman’s air. Coffee plantations surround the region where some of the country’s poorest live and work. On these twisty back roads bent campesinos haul bursting sacks, sorting ripe red berries. The Ruta de las Flores travels the sunny climes of flower farms, where cobblestone villages offer the pleasant illusion of time stopped. But adventures do await; volcano ascents, waterfall descents, hot springs and crater lakes make this the destination for active travelers.

PARQUE NACIONAL LOS VOLCANES

This park (admission US$1; 8am-5pm) is a natural treasure, encompassing three major volcanoes (Cerro Verde, Volcán Santa Ana and Volcán Izalco) and thousands of hectares. It’s a major bird sanctuary, with many migratory species passing through, including emerald toucanets, jays, woodpeckers, motmots and 17 species of hummingbird.

Active Volcán Izalco is the youngest in the group. Its cone began forming in 1770 from a belching hole of sulfuric smoke and today stands 1910m high. Izalco erupted throughout the 20th century, spewing smoke, boulders and steak dinners that sleep four. Casa de Cristal (2483 4713) has rustic cabanas. Call ahead for prices, camping possibilities and availability.

A local cooperative manages a rustic campground (2483 4713/4679, 2 adults US$35), 13km from San Blas heading towards Los Andes. Los Andes has a ranger who can also guide Santa Ana hikes. For information, contact Salvanatura (2279 1515; www.salvanatura.org, in Spanish) in San Salvador (see p280). More useful park information is at www.complejosvolcanes.com.

Getting There & Away

Arrive by 11am since the guided hikes leave just once a day. The easiest, surest route is to come from Santa Ana, where bus 248 goes all the way to the entrance (see p297). The last bus leaves the park at 5pm but verify times with the driver who drops you off.

Leaving early from San Salvador is possible. Take any bus to Santa Ana and disembark at El Congo on the Carr Panamericana; walk uphill to the overpass and catch bus 248. Ask to be sure you’re in the right place.

If you’re driving, Parque Nacional Los Volcanes is 67km from San Salvador via Sonsonate or 77km by the more scenic route toward Santa Ana.

LAGO DE COATEPEQUE

Coatepeque is a sparkling blue crater lake under the looming peaks of Cerro Verde, Izalco and Santa Ana. It’s 6km wide and 120m deep, surrounded by green slopes. The lake is a popular weekend retreat for San Salvador’s elite. But there are a few cheap hotels here, and during the week it is peaceful. The bus enters the northeast side of the lake to an area with hotels and public access. For around US$4 or the price of a meal, you can relax and enjoy lake access at one of the hotels listed here.

Sleeping & Eating

San Blas has two camping complexes in the shadow of Volcán Santa Ana. Campo Bello (2271 8853) offers 53 basic bungalows, each with three cots and a bathroom. Rooms are musty and the grounds are unkempt, but it’s free. Bring linens and a mosquito net. (For a permit, visit the Ministerio de Trabajo in San Salvador, p279.) Amacuilco Guest House (2483 4713) has 13 rooms with bathrooms (some with lake view). To get here take the Parque Nacional los Volcanes bus from Santa Ana. More useful park information is at www.complejosvolcanes.com.

Getting There & Away

Buses 220 and 242 depart Santa Ana for the lake every half-hour. They pass El Congo and descend to shoreline, passing the Centro de Obreros, Amaculco and Hotel Torremolinos in that order. The last return bus to Santa Ana leaves at 6pm.

SANTA ANA

pop 178,600

The colonial seat of old money in El Salvador, Santa Ana maintains its social conservatism and gentleman ways. The country’s second-largest city has moved from coffee plantations to bustling commerce. Travelers will likely enjoy the leafy plaza and the lively food and bar scene. Its proximity to natural attractions and frequent buses make a worthwhile base for exploring the western reaches of the country.

Information

Ciberworld (Av Independencia Sur btwn 9a & 11a Calle Poniente; per hr US$1; 8am-7:30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-6pm Sun) Friendly service.

Banco Cuscatlán (Independencia Sur & 3a Calle Oriente) Has an ATM.

Red Cross (414 2645, 447 7213; cnr 1a Av Sur & 3a Calle Oriente; 24hr)

Virtual Center (3a Av Sur & 7a Calle Oriente; per hr US$0.60; 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-6pm Sat, 9am-1pm Sun)

Sights & Activities

Santa Ana’s biggest attraction is its large neo-Gothic cathedral. Ornate moldings cover the front, and interior archways and pillars are painted slate and pink stripes (consider it preppy-neo-Gothic). The city’s patron saint is feted in late July with parades and live music.

OOH OOH WITCHY WOMAN

The Siguanaba is a mythical hottie who seduces men, then upon further inspection, turns out to be grotesque and whorish. But the revelation comes too late to warn her man-victims – they directly drop dead or go batty. Siguanaba travels with her mischievous little boy Cipitío, who approaches women washing at rivers to hurl rocks at them. He never grows up, but here too appearances deceive. Those who’ve spied Cipitio up close report he’s actually a tiny man.

The Siguanaba story comes from the era of coffee plantations when landowners threw luxurious parties that spanned days. To keep the nosy neighboring campesinos (farmers) away the landowners invented terrific tales. And who knows? Perhaps they helped explain away the lovely ladies traveling to and from the fete.

These days, you’ll hear ‘Te has jugado la Siguanaba’ (Has the Siguanaba played with you?) if you’re totally dazed or distracted.
On the square west of the cathedral is the Teatro de Santa Ana, with an impressive, ornate interior.

Sleeping
Casa Frolaz (2440 5302; www.casafrolaz.com; 29 Calle Pte; dm US$7) The best bet for travelers is this elegant home with a sunlit kitchen, cozy living area and garden. Spacious rooms have sturdy single beds, spotless bathrooms and laundry access. The hospitable owner Javier takes guests on day trips and provides transportation downtown.

El Faro (2447 7787; 14a A V Sur; s with without bathroom US$11/18) El Faro has small, clean rooms centered around a tile courtyard filled with plants. Attractive landscape murals cover the walls. The only downside is the seedy neighborhood – those ladies parked outside aren’t selling pupusas.

Hotel Livingston (2447 1801; 10a Av Sur; d without/with cable TV US$10/15) A cement block complex off the street, Livingston offers well-kept if cavernous rooms. Beds have mirrored headboards and the hodge-podge of sofas and chairs pass for décor. A good choice for quick access to the bus terminals.

Eating
Hit the row of food stands (1a Av Norte) for the plaza for enormous chicken sandwiches in soft bread, burgers and greasy fries. Everybody eats dribbling sandwiches on park benches while watching the world go by.

San Cristóbal (Guatemalan border) Bus 236 (US$0.50; 1hr) San Salvador Bus 201 (direct US$0.80, 1½hr; special US$1.25, 1¼hr) All buses also stop at Metrocentro in San Salvador.

Sonsonate Buses 209, 216 (US$0.75; 1¼hr; 40km) Bus 216 departs from La Vencedora terminal (one block west of Parque Colón).

Tazumal, Chalchuaupa Bus 218 (US$0.25; 30mins)

Buses departing from other locations in town include:
Anguauti (Guatemalan border) Bus 235 (US$1.10 to Metapán and transfer.

Parque Nacional los Volcanes (Cerro Verde) Bus 248 (US$0.85; 1½hr, departs from La Vencedora Terminal one block west of Parque Colón at 7am, 8am, 10:15am, 11:20am, 12:20pm, 1:40pm, and 3:30pm. Last bus returns at 5pm. Confirm departure times.

Metapán Bus 235 (US$0.85; 1½hr) Departs from the corner of Av F Moraga Sur and 13a Calle Pte.

METAPÁN
pop 18,500
This medium-sized mountain town near the Guatemalan border is the nearest access to Parque Nacional Montecristo-El Trifinio, one of the country’s most inaccessible (but beautiful) parks. It is closed from May to November to let the wildlife breed in peace. When it is open you need a 4WD vehicle to get there. Grubby around the edges, Metapán might not merit a visit if you’re not headed for hiking.

Information
Fusión Ciber Café (2 Av Sur at 15 de Septiembre; per hr US$0.60)
Scotiabank (Av Ignacio Gómez) Exchanges traveler’s checks and has a 24 hour ATM.

Lago de Gúija
On the El Salvador–Guatemala border, underdeveloped and little-known Lago de Gúija is stunning. Take advantage of the peace to swim and picnic. In dry season you can hike to archaeological sites and find rock carvings along the shore. It’s several kilometers south of Metapán and 30km north of Santa Ana along CA12. To get there, take a Santa Ana-bound bus and get dropped off at the junction to the lake. It is a 2km walk from there.

Sleeping & Eating
Hotel California (2442 0561; s/d US$8/10) Convenient if you’re headed to Guatemala, this hotel
GETTING TO GUATEMALA

To El Progreso
The San Cristóbal–El Progreso border is open 24 hours but cross during daylight hours. From Santa Ana, take bus 236 to San Cristóbal (US$5.00, one hour, every 20 minutes from 5:30am to 9pm). Buses on the other side of the border go to El Progreso. The last bus back from San Cristóbal is at 6pm.

To Guatemala City via Las Chinamas
Agencia Puerto Bus (☎ 2440 1608; 25a Calle Pte) offers ordinary and special service to Guatemala City via Las Chinamas–Válle Nuevo. Ordinary buses (US$5, four hours) leave hourly from 5am to 4pm, except 7am. Special buses (a well-spent US$11.50, 3½ hours) leave at 7am and 5:30pm. Another option is to catch a 1st-class bus at Las Chinamas.

To Chiquimula
From Metapán, microbuses run every half-hour to the Anguiatú–Chiquimula border (open 24 hours but more reliably from 6am to 7pm). On the Guatemalan side, buses run frequently to Chiquimula (one hour, last bus at 5:30pm) and onward to Guatemala City (three hours, last bus from Chiquimula at 3:30pm). This is the quickest route to Nuevo Ocotepeque or Copán Ruinas, Honduras. In El Salvador, the last bus from the border to Metapán is at 6:30pm. See p171 for information on crossing the border from Guatemala.

on the roadside has plain, decent-sized rooms, some with views of El Trifinio. It’s a five-minute walk out of town, 500m north of the terminal. Nearby eating options are scant.

Hotel Cristina (☎ 2442 0044; 4a Av Sur btwn Calle 15 de Septiembre & 2a Calle; s/d US$12/15, with air-con US$18/23; ✈) Convenient to the bus terminal, shops and the internet café, this modern hotel offers clean but somewhat airless rooms. Those upstairs share a wide terrace with tables and hammocks overlooking a bustling street. It’s three blocks downhill from the terminal.

Pollo Sheriff (Carr a la Fronda; mains US$1.50-5; 6am-10pm) A law-abiding fried chicken restaurant located in front of the bus terminal. Ask about the daily specials.

Getting There & Away
The bus terminal sits on the highway facing the entrance to town. For Santa Ana, take bus 235 (US$0.85, 1½ hours) or a directo (US$2.50, one hour). San Salvador bus 201A (US$2.50, 1½ hours) departs seven times daily. Bus 235 and microbuses go to the Guatemalan border of Anguiatú (US$0.50, 30 minutes); the last leaves at 6:30pm. Bus 463 departs 5:30am and noon daily for the gorgeous and also hair-raising haul over the mountains to Citalá (US$2, three hours), close to the Honduran border crossing at El Poy.

PARQUE NACIONAL MONTECRISTO-EL TRIFINIO
Isolated and pristine, this borderland park boasts thick cloud forest canopy, exotic orchids and abundant wildlife. The borders of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala converge at the highest point (2418m), referred to as El Trifinio. Oak and laurel trees grow to 30m, and leaves intertwine to form a canopy impenetrable to sunlight. The forest floor provides a habitat for abundant exotic plant life including mushrooms, lichens and mosses, and tree ferns up to 8m tall. The temperature averages between 10°C and 15°C. This is the most humid region in the country, with 2000mm annual precipitation and 100% average relative humidity.

Animals seen (albeit rarely) include spider monkeys, two-fingered anteaters, porcupines, spotted and hooded skunks, pumas, red and gray squirrels, wild pigs, opossums, coyotes and agoutis. The forest is also home to at least 87 bird species, including quetzals, green toucans, woodpeckers, hummingbirds, nightingales, white-faced quail and striped owls. The area above Los Planes is closed from May to November, the breeding season of the local fauna. The remainder of the park is open the rest of the year, but you can only venture a few kilometers up the road.

To take full advantage of the park, you’ll need to spend the night. Camping is free at Los Planes – bring all your own equipment, food and water. Get advance permission from the National Parks and Wildlife Service at the Ministerio de Medio Ambiente (☎ 2267 6259/6276; www.marn.gov.sv in Spanish; Alameda Araujo/Carr a Santa Tecla Km 5.5; ☀ 7:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) in San Salvador. Admission is US$6 per day for foreigners plus US$1.15 per vehicle, required for taxis as well.

Getting There & Away
Unfortunately, getting to Los Planes is a challenge, and not a cheap one. If you have a 4WD, you can drive there (22km from Metapán). Francisco Monterrosa (☎ 2402 2805) charges US$45 for day trips or US$85 to drop you off and return a day or two later. If he isn’t available, look for other drivers in Metapán near the park turnoff.

If you wait at the road in early morning, you may be able to catch a ride with the rangers or residents of a small village in the park; but there are no guarantees and the trip back remains unresolved. You can walk to the gate (5km), but you can’t walk beyond that without a private vehicle – that’s the rule.

RUINAS DE TAZUMAL
The Maya ruins of Tazumal (admission US$3; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun), the most important and impressive in El Salvador, are in Chalchuapa, 13km west of Santa Ana on the way to Ahuachapán. In the Quiché language ‘Tazumal means ‘pyramid where the victims were burned.’ Archaelogists estimate that the area was first settled around 5000 BC. Part of a 10-sq-km zone, much is still buried under Chalchuapa. The excavated ruins span a period of over 1000 years. While these ruins are very important for El Salvador, they pale in comparison to those in neighboring countries. A previous restoration that ‘protected’ the pyramids by covering them in concrete was severely damaged by Hurricane Stan. The new restoration, inaugurated in December 2006, restored the original stone-and-mortar construction in much of the ruins. Don’t expect to get too close – a chain-link enclosure prevents visitors walking on the pyramids.

The museum displays artifacts showing active trade as far away as Panama and Mexico, with explanations in detailed English. Other finds, including the Estela de Tazumal, a 2.65m-high basalt monolith inscribed with hieroglyphs, are at the Museo Nacional David J Guzmán in San Salvador (see p281).

Bus 218 comes from Santa Ana, 14km (45 minutes) away. A sign on the main road through Chalchuapa points toward the ruins, about a five-minute walk from the highway. If driving from Santa Ana, stay right at the fork in the road, continuing toward Ahuachapán, then turn left at the Texaco station in Chalchupa. The ruins are at the end of the road.

AHUACHAPÁN
pop 36,630
Ahuachapán is a pleasant colonial city in the highland hills, just 16km from Guatemala. Its bubbly mud pits and secret hot springs are the product of active geothermals that also drive the city power plant which supplies over 15% of the country’s electrical power. It’s also the start or endpoint of Ruta de las Flores, a series of beautiful villages strung through the coffee-rich mountains to the south.

The hubs of Plaza Concordia and Parque Menéndez are five blocks apart, connected by the busy commercial street Av Menéndez, which runs north–south.

Information
Most services and restaurants are nearer Plaza Concordia.

Ciber Café Getcom (2a Av Sur at 1a Calle Pte; per hr US$0.60; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9:30am-8:30pm Sat, 10am-9pm Sun)

Scotiabank (Av Menéndez at 4 Calle Pte) Changes Amex and Visa traveler’s checks.

Tours & Aventuras (☎ 2442 0016; www.elsalvadorvacations.com; 2a Av Norte 2-4; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 2-5pm Sat & Sun) Travel agency offering friendly tours of the area’s sights.
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES
Green gardens and palms make Plaza Concórdia an agreeable spot to catch a breeze. The kiosk occasionally holds concerts and free events. East of the plaza is Nuestra Señora de Asunción, with pretty azuleo floors and a stained-glass Virgin.

Ahuachapán bubbles with geothermic activity, evidenced in the steaming mud pits found about. To visit the infernillos, aka los infierbos (the little hells), contact Tours & Aventuras or guide Carlos Alvarado Martínez (2413 3360).

GETTING TO GUATEMALA CITY
The Las Chimas–Valle Nuevo border is open 24 hours but it’s best to cross in daylight. Buses leave Ahuachapán from Parque Menéndez every 15 minutes (US$0.50, 5am to 7:30pm) for the Guatemala border. Cross the border 300m to the bus stop for service to Guatemala City via Cualapa. Tica bus (US$0.25) passes every half-hour and is safer than 2nd-class service. The last bus from the border to Ahuachapán is at 5:45pm.

Santa Ana Bus 210 (US$0.45; 1hr) Alternatively, take the faster San Salvador bus, get off at Metrocentro and catch a local bus into town.

Sonsonate (via Apaneca & Juayúa) Bus 249 (US$0.85, 2hr)
Tacuba Bus 264 or Ruta 15 (US$0.60; 40min; 5:30am-7pm)

TACUBA
A mountain nook blanked by coffee crops and lush forests, Tacuba is one of the poorest regions in the country but a rewarding outdoor destination. It’s on the north side of Parque Nacional El Imposible along Guatemala’s rolling hills and a fast 14km to Ahuachapán on a newly paved road. While travelers’ options are still few, watch as Tacuba’s promising potential for ecotourism gets tapped.

ACTIVITIES
Tropical mountain forest Parque Nacional El Imposible (p304) offers primary forest thick with rivers and vegetation. The area conserves a boggling array of plant and animal life, including pumas and black-crested eagles. Hiking can be strenuous but trekkers are rewarded by grand vistas of misty peaks and the gleaming Pacific Ocean.

The park is run by Salvanatura (+506 2279 1515; www.salvanatura.org in Spanish; admission US$5). In theory you need to visit the San Salvador office to pay the entry fee and arrange for guide service (the guide service has no fee but a US$5 tip is customary). If you call, the park will radio a guide to collect your fee. Those just showing up will have better luck on weekends when there is more activity.

An excellent trip is a moderately strenuous downhill transect of the park. Enter from the north, cross dense forest with some spectacular vistas, skirt Cerro Leon and end at the main visitor’s center.

Should you have a mountain bike, a great ride is the 40km road between the park and Tacuba – mostly downhill from the Tacuba side. Imposible Tours (2417 4268; www.imposible tours.com; Hostal de Mama y Papi; tours US$15), run by the energetic, amiable and borderline kooky Manolo González, offers a range of guided activities. His established hikes are popular but the canyoning might involve some risk. It is definitely not for those with acrophobia or without insurance. His new trips to the private Termas Santa Teresa (US$10), with seven hot and hotter pools, offers a welcome respite from all that sweaty activity.

Sleeping & Eating
Hostal Mammá and Papi (2417 4268; www.imposible tours.com; dm/d US$5/12, meals extra US$3) This fantastic hospitality at this family home and surely nothing beats Mama’s cooking. The rooms are rustic but well-kept brick and cement, each with an adjoining bathroom with a hot shower. Enjoy the rooftop views. For directions call ahead.

Sol de Medio Noche (mains US$5-10; 6:30am-7pm) Run by a Salvadoran Hindu sect, this vegetarian café offers tasty carrot tortas and brown rice. It’s two blocks past the plaza.

Getting There & Away
Bus 264 and Ruta 15 (US$0.60, 40 minutes, 5:30am to 7pm) go to Ahuachapán from the main plaza.

RUTA DE LAS FLORES
A winding ride through the heart of coffee country, this 36km stretch linking Sonsonate and Ahuachapán is named for the explosion of wildflowers found between October and February. Wander the colonial-style villages where chaty locals are quick to smile and coo over the novelty of blue eyes and backpackers.

While locals consider the region perfect for lazy Sunday excursions, the adventure-minded can discover great hiking, horseback riding and mountain biking.

Bus 249 runs frequently between Sonsonate and Ahuachapán, stopping in all the towns along the way, including Juayúa, Apaneca and Ataco.

Juayúa
pop 10,100
Relaxed, colonial Juayúa is a hip-yet- quaint village blanked by coffee farms and volcanoes.
César’s hikes to hot springs and horseback riding tours are well worthwhile, and could stretch your stay a lot. Both Danish and English are spoken.

**Hotel El Mirador** (Tel 2452 2432; www.elminadostijuayua.org; 4a Calle Poniente 4-4; s/d/tr US$15/25/40) Behind the church, this serene colonial hotel has cool tiles and a myriad dark, uncluttered rooms. Hot water is US$2 extra. Sneak up to the rooftop for a panoramic view of town and volcanoes.

**Casa de Huespedes Doña Mercedes** (Tel 2452 2287; 2a Av Sur & 6a Calle Oriente; d with/without bathroom US$25/23) A quietly home with large, quality rooms featuring firm beds and spanking-clean shared bathrooms. It’s two blocks east and one block south of the plaza.

Laura’s Comida (Calle Mercedes Caceres; mains US$5-8; 7am-8pm Mon-Sat, 7am-3pm Sun) Enjoy the everмяn atmosphere with options like veggie fritters, salads, meat, rice and salsa. It’s four blocks from the park.

**Taquería la Guadalupana** (2a Calle Ote; mains US$2-5; 8:30am-11pm) A mini-mart hides a surprisingly hip dining area, great for the late-night munchies. **RR (Calle Mercedes Caceres 1-4 Pte; mains US$6-19; lunch & dinner Tue-Sun)** Resispensable Mexican – evidenced by the chicken in mole poblano and nopal (cactus) salads, served at cozy benches or in a shaded courtyard.

**Tienda San José** (main plaza; mains US$2-8; 8:30am-11pm) A mini-mart hides a surprisingly hip dining area, great for the late-night munchies. **RR (Calle Mercedes Caceres 1-4 Pte; mains US$6-19; lunch & dinner Tue-Sun)** Resispensable Mexican – evidenced by the chicken in mole poblano and nopal (cactus) salads, served at cozy benches or in a shaded courtyard.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

Bus 249 has services northwest to Apaneca (US$0.35, 20 minutes), Ataco (US$0.45, 30 minutes) and Ahuachapán (US$0.60, one hour) as also south to Sonsonate (US$0.50, 45 minutes) during daylight. Buses leave every 15 minutes from the park, or from four blocks west on weekends. For Santa Ana, bus 238 (US$0.50, 40 minutes) goes direct, leaving a few blocks west of parque central six times daily.

Apaneca pop 8600

High in the Sierra Apaneca Ilamatepec, cool, cobblestone Apaneca (1450m) is the town that time forgot. Strolling is a major pastime here, and while doing so you’ll encounter some easy hikes and friendly locals. Other attractions include locally produced furniture made from cypress and coffee wood, and visiting the myriad flower and plant nurseries. The beautiful Iglesia San Andres was one of the oldest churches in the country until the January 2001 earthquake reduced it to rubble.

**ORIENTATION & INFORMATION**

The market is west of the park and the church is to the south. Buses drop off and pick up on the main street, right in front of the market. A tourist information booth operates on the plaza on weekends.

You can check email at Cybercafe Apaneca (3a Av Sur; per hr US$0.75; 8:30am-11pm), behind the former church. There are no banks.

**SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES**

The crater lakes Laguna de las Ninfas and Laguna Verde, north and northeast of town, are within hiking distance. The former is swampy, reedy and rife with lily pads; the latter is deep and cold. You can camp at Chichicastenique (aka Cerro Grande), which at 1816m affords outstanding views of the region, although the antennae make it look a lot less wild. For directions or a guide stop by the tourist kiosk.

Vivero (nursery) tourists make for a relaxed afternoon. Vivero Alejandro (7am-4pm Wed-Sun) is a short walk from the center (toward Juayúa). Come for the flowers and rare plants, but stay for the great little café, serving coffee, quesadillas and strawberries and cream. Other viveros include: Vivero Santa Clara, across from Alejandro, and Las Flores de Eloisa (2453 0415), a small café 2km toward Ahuachapán.

Finca Santa Leticia, a hotel, restaurant and coffee farm just south of Apaneca, has a small archaeological park (admission US$5) in a coffee field. The highlight is two pot-bellied figures carved from huge basalt boulders, weighing between 6350kg and 11,000kg. Experts speculate that these 2000-year-old chubbies were created by early Maya in deference to their rulers. Catch any bus headed toward Juayúa and Sonsonate and ask for the Finca Santa Leticia.

**SLEEPING & EATING**

The best restaurants only open weekends when San Salvadors come day-tripping.

**Hostal Rural las Orquídeas** (2453 0061; 4a Calle Poniente; s/d US$10/17) A cute red-roofed colonial place with décor by Granny. Rooms are smallish but clean, behind a courtyard with hammocks and rockers. To get here follow the signs two blocks north of the park and turn left.

**Hostal la Magaña** (2433 0268; Av Central btwn 4 & 6 Calles Sur; s/d US$10/20) Quiet and hospitable, this home has two large rooms stepped in burgundy and varnish, as well impeccable bathrooms. Guests can cook, or relax on the bellowy living-room sofas.

**Mercado Saludable** (mains US$1.50-3; 6:30am-8pm) Cheap eats deluxe, this market facing the park offers good little eateries serving ham, eggs and beans, and atole as well as afternoon meals and pupusas.

**La Cocina de Mi Abuela** (2433 0100; cnr 1a Av Norte & 4a Calle Ote; mains US$7-11; 11am-7pm Sat & Sun) Considered one of El Salvador’s best restaurants, serving high-quality meats and national fare. The desserts are magnificent.

For more options, check out resort lodges near Apaneca on the highway. Their upmarket restaurants offer the inevitable buena vista and a relaxed atmosphere to dally in.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

Bus 249 plies the route between Ahuachapán and Sonsonate almost every half-hour. The last bus runs between 7pm and 8pm. Ask a local to be sure.

**Ataco**

In this part of El Salvador, each town seems to be more picturesque and pleasing than the last. Ataco offers more cobblestone streets and melon-and-sky-colored homes. Fairly isolated from all three of El Salvador’s largest cities, it remains of off the map for most. This partly indigenous village can be reticent toward strangers, but a fledgling guide service and information kiosk have thrown out the welcome mat. Still, be extra courteous to locals, who are not used to tourism à la Antigua.

**SONSONATE**

pop 65,100

Hot and menacing, Sonsonate offers little for the traveler other than the way to Ruta de las Flores, El Imposible or the Guatemalan border. Gang problems mar city life, yet the city’s vivid Semana Santa celebration is a highlight.

The surrounding area does warrant exploration. The village of Izalco, 8km northeast at the foot of Volcán Izalco, was the site of a major indigenous revolt in 1932. Nearby is...
Getting There & Away

Take a taxi or bus 53C from the central park to the bus station. Destinations include:

**El Salvador**

- **Atecozol**, a turicentro with swimming holes, kiosks and gardens. The grounds feature stone sculptures by Agustín Estrada – one commemorates Atonatl, a feisty indigenous warrior who peeged conquistador Pedro de Alvarado with an arrow in 1524.

- **You can access the coastal points of Los Cóbano**,s, a prime diving destination, and **Barra de Santiago**, a protected mangrove forest reserve, from here. At Barra de Santiago you can rent canoes for estuary tours.

**Orientation & Information**

You’ll find a lovely new bus terminal 2km east of the city center. The main north–south street is Av Morazán/Af Rafael Campos. To orient yourself in town, the church is on the east side of the park central.

- **Banco Cuscatlán** (Calle Marronqui at 4a Av Norte) Has a 24-hour ATM.
- **Infocentros** (3 Calle Pte at Av Morazán; per hr US$1; 8am-6pm Mon-Sat; )
- **Post Office** (1a Av Norte btwn 1 & 3 Calles Pte)

**Sleeping & Eating**

Dirt-cheap hotels are in the rough area by the east side, beyond the hamlet of San Miguelito.

- **Hotel Orbe** ($5; 4a Calle Ote at 2a Av Flaviano Muchi; d with bathroom US$17/26; d with air-con US$16/20; )
- **Well-worn from 35 years of business, the upshot of this place is it’s well-scrubbed, friendly and convenient. You might get a cheaper rate if you forfeit TV.**

- **Hotel Plaza** ($5; 4a Calle Ote btwn 1 & 3 Av Norte; d US$35/45; )

**Getting to Guatemala City**

The La Hachadura–Ciudad Pedro de Alvarado border is open 24 hours, but it’s best to cross in daylight. Bus 259 from Sonsonate drops you right at the border; Salvadoran and Guatemalan immigration posts are at the far side of the complex.

- In Guatemala, the bus stop is 1km away. Bicycle taxis cost US$0.50. Buses for Guatemala City (US$5, four hours) leave every half-hour via Chiquimulilla and Escuintla. The last bus from La Hachadura to Sonsonate is at 6pm.

- **Jugos, Licuados y Más** (1a Av Norte btwn 1 & 3 Calles Pte; 7am-6pm Mon-Sat; )

- **Hotel Plaza** ($5; 4a Calle Ote btwn 1 & 3 Av Norte; d US$35/45; )

**PARQUE NACIONAL EL IMPOSIBLE**

Tropical mountain forest Parque Nacional El Imposible was named for the perilous gorge which used to claimed the lives of farmers and pack mules transporting coffee to the Pacific port. Decreed a national park in 1989, it sits in the Apaneca Ilamatepec mountain range between 300m and 1450m above sea level, and includes eight rivers which feed the watershed for Barra de Santiago and the mangrove forests along the coast.

This original forest – the remains of a tropical rainforest – is still home to an extraordinary variety of plant and animal life, including pumas, tigrillos, wild boars, king hawks and black-crested eagles. Hiking can get muddy and steep but offers grand vistas of misty peaks and the gleaming Pacific Ocean.

**Information**

- The main San Benito entrance is on the south-east side, beyond the hamlet of San Miguelito.

**Getting There & Away**

From Sonsonate catch bus 259 toward La Hachadura and get off at Cara Sucia. From there, a bus leaves at 11am and a pick-up at 2pm (both US$2, one hour) for the main entrance. The trucks return to Cara Sucia every morning at 5:30am and 7:30am. If you think you might miss the pick-ups in Cara Sucia, you may be able to cut them off at Puente Ahuachapán (bridge), a few kilometers short of Cara Sucia. If the pick-ups have already passed, you may be able to hitch a ride (13.5km).

- You can also visit the park from the northern side via Tacuba (p300).

**Eastern El Salvador**

El Salvador’s east and northeast were poor areas populated by subsistence farmers before the war. The guerrillas’ call for land reforms resonated strongly and the area became a wartime rebel stronghold. Much of the combat and atrocities took place here. Even communities that had remained neutral suffered terrible persecution and destruction.

Refugees who fled away the war in Honduras have returned. The infrastructure destroyed during the war – bombed-out bridges and defunct ports – has largely been rebuilt. It’s impossible not to notice the huge impact from the remittances sent from relatives working abroad (see p314). Boxo new gringo-style homes and booming commerce give a somewhat false impression of prosperity. But as eastern El Salvador ‘comes back,’ travelers will find that, among the forgotten beaches and quiet hill towns, there is a lot worth exploring.

- **There are two ways to travel east** – along the Carr Intereamericana or along the Carr del Litoral (CA2); the latter accesses the beaches, and the former the northern reaches.

**Eastern Along the Intereamericana**

The Carr Intereamericana goes east from San Salvador to San Miguel, on to La Unión and up again to the El Salvador–Honduras border at El Amatillo. A few towns of interest lie between San Salvador and San Vicente on the Intereamericana.

**Cojutepeque**, 32km east of San Salvador, is a small town best known for the Cerrro las Pavas (Hill of the Turkeys), featuring an outdoor shrine to the Virgen de Fátima, brought here from Portugal in 1949. Religious pilgrims come on Sunday and on May 13, El Día de la Virgen. In San Salvador, catch bus 113 from the Reloj de Flores, just west of the Terminal de Oriente; it’s about a 45-minute ride.
Further along the highway (54km from San Salvador or 22km from Cojutepeque) is the turnoff to Ilobasco, a town known for ceramics known as sorpresas (see the boxed text, opposite). Upon entering the town a string of artesanía shops line Av Carlo Bonilla. The annual crafts fair runs September 24 to 29. Take bus 111 or from the Terminal de Oriente or from Cojutepeque.

Another 8.5km heading east along the Interamericana is the road to San Sebastián, known for woven hammocks and textiles, and unique as most of the weavers are male. The fair takes place at the end of January. Take bus 111 or catch a bus in Cojutepeque.

SAN VICENTE

pop 34,600

Set under the horned-topped Volcán Chichontepec in the Jiboa Valley, San Vicente is a relaxed little city worth a peek. Lots of musicians live here and it has a reputation for being gay-friendly. Approaching town you’ll see the landmark clock tower – a cartoonish Eiffel Tower – sprouting up from green hills and farmland. The tower is closed from damage by the January 2001 earthquake. It also damaged El Pilar, a beautiful colonial church built in the 1760s. With any luck, both will reopen soon.

Orientation & Information

The cathedral sits on the east side of the park. A large army barracks takes up the entire block southwest of the park. The main drag, 1a Av, runs north–south, passing a block west of the park.

Banco Cuscatlán (2a Av Sur) Cashes traveler’s checks and has a 24-hour ATM.

Fast Line Ciber Café (2a Calle Ote; per hr US$0.85; 7am-9pm)

Police (2393 7300; 1a Av Norte at 3a Calle Pte) Can arrange for an escort up the volcano.

Activities

The double-peaked Chichontepec (also known as Volcán San Vicente) offers a relaxed little climb through coffee plantations. Views are fantastic, though somewhat marred by the summit’s helicopter pad and communications antenna. This eight-hour round-trip is relatively safe but it’s best to go in a skirt or get a police escort (fax 2396 3535) from Nuevo Tepeitín or San Vicente. Wear sturdy boots and bring a sweatshirt, lots of water and food for you and your escorts. Take bus 191 (US$0.25, 20 minutes) to Nuevo Tepetitán, where the trail begins. Buses leave from the corner of Calle Alvaro Quiñonez de Osorio and 9a Av every half-hour from 6:30am; last return bus is at 7:15pm.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Central Park (2393 0333; s with fan/air-con US$10/15; 2a Calle Ote) Location is everything, so enjoy the 2nd-floor terrace and small gay-friendly bar, since the actual accommodations are mediocre. Cement rooms smell slightly of mildew but the sheets are fresh and beds firm. The restaurant (open 6:30am to 10pm) below the hotel serves decent típica.

Casa de Huespedes El Turista (2393 0323; 4a Calle Pte 15 at 1 Av Sur; US$15-25) San Vicente’s best bargain offers ultratidy rooms (early arrivals pay more) which are a bit dated and small. Enjoy the hammock, leafy courtyard and roof with a view.

Comedor Rivoli (1 Av Sur; mains US$2-4; 7am-8:30pm) The most popular place in town, and justly so – check out the baked chicken, salads and roasted veggies, all fresh and homemade. This comida a la vista is served in a spotless dining room alongside rose gardens. Don’t miss the delicious dollar licuados.

Getting There & Away

All buses pass by the parque central after leaving the bus terminal up the hill on 6a Calle and 15 Av. Beat the crowds at the park without hoofing it to the terminal by catching buses at 6a Calle and 2a Av. Departures include:

- Alegria Catch an eastward bus from the Carr Interamericana and transfer at Villa El Triunfo.
- Ilobasco Bus 530 (US$0.60; 1hr) Departures at 6:50am, 11am and 4pm.
- San Miguel Bus 301 from the turnoff at the highway (US$1.50; 1½hr). Last bus at 6pm.
- San Salvador Bus 116 (US$0.85; 1½hr) Last bus at 6pm.
- Zacatecoluca Bus 177 (US$0.60; 50min)

ALEGRIA

High in the mountains, Alegria is an unsung gem and one of El Salvador’s most picturesque towns. At 1593m above sea level it’s El Salvador’s highest town. Young artists and new businesses are infusing energy into the quaint village of philosopher Alberto Masferrer. That’s not to say it’s bohemian – on certain nights rousing fire-and-brimstone sermons rock the plaza. Once coffee country, Alegria is now the nation’s flower-growing capital, evidenced by some 230 viveros which fill porches, fields and backyards, leaving sweet smells in the air.

The friendly tourist agency (7628 1087; 1a Av Norte at 1a Calle Pte) can offer information about sights, nurseries and accommodations. Look for the kiosk or ask in the municipal office, both on the parque central. It also offers some worthy guided hikes (US$10 to US$15 per half-day) to coffee plantations, geothermal plants and sites related to philosopher and national hero Masferrer. The scenic crater lake La Laguna de Alegria (admission US$0.25) is a 2km downhill walk from town. Its icy waters are said to be medicinal. Don’t miss the beautiful view from the Mirador de las Cien Grados – a vista point at the top of one hundred steps. Take the road toward Berlin to the steps.

Sleeping & Eating

Casa Alegre (7621 8641; www.lacasaalegre.zoomblog.com; Av Camilo Campos; d/tw US$10/20) Artists Memo and Paola have created a great shared space – just a few clean rooms with a shared mosaic-tile bath, but with relaxed warmth and style. The 1st floor is a gallery with modern works and recycled art. The couple offers free art classes to local kids. Volunteers are welcome to help.

Casa de Huespedes la Palma (2628 1131; 1a Av Norte near Calle Alberto Masferrer; dm US$10;  ) Big rickety rooms with worn tiles and firm beds characterize this family guesthouse which also has a curious clutter of photos, carvings and religious dioramas. A plus is the onsite internet café serving coffee on the plaza.

TÍPICA O PIRCARA?

Sorpresas (surprises) are little scenes and figurines hidden in egg-sized shells, pioneered by folk artist Dominga Herrera of Ilobasco. Underneath a bulbous papaya or white chapel you’ll find a charming microwossed scene of village life – usually. One local artist got sassy and sculpted a couple in the giddy throes of sex. The illicit art was condemned by the town priest and briefly removed from stores. But prosperity may have beat out piety. ‘Pícara’ (sinful) sorpresas, now available as matchbox copulation scenes, continue selling strong. Expect yours to come discreetly wrapped.

ISLA MONTECRISTO

A steamy, pristine sanctuary for hundreds of pelicans and egrets, this island and estuary sit where the Rio Lempa meets the Pacific Ocean. During the war, the island and its cashew plantation were abandoned and taken over by the FMLN. After 1992, it was resettled by local farmers taking advantage of the postwar land transfer program. In 1998 Hurricane
Mitch caused the evacuation of the island and flooded the lower Lempa. These days there are about 25 families growing organic cashews as an export crop.

Guests can stay at Hostal Lempa Mar (2310 9901; www.jbajolempa.net; La Pita; r US$15; Wed-Sun), operated by a local development group. Simple cabins offer basic rooms with shared bathrooms and a comfortable terrace, and there are meals available in the restaurant. Boat tours travel through narrow corridors in the mangroves; some visit the cashew plantations as well. A fishing cooperative in Estero Jaltepeque can arrange fishing trips or the rental of traditional canoes.

La Pita and Montecristo are at the end of a 22km road which connects the Carr Litoral to the coast. The road can be rough in rainy season. Take bus 155 (US$0.70, 40 minutes) or a pick-up from the Texaco in San Nicolas Lempa, with departures between 6am and 5:30pm.

From La Pita, lanchas (small motorboats; US$14 round-trip) or canoes (US$2.50 one way) can take you out to the island.

**USULUTÁN**

**Sleeping & Eating**

The gateway to Bahía de Jiquilisco, seedy Puerto El Triunfo is best sped through. Redefining grim, the only lodging, Hotel El Jardin, has doubles for US$12 or charges hourly (at least the sheets are clean). The pier eateries overlooking the bay offer fresh fish, pupusas and licuados.

**Corral de Mulas & Isla Méndez**

Passenger boats to Corral de Mulas (US$2) leave in the early morning from the dock at the end of the main road. Be sure to ask for El Icaco, which is a better option to Corral II. Once there, cut through town on sandy – sometimes flooded – roads to the beach (30 minutes). The last boat back is at 4pm; if you miss it, ask for a lodging recommendation at the alcaldia.

Isla Méndez offers a bay beach with calm, shallow waters and a palm-fringed ocean beach with crashing surf. Due to bus schedules, travelers are obliged to stay the night. It could be interesting, however. Local community development group Adesco (7727 3435) can arrange US$10 overnight family home-stays. It also arranges boat trips around the bay (US$35 per group) that travel through mangroves and Palacio de las Aves, home to hundreds of waterfowl. Bus 368 (US$1.14 hours) goes to Isla Méndez from San Marcos Lempa (30km away on the Carr Litoral) at 1pm and 2pm, returning at 5:30am and 6:30am. From San Marcos Lempa buses go to Puerto El Triunfo (1km) frequently.

See Usulután (opposite) for bus information; the last bus to Puerto El Triunfo is at 4:40pm, the last one back to Usulután is at 5:30pm. From the highway turnoff, take bus 377 to San Miguel (US$1.35, 2½ hours, last bus 2:50pm) or bus 185 to San Salvador (US$1.55, two hours, every 30 minutes, last bus 2:50pm).

**SAN MIGUEL**

**Orientation**

Parque David J Guzmán is park central, with the cathedral to the east. The area is choked with traffic by day and dodgy by night, but it’s unavoidable since the bus terminal and hotels are nearby. The area west of central park is quieter and more secure. Av Roosevelt (Carr Interamericana) skirts the southwestern edge of town, where you’ll find the majority of nightclubs and a large Metrocentro mall.

**Information**

Banco Cuscatlán (4a Calle Oriente & Av Barrios) exchanges traveler’s checks and foreign currency and has a 24-hour ATM.

Banco Salvadoreño (Av Barrios & 6a Calle Pte) cashes traveler’s checks, does Visa cash advances and has a 24-hour ATM.

**Immigration Office** (Migración; 2660 0957; cnr 15a Calle Oriente & 6a Av Sur; 8am-4pm Mon-Fri)

Infocentros (6a Calle Pte; per hr US$1; 7am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8am-noon Sun)

Post Office (4a Av Sur at 3a Calle Ote)

**Dangers & Annoyances**

Although gang violence has quietened with new security measures, the city center is still the wrong place to be once the sun sets. Make sure your hotel feels safe and secure at check in.

**Sights & Activities**

**CENTRO**

Facing Parque David J Guzmán, San Miguel’s cathedral, Catedral Nuestra Señora de la Paz, dates from the 18th century. Around the corner, on 2a Calle Oriente, is the Antiguo Teatro Nacional, a neoclassical gem which functioned as a cinema during the silent-film era and later as the Telecom headquarters and a public hospital. The Museo Regional del Oriente is in the same building on the 2nd floor. The collection of pottery and photos is meager but it’s free.

**AROUND TOWN**

Archaeology buffs will appreciate the Ruinas de Quelepa, grassy mounds covering 40 terraced ceremonial platforms, largely unexcavated. Lenca inhabited the site between the 2nd and 7th centuries AD, trading with Copán in Honduras as well as Mexico. Stone sculptures uncovered here are on display in the Museo Regional del Oriente. The ruins are a few miles east of San Miguel off the Interamericana. From the cathedral, bus 90 to Moncagua (US$35, 30 minutes) passes them.
If you’re game for a steep nine-hour slog, head to Volcán de Chaparrastique, aka Volcán de San Miguel, a towering cone (8km). The crater is hundreds of meters deep, with a jumble of boulders and virgins at the bottom.

The cheapest places to stay are by the bus terminal, a gritty area unsafe after dark. If you stay out late take a cab. Hotel Montecarlo (tel 2661 4113; 6a Calle Oriente; s/d with bathroom US$8/12; d with fan/air-con US$18) has clean rooms and a beachy feel. El Guanaco has enormous spotless rooms with hot-water bathrooms and cable TV. For something quiet and removed, choose the 3rd floor. There’s a pool table and promising smells wafting up from its ground-level restaurant.

Hotel King Palace (tel 2661 1086; www.hotelkingpalace.com in Spanish; 6a Calle Ote 609; s/d US$22-30, delux d US$28-35) is right across from the bus station, this business hotel’s greatest asset is the helpful and professional staff. Spacious renovated rooms have flat-screen TVs; the cheapies are small but fine. All have blissful air-con. Take advantage of the little-used courtyard – it has a tiny pool that’s, unfortunately, in view of the street vendors.

Hotel Posada Real (tel 2661 7174; 7a Av & 2a Calle Poniente; s/d US$23/30) is in the safer and subdued neighborhood west of the market, this well-kept two-story hotel offers bland but amenable rooms, with good air-con, and TV. Take an upstairs room; those downstairs smell of mildew.

Eating
The best value is comida a la vista for breakfast and lunch at a comedor; show up early when the trays are full and the food is fresh. Pan y Cakes Liz (2a Calle Pte; mains US$1-3) Stack your tray with eggs, tamales, plantains, beans and coffee on the cheap at this friendly spot near the market. El Mandarin (Av Roosevelt Norte 407; mains US$4-10; 7am-10pm) This buzzing Chinese restaurant with its ground-level restaurant serves two) at this Chinese restaurant with its ground-level restaurant.

11th November San Miguel honors the Virgen de la Paz with fiestas patronales, marking the occasion with holy processions and enormous, colorful sawdust carpets. Save yourself for its blowout finale, Carnaval, a citywide party held the last Saturday of November.

Sleeping
The cheapest places to stay are by the bus terminal, a gritty area unsafe after dark. If you stay out late take a cab. Hotel Montecarlo, like in the real Monte Carlo, you’ll find high security (a surveillance camera) and gold trimmings (well, spray-on) spicing up this cheap motel. The best of the cheapies, it offers good beds and cable TV. Don’t even think about swiping the remote control – it’s bolted down.

Hotel Inn Guanaco (tel 2661 5029; 8a Av Norte at Pasaje Madrid; s/d US$20/30; ) is small and welcoming. El Guanaco has enormous spotless rooms with hot-water bathrooms and cable TV. For something quiet and removed, choose the 3rd floor. There’s a pool table and promising smells wafting up from its ground-level restaurant.

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Festivals
Every November San Miguel honors the Virgen de la Paz with fiestas patronales, marking the occasion with holy processions and enormous, colorful sawdust carpets. Save yourself for its blowout finale, Carnaval, a citywide party held the last Saturday of November.

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EL SALVADOR
btwn 7a & 9a Avs Sur; the post office, the sign says (Plaza Médica Vida Infocentros) imposing volcano of the same name.

of the gulf, head to Unión, notwithstanding local enthusiasm for meantime, the dock on the mudflats bustles outside town will receive cruise ships. In the vor of the past, and a new deep-sea port just crumbling colonial porches give some flavor of the past, and a new deep-sea port just outside town will receive cruise ships. In the meantime, the dock on the mudflats bustles with business.

Travelers come here to embark for the remote islands in the Golfo de Fonseca (opposite). Playa las Tunas and Playa Jaguey are the only good beaches on the coast west of La Unión, notwithstanding local enthusiasm for Playa El Cuco and El Tamarindo.

For some respite from the heat, and views of the Gulf, head to Conchagua, at the base of the imposing volcano of the same name.

Information

Immigration Office (2604 4375; Av General Caballos at 7a Calle Pte;  6am-10pm) Next door to the post office, the sign says Control Migración. You must stop by here if you’re arriving or departing by boat from Nicaragua or Honduras.

Infocentros (1a Calle Pte btwn 2a & 4a Avs; per hr US$1;  8am-5:30pm Mon-Sat, 8am-noon Sun)
Plaza Médica Vida (2604 2065; Calle Gral Menéndez btwn 7a & 9a Av Sur;  24hr) A decent hospital near the center.

 Scotiabank (2a Calle Ote btwn 1a Calle Sur & Av General Caballos) Changes traveler’s checks and has a 24-hour ATM.

Sleeping & Eating

Casa de Huespedes El Dorado (2604 4724; Calle San Carlos & 2a Av Norte; d US$5; ) An old-fashioned guesthouse plunked in the middle of the market madness. Its best feature is the quiet courtyard with gardens and mangos. Rooms are somewhat dated and damaged but the elderly owners are cool.

Hotel San Francisco (2604 4159; Calle Gral Menéndez btwn 9a & 11a Av Sur; d/s with air-con US$24/40;  ) In a better area than the competition, this hotel sports a wide colonial porch and leafy courtyards. Rooms are spotless though dated, featuring hammocks and beds with pink satin ruffles. Don’t be put off if there are guests paying the hour.

Pupusería Maya (Calle Gral Menéndez; mains US$1-2;  5-10pm) Superclean and kitschy (spot The Last Supper alongside the mounted elk), this is the spot for panes de pollo (chicken sandwiches) and fresh pupusas.

Maurita’s Food (cn Av Gral Caballos & 3a Calle Poniente; meals US$2-6; breakfast & lunch) A local mainstay once known as Cafetín El Marinero, friendly Maurita serves up well-prepared seafood, ceviche and típica. In a charmed pink colonial building with a wrap-around porch.

For fine seafood dining check out the waterfront east of the center. Nearby Las Lunas (3a Av Norte, Playa Las Coquetas;  2pm-2am) offers nightlife in the form of karaoke and occasional Saturday concerts under a thatched bar.

Getting There & Away

The bus terminal is on 3a Calle Poniente between 4a and 6a Avs Norte. Service includes the following:

Conchagua Bus 382A (US$0.25; 15min)
El Amatillo (Honduran border) Santa Rosa de Lima bus 342 (US$0.90; 1hr) to San Carlos, transfer to bus 330 at the turnoff
El Tamarindo Bus 383 (US$0.90; 1hr)
Las Playitas Bus 418 (US$0.80; 1hr)
San Miguel Bus 324 (US$0.85; 1hr; especial US$1; 1hr)
San Salvador Bus 304 (US$3; 4hr; especial US$5; 3hr)
Santa Rosa de Lima Bus 342 (US$0.90; 1hr)

BEACHES NEAR LA UNIÓN

El Salvador has some great beaches but these are not among them. Extremely popular among Salvadorans from San Miguel and La Unión, they will probably impress backpackers as drab and crowded. Neither El Cuco, the most popular, nor El Tamarindo, the closest, are worth a stop. Be aware of potential jellyfish and manta rays – shuffle while walking out.

Broad and sandy Playa Jaguey is the best beach between El Tamarindo and El Cuco, with moderate surf. At Jaguey, a local road descends from the highway to an access road just east of a grassy parking area that leads to the beach. Private homes front the beach but you can still use it. There are no facilities.

Playa las Tunas is also pleasant enough, with a wide, flat beach reaching 100m in an estuary. The cluster of seaside restaurants serving fresh lobster, fish and oysters is packed on weekends. Among them is the lively Rancho Las Tunas (mains US$4-10;  7am-7pm), where live horn trios mingle among the relaxed crowd glugging baldes cerveceros (beer buckets on ice) and oysters by the dozen. The budget lodgings here are a disappointing lot – it’s best left as a day trip.

From La Unión, bus 383 takes a circular route to El Tamarindo; it passes Las Tunas and Jaguey on the way. For a breezy shortcut, take the same bus only as far as Buenavista and catch a lancha across the inlet to El Tamarindo (US$0.25) and hop on bus 383 returning to La Unión via Jaguey and Las Tunas.

ISLANDS IN GOLFO DE FONSECA

Pillaged by 17th-century pirates and abandoned, only to be repopulated in the 20th century, these lush volcanic islands remain oblivious to tourism. Visitors might have romantic notions of this gorgeous inlet, but it’s more a revelation of how isolated communities really live. There are fishing villages with

CROSSING THE BORDER

Getting to Tegucigalpa, Honduras

For Tegucigalpa (US$27, five hours), 1st-class King Quality (in San Salvador  2271 1361) buses stop at San Miguel’s Esso gas station (Av Roosevelt at Ruta Militar) at around 8am and 3:30pm daily – be early just in case. Buy tickets at the gas station one day in advance.

Otherwise, bus 330 drops you 50m from El Amatillo on the Salvadoran border where a bridge crosses into Honduras. Honduran buses then go to Choluteca (US$1.50, 2¼ hours) and on to Tegucigalpa (US$2, 3½ hours); the last bus for both leaves at 5:30pm. The last bus from El Amatillo to San Miguel goes at 6:30pm.

See p435 for information on crossing the border from Honduras.

Getting to Nicaragua & Costa Rica

King Quality operates to Managua (US$27, nine hours), continuing on to San José, Costa Rica (US$47, 19 hours). It stops at San Miguel’s Esso gas station at about 7:30am and 1:30pm.

From El Amatillo minibuses run from 5:30am to 5pm across the southern tip of Honduras to the Nicaraguan border town of Guasaule (US$5, two hours), where connections reach León and Managua.
SPREADING THE WEALTH

War and economies have scattered 2.9 million Salvadorans from Mexico City to Melbourne. These hard-working Guanacos go where the jobs are, mostly to the USA, where many wash dishes or work in construction crews to sustain families and communities back home. Remesas (remittances) are not just petty cash but make up a whopping US$3 billion a year for the El Salvadoran economy.

Cinderella stories tell of remittances pooled by expat clubs to finance hometown improvements. The small community of El Piche in La Unión Department has had wells drilled, schools extended and clinics improved, all thanks to the town’s Los Angeles cousins.

Yet the reality of remittances is that they are rarely saved and largely spent. The Inter-American Development Bank estimates that 85% of wired funds go to consumer spending – that means money for grocery bills, cell phones or designer track shoes. Consumerism in El Salvador has grown exponentially, evidenced by upmarket new malls and Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets. Banks act largely as money transfer agents, content to take a cut on transfers instead of promoting accounts, a disservice that perpetuates the perception that the poor don’t save. Those who aren’t saving grow increasingly dependent on that next check from abroad.

But what would happen if the USA tightened its reins on illegal workers? El Salvador’s infrastructure is built for spending, not generating revenue. Farming would be out. The war scattered rural families and among returnees is a generation raised in urban refugee camps. It’s little wonder that all but grandma and grandpa have turned their back on the family farm and resettled in urban areas, closer to the Western Union.

few services and black-sand beaches which are either trash-strewn or hard to get to. Take along food and water. In general, the more distant islands are more pristine.

The nearest island, Isla Zacatillo, has the largest community. Numerous coves with sandy beaches can be explored, but it’s no tropical dreamscape. The principal village has a few stores and lodgings in a wooden shack over the bay. For solitary beaches, head for Isla Martin Pérez, just south of Zacatillo. More mountainous, Isla Conchaguita offers hiking. Fishing boats are neatly lined up under arboledas (arbors or protective awnings, typically made of wood or branches) along the beachfront of the main village. Locals say there are prehistoric rock carvings on the way out to Playa Brava, a black-sand beach an hour’s walk from the village.

Isla Meanguera, the southernmost isle, was long the subject of territorial disputes with Honduras and Nicaragua, until an international court declared it part of El Salvador in 1992. It’s the only island in the gulf with decent lodging – ask for directions at the ferry landing.

Hotel Paraiso de Meanguera (2648 0145; s/d US$12/15) has decent hammock-strewn rooms with cable TV and bathroom. Meals are available upon request, with seafood just US$3.

Perched over a peaceful cove, Hotel El Mirador (2648 0072) is a recommended hotel and restaurant under renovation at the time of research; call before arriving. One of the island’s best beaches, Playa Majahual, is a 45-minute walk; shuttles (US$1) depend on availability.

La Unión has services to Zacatillo (US$2, 20 minutes) and Meanguera (US$2.50, 1½ hours) from the pier. Departure times vary, but are generally from 10am to 10:30am, returning at 5am the next day. Day-trippers have to arrange a private pick-up.

A private ‘express’ lancha costs US$60 round-trip to Meanguera. Don’t expect any bargains. Agree on a price before the journey starts, and pay only half up front to ensure your return trip. Ferries for the islands also depart from Las Playitas further down the coast.

Boat service from La Unión to Coyolitos, Honduras, and the port of Potosí, Nicaragua, is very infrequent. Ask a navy officer or a boatman. You could also try calling Hotel El Mirador on Isla Meanguera to see if it has a trip planned. Prices vary widely – we were quoted from US$10 to US$60. The wait may last days or weeks. The land route may not be too exciting, but neither is hanging out in La Unión.

There is a navy post at the pier – look for the wood-burning stove. Sure, it’s roughing it, but the experience is undoubtedly unique.

The community at Guatagalaguna produces quality black pottery in the Lenca tradition. Visit Cédar (Calle Principal; 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am Sat) crafts shop or ask the clerk to point you in the direction of local artist workshops.

Perquin

pop 5500

Perquin, at 1117m, was the FMLN headquarters during the war – its leftover bunkers and bomb craters are evidence of the former guerrilla presence. The opposition enjoyed broad popular support here and the rugged landscape thick with trees provided cover from military patrols. The town itself isn’t beautiful but the cool mountain climate and strong historical significance make a trip here the highlight of El Salvador for most visitors.

SU CASA EN CUMARO

Community-based tourism provides travelers with an opportunity that’s so grass roots it’s part adventure. But, hey, that’s why you’re here, right? The upper Río Sapo watershed offers a glimpse of rural life as well as gorgeous waterfalls, swimming holes and hiking. Peace Corps volunteer Jason Seagle, who spent two years here, suggests the following:

- Explore the upper Río Sapo watershed where you’ll find beautiful and friendly communities. Ask around for Don Santos, a guide for the Río Sapo Protected Area.
- Ask any kid to show you la pileta, the town swimming hole, and you’ll likely be joined by an additional 20 kids.
- There’s a small community library in Cumaro. Talk to Don Santos for the key and for help organizing a group of kids for reading hour. They’re really into it.
- Talk with a local farmer to go out and spend the day working in their corn/coffee or sugar-cane field (depending on season).
- See Don Juan, Cumaro’s school director, if you want to give volunteer classes. The school is always excited to work with international visitors.
- Talk with Marcos Hernandez to get involved in beekeeping. (Tip accordingly.)

For lodging in a beautiful log cabin on the property of a wonderful Salvadoran family, contact Cabañas Veranea (7733 4493; Caserio Cumaro; campsites/r per person US$2/6; meals US$1.50). Guests of Niña Nilda become one more member of the family. You can also contact the Prodel tur office in Perquin for reservations.

To arrive from Perquin, take any pick-up (US$0.15) to the Arambala turnoff and take bus 332C (US$0.50) toward Joatoca. Buses pass at 8am, 1:10pm, 3:10pm and 5pm. At the Caserio Cumaro turnoff start the 20-minute walk in to Las Veraneas (follow the signs for the pool). Happy adventures!
good for swimming. Cerro de Perquin is a 10- minute hike from town, while Cerro el Péricon is a longer haul. Both offer gorgeous views.

For guides consult Prodetur or the museum. For nearby community tourism opportunities, see p315.

Sleeping & Eating

Eco Albergue Rio Sapo (☎️ 2680 4086/4087; campsites/dm per person US$5/10; #access to a swimming hole and a dozen hikes is the best reason for staying at these rustic dorm-style cabins at Area Natural Protegida Rio Sapo. There’s no electricity and limited water; bring your own food and flashlights. You can rent a tent (US$3) or sleeping bag (US$1) if you don’t have your own. It’s operated by Prodetur.

Hotel Perquin Real (☎️ 2680 4158; r per person US$6) Large tile rooms with lumpy beds are relatively comfy, if not very private; the doors open right into the restaurant. The shared bathroom boils down to a bucket wash. Dining is convenient, with the restaurant serving typical fare in an open-air setting.

La Posada de Don Manuel (☎️ 2680 4037; s/d US$6/18) In this gigantic lumber mill-gone-guesthouse you’ll find a dark comedor and small, bright cement rooms, with sturdy mattresses and fans. The common bathrooms could be cleaner. It’s 500m from town.

Hotel Perkin Lenca (☎️ 2680 4046; www.perkinlenca.com; r per person incl breakfast US$15, 1-person cabin incl breakfast US$40-77) Perquin’s finest accommodation option is this relaxed mountain lodge, with sunny oak and pine cabins that offer superb views of pine-forested slopes. The new doubles are excellent value. All accommodations have hot-water showers. Handicap access, area tours and a book exchange are in the works. The American owner, Ronald Brenneman, did relief work during the 1980s, building low-income refugee housing.

La Cocina de Ma’Anita (Hotel Perkin Lenca; mains US$3-11) This large country kitchen prepares hearty breakfasts with fresh juice, eggs and homemade bread. A good dinner choice is grilled steak with roasted veggies and warm tortillas. Blue-sky days warrant outdoor seating on the stone patio.

Getting There & Away

The CA7 north of San Miguel to the Honduran border is in good shape. Bus 332 runs from San Miguel to Perquin (US$1.50, 2½ hours) at 6am, 7am, 9:50am and 12:40pm.

Alternatively, there’s the more frequent bus 328 to San Francisco Gotera (US$0.70, 1½ hours) from which pick-ups go on to Perquin (US$0.50, one hour). The last bus back to San Miguel is at 4pm; the last pick-up to Gotera leaves at 5:40pm, but you have to catch the 5pm to make the last Gotera–San Miguel bus.

El Mozote

On December 11, 1981, government soldiers terrorized and executed the residents of this northern hill village. It’s estimated that 757 people died: of the 143 victims uncovered, 131 were children. El Mozote is now a destination for those paying homage to the massacre. A tribute includes bright murals painted on the church, depicting the town as it was back then and as its children hope it to someday be. There is also a plaque with the names of those who had died and a rose garden planted over the collective grave of the massacred children. This modest village has no lodgings and few services.

A visit to El Mozote is a searing and heart-wrenching experience, one that could re-order your sense of the world. A local guide might talk about how her whole family, parents and siblings, were exterminated, while touring the village to point out the bomb scars and bullet holes. For some it might seem macabre, but the tour’s impetus of ‘Nunca Más’ (never again) aims to end senseless violence through this horrific example.

It’s important to remain sensitive to the seriousness of the site. Locals are accustomed to an international presence; they’ve even set up snack bars and children tag behind visitors asking for handouts. As tempting as it is to give, it’s best, however, if you donate directly to the box inside the tour office.
From Perquin walk or take a pick-up 3km south to a fork in the highway. El Mozote is 10km from the paved road; Jateca-bound buses pass here at 8am. On the way you’ll pass Arambala, once decimated by air raids. The same bus returns from El Mozote at 12:45pm and can drop you at the turnoff. Combine this trip with a visit to Rio Sapo, a 30-minute walk from El Mozote.

While the Museo de la Revolución Salvadoreña in Perquin (p316) can do trips here, but show respect by using local El Mozote guides once in the village.

NELLSALVADOR

While whitewashed Suchitoto wins the hearts of local and international travelers searching for enchantment, the north has much more to offer. Here, little side trips turn into big adventures. The artisan town of Palma, with its crayon-color homes, dedicated workshops and luscious mountain backdrop offers a cool borderland retreat. Bumpy bus rides run up craggy hills and pass through pine forests to take you (albeit slowly) where few outsiders venture.

Now boasting one of the country’s lowest crime rates, the Chalatenango district was the scene of intense fighting between the government army and the FMLN guerrillas. Villages bore the brunt of the military’s tierra arrasada (scorched land) tactics, which burned fields and killed livestock as a form of combat. The carnage precipitated an exodus, and it is not uncommon to run into locals who spent a dozen years in New York or Melbourne.

The main provider of water and hydroelectric power for El Salvador, Chalatenango Department faces a serious deforestation problem.

SUCHITOTO

Sure enough, tell San Salvadorans that you’re coming to Suchito and you’ll be offered a ride by a local. His small convenience store for the favor). Suchitoto’s Tourism Office (2335 1782; www.suchitoto-elsalvador.com; Calle Francisco Morazán at 2a Av Norte; 8am-4pm Wed-Sun) rents bikes (per hour US$1) and informs about hikes, activities and cultural events.

Geologic oddity Cascada los Tercios tumbles over a cliff of tightly packed hexagonal stone spires. The waterfall underwhelms when water is low (often), but the rock formation and the trip there are interesting enough. Turn right onto the road in front of the church south. It curves left, down and up again before intersecting with a soccer field. Turn left onto the main road and continue for about 1.5km. After a smoking garbage dump there’s a gate on your left. Upon request, boat tours can stop at the trail for the cascadas (waterfalls); walk up to the road, turn right and walk another four to five minutes.

It’s a 1½-hour hike to Salto El Cubo, a 15m waterfall tumbling into a pair of pools. You can climb from the lower one to the upper, hemmed in by rocks with the water crashing down from above. To get there, take Calle Francisco Morazán west out of town to a rocky trailhead, a narrow path descending steeply to the falls. A local Peace Corps volunteer working in conjunction with the tourist office put up signs.

Southwest of town, the former FMLN hide-out of Volcán Guazapa is a popular horseback riding (2hr tour US$18) destination operated by an independent cooperative. Visitors can check out taitus, clever dugout huts, as well as craters and bomb shells. The tours are operated by an independent local cooperative and the quality may depend greatly on who is in charge (in general fewer riders means a better pick of healthy horses). Book trips through the tourism office or La Casona, preferably a day or two in advance.

The tourism office arranges city tours that include some 30 historical buildings. Also, browsing the art galleries can make an agreeable afternoon. Check out Casa del Escultor (2335 1836; www.miguelmartino.com; 2a Av Sur; Sat & Sun), the studio of acclaimed Argentine sculptor Miguel Martino. For listings of local festivals see p325.

More lodging options are poised to spring up; ask locally for the newest budget options.

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block west of Parque Centenario. By car, go toward Cojutepeque on the Interamericana. When you get to San Martín, turn left at the Texaco sign.

If you’re headed north, catch Bus 163 to Las Águilares (US$0.70, one hour), where buses pass for Chalatenango, Las Palmas and the El Salvador–Honduras border. A slower but more scenic option is to take a boat (per person US$20 minutes) or car ferry (per person US$1, per car US$4) across Lago de Suchiclan to San Francisco Lempa and from there catch a bus to Chalatenango.

CHALATENANGO pop 16,200

In the morning’s first hours the market cackles to life, blocking traffic with piles of mandarins and pineapples stacked among bolts of fabric and cheap miniskirts. The north’s largest city, ‘Chalate’ has taken a distinctly commercial route, as opposed to its sleepy neighbors. You dig it or you don’t. The large military garrison on the plaza was built during wartime to rein in revolutionary activity in this FMLN stronghold. These days the only thing ‘revolutionary’ is the brisk business at this FMLN stronghold. These days the only real thing is the brisk business at the pay-per-hour hotels.

Orientation & Information

The church on the east (uphill) side and the main park on the west (downhill) side. The market extends up the main east–west street, Calle San Martín–Calle Morazán. A huge army barracks stands north of the main park; most buses pick up and drop off on 3a Av, south of the park. One exception are the buses to Arcatao and La Vuelta, which leave at the top of Calle Morazán, near the turnoff to the turicentro.

There’s a 24-hour ATM at Banco Cuscatán (4a Calle Pte near 6a Av Sur), and it also changes traveler’s checks. Try Cibercafé @halate Online (1a Calle Ote at 5a Av Norte; per hr US$0.80; 8am-9:30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) for internet access.

Sights

The Iglesia de Chalatenango, with its squat bell tower and bright chalky facade, sits on the east side of the park central, a stone’s throw from the military garrison.

A 20-minute walk from the park central, Turicentro Agua Fria (admission US$0.80; 8am-5pm) has a lush park with picnic tables, but the main draw are pools set with an artificial rock island topped by a waterslide. Dry season means water shortages – expect an overdose of chlorine. A cafeteria serves beer and meals. To get here, go up Calle Morazán (east) about 400m, and turn left at the big sign.

For panoramic views of the Cerrón Grande reservoir, climb Cerro La Peña, a 1½-hour hike starting at a trailhead before the turicentro. A number of roads and paths reach the top; as passersby for directions.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel la Ceiba (US$1.20; 2730 1800; d US$12) The only cheap hotel which doesn’t seem to be an all-out bordello (we understand the residents of Chalate have their needs) is this two-story building. It offers dark rooms, sturdy mattresses and fairly new installations.

For something a step up, try Hotel la Posada del Jefe (124 8560; s/d US$5/10; ) By far, the best bet in town is this family-run hotel, which has 12 impeccable cement rooms, all painted dark rooms, sturdy mattresses and fairly new installations. Comedor Carmary (US$0.70). It’s kind of fun.

Getting There & Away

Bus 125 runs regularly from San Salvador (US$0.90, two hours) and terminates on 3a Av Sur, a few blocks south of the church. To La Palma and El Poy, take bus 125 toward El Amayo (the highway intersection) and transfer to bus 119 (1 ½ hours) heading north.

See opposite for details on taking buses to local villages.

AROUND CHALATENANGO

The countryside around Chalate climbs into dry forest studded with toothy peaks and rugged twainy hills. The small villages in this remote area have stunning landscapes and interesting histories.

Beyond the Rio Sumpul, Arcatá is a beautiful village in the mountains bordering Honduras. Ask in the municipal office about tours of the tatus (cave hideouts), which attest to Arcatao’s former role as an FMLN stronghold. The local Jesuit order (2354 8009; bartolome240@yahoo.com) receives guests and can set up guided tours of the area. Call ahead.

North of Chalate, Concepción Quezaltepeque is a hammock-making center. You’ll see women threading them along the side of the road. Prices range from US$30 to US$120, depending on size, length, thickness and material. Shops line the main street; browse a few first to compare quality.

La Montañona is a pine forest reserve at 1600m with prime views and pre-Columbian rock carvings. The civil war left several tatus, including one used by clandestine guerrilla radio station, Radio Farabundo, as well as an underground guerrilla hospital. You can stay in this small village: a rustic cabin has beds and shared bathroom (US$5 per night). Teresa Avilá cooks up basic meals. Call Cesar Alas (7723 6283) before going; he oversees the lodging and acts as a guide to the area.

A strenuous climb passing Dulce Nombre de María travels cobbled roads through pastoral villages. Enjoy views of flat valleys with embankments and the mountainous Honduran border beyond. North is El Manzano, a cooperative of ex-FMLN combatants. Its trails lead to the 1600m with prime views and pre-Columbian rock carvings. The civil war left several tatus, including one used by clandestine guerrilla radio station, Radio Farabundo, as well as an underground guerrilla hospital. You can stay in this small village: a rustic cabin has beds and shared bathroom (US$5 per night). Teresa Avilá cooks up basic meals. Call Cesar Alas (7723 6283) before going; he oversees the lodging and acts as a guide to the area.

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Getting There & Around

The following bus departures originate in Chalatenango:

Arcatao

Bus 508 (US$1.15; 2hr) Departs hourly from 7am to 7:30pm from the stop of Calle Morazán.

Concepción Quezaltepeque

Bus 300B (US$0.35; 2351 2420; 2351 2400; 2351 2261; 2351 2271) A daily bus to Arcatao. It’s kind of fun.

LA PALMA

At first glance, La Palma, at 1200m, resembles a coloring-book page zealously attended to by a seven-year-old. Its narrow streets are populated with tiny, tiled homes in garish tones of plum, mint and tangerine, some covered in fanciful murals or drawings. This artist village 84km north of San Salvador might border kitsch as well as Honduras, but it does make a cool cool. Lovers of the outdoors can enjoy the fresh air, verdant mountain views and some of the country’s best hiking.

Painier Fernando Llori moved here in 1972, founding Naive Art, a trend that still represents El Salvador around the world (p271). These bright, primitive images of mountain villages, campesinos or Christ images are painted on anything from seeds to church walls. He taught local residents how to create the same images and started a successful cooperative. Today 75% of the village makes a living by mass-producing these bright motifs.

Hikers often prefer lodging in the neighboring village of San Ignacio as it’s closer to the trails.

Information

Banco Cuscatán (Calle Barrios at 1a Calle Pte) Has a 24-hour ATM.

Ciber Pinto (Calle de Espina 83; per hr US$1; 8am-6pm)

Sights

Take some time to peruse the colorful streets of La Palma. Visitors are welcome to peek into workshops to see families painting away. Local cooperative La Semilla de Dios (3a Calle Pte at 5a Av Norte) crafts quality products in workshops behind the store. If you ask permission you can wander through the workshops and watch the painters and woodworkers at work.

Activities

Cerro El Pital (2730m) is the highest peak in El Salvador, but thanks to an access road, it is also one of the easiest to hike. From nearby San Ignacio, bus 509 to Las Pilas leaves you at Rio Chiquito near the trail. It’s about 1½ hours to the top, where spectacular views await. You will know you reached the summit when you find the cement block marking it. It is private property, so bring US$2 to cover admission.

Once there, ask for directions to Piedra Raíz, a huge cloven rock a half-hour walk from...
GETTING TO SAN PEDRO SULA OR COPÁN RUINAS, HONDURAS

The bus from La Palma drops you about 100m from the El Salvador–Honduras border (open 6am to 6pm), where you pay US$2 to enter Honduras. From El Poy, you can take a bus or colectivo taxi to Nueva Ocotpeque, Honduras. From there buses leave hourly for San Pedro Sula. For Copán Ruinas, transfer at La Entrada.

The last bus to El Poy from La Palma (bus 119, US$0.50, 30 minutes) leaves at 7pm. The last bus south from El Poy to San Salvador leaves around 4:15pm. See p383 for information on crossing the border from Honduras.

the summit, accessed by a nerve-wracking log bridge spanning a 25m drop. Don’t try this one in wet weather.

Get more awe-inspiring vistas at Miramundo, a small, aptly named community perched on a steep hillside. Back at Río Chiquito, follow the right-hand fork for about an hour to Miramundo. Right on the trail, the ridge-top Hotel Miramundo (US$20 US$45; per 6 people US$40) may have the best view of any lodging in El Salvador.

Great hikes around San Ignacio abound. For a guide, contact José Samuel Hernández, the owner of Comedor y Artesanías El Manzana (2305 8379; Carr La Palma–El Poy km 85), outside La Palma, or Humberto Regalado (2352 9138), who owns and maintains the trail to Peña Cayaguana.

Buses to Las Pilas, passing through Río Chiquito, leave San Ignacio at 7am, 9:30am, 12:30pm, 2:30pm and 4:30pm and return at the same times.

Sleeping & Eating

Five kilometers south of town, Centro Obrero Dr Mario Zamora Rivas offers 15 remodeled cabins and a couple of pools, and is free with permission from the Ministerio de Trabajo. Trails crisscross the forested grounds.

El Pital (2335 9344; 1 per person with bathroom US$10; 2) Well-kept but dowdy, these huge tile rooms have weary sofas and patched fixtures. The features include cable TV, mini-fridge and a fast-food eatery. It’s popular with families.

Hotel La Palma (2305 9344; www.hotellapalma.com; per person US$13) A quiet mountain getaway bordered by the Río La Palma, its expansion makes it feel more commercial than rustic. Accommodations are mostly comfortable, with a few drafty cabin rooms. Still, there’s hammocks on the shady grounds, a pool (under renovation) and restaurant.

Quechelá Bed & Breakfast (2305 9328; quechela@avegante.com; s/d with shared bathroom US$26/39) Worth the splurge, this mountain home offers wonderful hospitality. Rooms are spare but comfortable with ceramic tiles, and crisp linens on the beds. The living spaces show an artsy bent and impeccable taste. Breakfast is included. To get here take a mototaxi (US$0.50) from town.

Restaurante del Pueblo (main US$1-5; 7am-9pm) If a dollar buys you a sandwich in thick bread, going all out means a good plato típico with grilled meat, bananas, beans, cheese and cream. It’s down the road from the Hotel La Palma.

La Estancia (Calle Barrios 35; mains US$2-7; 7am-8pm) With a narrow balcony highly conducive to people-watching, this established restaurant mostly serves chicken or steak dinners. For snacking, US$2 tacos heaped with fresh tomatoes and chirimol hit the spot.

The village of San Ignacio has additional sleeping and eating options.

Getting There & Away

Bus 119 runs every half-hour from San Salvador’s Terminal de Oriente to the El Salvador–Honduras border at El Poy, stopping at La Palma (US$1.50, three hours). Some enter San Ignacio, 3km to the north, others drop you off at the entrance.

From San Ignacio you can catch the bus to El Pital and its environs.

EL SALVADOR DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATIONS

El Salvador has a decent selection of hotels but lacks the backpacker infrastructure that neighboring countries have. Consequently, hostels are few and those on very tight budgets must plan accordingly. As usual, couples get better deals than solo travelers. The cheapest places are often in seedy areas near bus terminals; paying a bit more is worthwhile for personal security. In many areas prostitution outranks tourism and travelers might find their only options are room-per-hour lodgings. This book attempts to include the safest and most secure options for travelers.

Camping and eco-albergues (eco-hostels; basic shared cabins, some with modest kitchen facilities) are appearing around popular outdoor attractions. Bringing your own camping equipment, as the selection here is scant.

You can stay for free at centros de obreros (government workers’ centers), which are huge compounds designed to give workers and their families a place to relax on the weekend. The main locations are Lago de Coatepeque, El Tamarindo, La Palma and outside La Libertad. You must reserve them advance at the appropriate office in San Salvador, see p279 for details.

Room rates are stable season to season, except during the summer holiday (first week of August), when hotels in popular towns fill up fast.

ACTIVITIES

Diving

Diving in El Salvador is more expensive and admittedly inferior to nearby Honduras or Belize. That said, it does offer one of the few coral reefs on the American side of the Pacific, as well as a chance to dive in crater lakes. The best time for diving is from October to February, especially December and January. One 5-star operator is El Salvador Divers (Map p278; 2264 0961; www.elsalvadordivers.com; 3a Calle Pte 5020, Col Escalon, El Salvador), offering open-water and advanced certification courses for around US$300.

Hiking

El Salvador has some excellent hiking, in spite of serious deforestation. Parque Nacional El Imposible (p304), near the border with Guatemala, offers the best combination of easy access and rewarding primary-forest hikes. The Ruta de las Flores offers waterfall and hot springs hikes; find guides for hire in Juayúa (p301). Further north, the pristine and beautiful Parque Nacional Montecristo–El Trifinio (p298) is renowned for wildlife. Access is difficult, and it’s closed during the May–November mating season. Parque Nacional los Volcanes (p294), with two climbable volcanoes, is a beautiful, if sometimes crowded, destination. Hikes from the northwestern towns of La Palma and San Ignacio offer stunning vistas. You can access El Salvador’s highest peak (El Pital, 2730m; p321) from here. The northeastern state of Morazán, in particular Perquin, has a cool climate and fine hiking.

As a longtime stronghold of the FMLN, it also has interesting and sobering sites related to the civil war.

Surfing

El Salvador is a steadily growing surf destination, with kilometer after kilometer of world-class breaks and virtually no one on them. Punta Roca, the country’s finest wave, is at the scruffy port of La Libertad (p290), which is readily accessible from the capital. Several beaches west of La Libertad have excellent waves and better atmosphere, as well as all-service surf lodges. Your best bets for lessons are the Punta Roca resort or surfer Torsten Rode (he is found on Sunday in front of the Club Salvadoreño) in Playa Sunzal. Peak season is March to December.

BOOKS

Major Salvadoran authors (see p271) are available in translation. Joan Didion’s Salvador is a moving account of the early days of the war. Nonfiction about the civil war includes Massacre at El Mozote, by Mark Danner, Witness to War: An American Doctor in El Salvador, by Charles Clements MD, and Rebel Radio, a fascinating, firsthand account of clandestine radio stations operated by FMLN guerrillas.

Oscar Romero: Memories in Mosaic, by María López Vigil, is a recommended account of the clergyman’s life and political conversion told by those who knew him. When the Dogs Ate Candles, by Bill Hitchkinson, is an anecdotal history of the conflict based on interviews with refugees. Archaeology buffs can read about Central America’s Pompeii in Before the Volcano Erupted: The Ancient Ceréen Village in Central America by Payton Sheets.

BUSINESS HOURS

Businesses generally operate 9am to 6pm weekdays, while government offices are open 8am to 4pm. Some offices and stores close at luncheonette, between noon and 2pm, but this practice is fading. Banks are open 8am to 4pm or 5pm weekdays, and most open Saturday morning as well. Restaurants serve dinner early, and 4pm is pupusa hour.
CLIMATE

The invierno (wet season) is from May to October, and the verano (dry season) is from November to April. During the rainy season, it usually only rains at night. In San Salvador, the maximum temperature varies from 27°C in November to 30°C in March and April; the minimum temperatures range from 16°C in January and February to 20°C in March. The coastal lowlands are the hottest region. For climate charts see p272.

CUSTOMS

Salvadoran border officials are among the most scrutinizing in the region. They check for previous entry and exit stamps. If you’re entering on an international bus, your bags may well be searched. Carry your passport with you in all border regions, regardless of whether you’re leaving the country, since there are a lot of police checkpoints (mostly searching for drugs).

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Crime shouldn’t deter travelers from El Salvador any more than it does from the rest of Central America. Despite the country’s reputation for violence, attacks on tourists are rare. Be aware of pickpockets on buses and crowded streets. Take common-sense precautions, but avoid handling any suspicious bag or package. The service is free, but you must request it by phone or in person a day in advance (and preferably more). Officers are partly for your safety and partly to deter any more than it does from the rest of Central America. For climate charts see p723.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Feria Gastronómica A wonderful food fair held every weekend in Juayúa.
Festival de El Salvador (August 1-6) Celebrates El Salvador’s patron saint; all cities have festivities with San Salvador’s biggest.
Festival del Invierno (August) Perquin’s art and music festival popular with the boho crowd and college students.
Festival de Maíz (August) Suchitoto’s corn harvest festival with religious processions and street parties.
Bolas de Fuego (August 31) To commemorate an erupción of Volcán San Salvador that destroyed the original town, Nejapa residents spar by throwing balls of fire then dance till dawn around street bonfires.
Festival de Hamacas (mid-November) Hammocks fill the streets of Concepción Quezaltepeque (p230) during this street fair.

FOOD & DRINK

A typical breakfast includes eggs, beans or casamiento (rice and beans mixed together), fried plantains, cheese, tortillas and coffee or juice. Panaderías usually offer a selection of morning cakes and coffee. Drinkable yogurt is also sold in most grocery stores. Almuerzo (lunch) is the largest meal of the day and often the most expensive.

El Salvador street food is all about pupusas, round cornmeal dough stuffed with a combination of cheese, refried beans, chicharrón (pork rinds), or revuelta (all three), and grilled. Curtido, a mixture of pickled cabbage and vegetables, provides the final topping. Most pupuserías open at around 4pm and some work the same weekday space for years. Also popular in the evening are panes, French breads sliced open and stuffed with chicken, salsa, salad and pickled vegetables.

Liquados (fruit drinks made with water or milk), gaseosas (soft drinks) and coffee are easily had in El Salvador. Note that refresco, which means soft drink in many countries, here means lemonade, horchata and other water-based drinks. A refresco de ensalada is not coleslaw puree, but a mixed fruit juice served with a spoon for the fruit salad floating on top, sangria style. Water can be bought in either bottles or half-liter bags.

Local beers include Pilsener [sic], the most popular, and Suprema, a lighter brew.

INTERNET ACCESS

The Salvadoran government sponsors dozens of internet cafés called Infocentros, from the capital to the tiny mountain towns. Most have air-con and fast connections. Privately run internet cafés offer similar services.

INTERNET RESOURCES

www.elsalvadorturismo.gob.sv Corsar’s official website is mildly better than nothing.
www.lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/salvador An excellent resource of Salvadoran websites, arranged by topic.
www.puntamango.com Website of Mango’s Lounge surf shop in La Libertad; it tells you where to find the best waves in El Salvador.
www.salvanatura.org For reservations or information on Parque Nacional El Imposible and Parque Nacional Los Volcaños.
www.surf.com Shows off the west Pacific surf scene; links in English.

LANGUAGE

Spanish is the national language. In a few indigenous villages a handful of people still speak the Nahua language of the Pipil, but there is academic interest in preserving it. Many Salvadorans pick up some English while working in the USA, Australia and elsewhere, and English speakers pop up in the unlikeliest places.

LEGAL MATTERS

Law enforcement is strict and effective, from beat cops to border officials. Police are entitled to stop buses and search people and bags, and do so with some frequency, often helped by army soldiers. Bribes are generally not expected or accepted. If arrested and coordinate and call your embassy, although if you have committed a crime there’s little your embassy can do. Even minor offences require jail time.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Embassies & Consulates in El Salvador Australia, New Zealand and the UK do not have consular representation in El Salvador. Australians can get assistance at the Canadian embassy. Except for the US embassy, the following are in San Salvador.

Canada (☎ 2279 4655; Alameda Roosevelt at 63a Av Sur Torre A)
France (Map p278; ☎ 2279 4016; www.embafランス.com .sv; 1a Calle Poniente 3718)
Germany (Map p278; ☎ 2247 0000; www.san-salvador diplo.de; 7a Calle 3972)
Guatemala (Map p281; ☎ 2271 2225; 15a Av Norte btwn Callés Arce & 1a Calle Norte, Col Escalón)
Honduras (Map p278; ☎ 2263 2808; 89a Av Norte btwn 7a y 9a Calle Pte, Col Pirca)
México (Map p278; ☎ 2243 0445; Calle Circunvalación & Pasaje 12, Col San Benito)
Nicaragua (Map p278; ☎ 2263 8789; Calle El Mirador btwn 93a y 95a Av Norte, Col Escalón)
USA (☎ 2278 4444 ext 6208; www.sansalvador.usem bassy.gov; Blvd Santa Elena Final, Antiguo Cuscatlán, La Libertad)

Salvadoran Embassies & Consulates Abroad

For a complete list, refer to www.ree.gob .sv/website/embajadas.html.
France (☎ 03134 720 4220; 12 Rue Galilée 75116, Paris)
Germany (☎ 49 30 206 4660; Joachim-Karnatz-Allee 47, 10557 Berlin)
México (☎ 5281 5725; Temístocles 88, Col Polanco 11560, México DF)
UK (☎ 044 207 436 8282; Mayfair house, 3rd fl, 39 Great Portland Street, London W1W 1JZ)
USA (☎ 202 387 6511; 2308 California St, NW, Washington, DC 20008)
MAPS
Corsatur (see p279) and the Ministry of Tourism offer glossy maps of El Salvador and the capital, available at some hotels and tour offices. Map addicts should hit the Centro Nacional de Registros (IGe; Map p278; www.cnr.gov; 1a Calle Pte, San Salvador, 2nd fl; 8am-12:30pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri), behind MetroSur, for high-quality city and country maps. Simple maps of hiking trails are sometimes available at respective visitor centers, but trails are usually well marked.

MEDIA
San Salvador’s main newspapers are La Prensa Gráfica and the conservative El Diario de Hoy; check them for domestic and international news, plus entertainment listings. El Mundo and El Latino are thinner afternoon papers.

MONEY
In January 2001, El Salvador adopted the US dollar as official currency. The previous currency (the colón) technically still exists, but you’ll probably never see one.

ATMs
ATMs are found in most cities and towns, with the exception of Suchitoto and Perquin. Banco Cuscatlán, Scotiabank and Banco Atlántida have the largest network of ATMs. It used to be that cash machines only accepted cards with the Plus/Visa symbol, but Cirrus/MasterCard cards now generally work as well. If the machine doesn’t take your card you may get assistance inside the bank (this is also a sneaky way to avoid an ATM transaction fee – for a ‘tarjeta de crédito’ only).

Look for safer locking cabins to withdraw money and avoid taking out cash at night.

Bargaining & Tipping
Bargaining is less common here than in other Central American countries. A little back-and-forth is common with taxi drivers and market shopkeepers, but hard bargaining can seem a bit rude. Tip 10% in restaurants; it’s harmless hormonal babble, as much about experiences of everyday Salvadorans.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL
Many travelers come to El Salvador with a notion of which ‘side’ they supported in the civil war (usually the FMLN). In fact, both sides committed terrible atrocities and in 12 years of war, neither came to fully represent (or betray) the ideals of the majority of Salvadorans. Visitors should not be hesitant to discuss the war, but should honor the personal experiences of everyday Salvadorans.

The country is fairly new to tourism and Salvadorans remain relatively unjaded toward backpackers. Hard bargaining, whether in taxis or in markets, is rare. Though prices are somewhat higher here than elsewhere, try not to be the ugly tourist haggling endlessly over what amounts to a few cents or dollars. It may be too late to reverse the unpleasant wheeling and dealing of Guatemala and elsewhere, but in El Salvador, an honest price and a friendly transaction are still the norm.

STUDYING
Options are few but some English institutes offer Spanish classes. The best is the Centro de Intercambio y Solidaridad (CIS; Map p278; 2226 2623; www.cn-el-salvador.org), which offers Spanish classes with progressive sensibilities. Home-stays are available.

TELEPHONE
The country code when calling El Salvador from abroad is 503. Phone numbers usually have eight digits; there are no internal area codes. Telecom and Teléfonica payphones accept their respective phonecards. Buy prepaid phonecards (in US$3, US$5 and US$10 denominations) at pharmacies and corner stores. Phone booths post local and international dialing instructions in English and Spanish. Some internet cafés offer web-based calling.

TOURIST INFORMATION
El Salvador has few tourist information offices and even fewer that provide more than fluff. Offices with friendly and informed staff include those in Perquin and Suchitoto. Juayúa and Apaneca have information kiosks open on weekends. Friendly hotel owners can be very helpful resources. In the capital you’ll find the office of Corporación Salvadoreña de Turismo (Corsatur; 2243 7835; corsatur@solnet.net; Blvd Santa Elena, San Salvador; 8am-12:30pm, & 1:30-5:30pm), offering brochures and fliers. The Instituto Salvadoreño de Turismo (ISTU; Map p281; 222 8000; istu@mnh.gob.sv; 719 Calle Rubén Darío blv 9a & 11a Avs Sur, San Salvador; 8:30am-12:30pm & 1:30-4pm Mon-Sat) has very general information about El Salvador’s national parks and turcentros.

VISAS & DOCUMENTS
Citizens of the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Switzerland, Norway, Japan, Taiwan, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, other Central American countries, Israel, and EU member countries do not need a visa, but must purchase a single-entry tourist card for US$10 when entering the country. For those who do need a prearranged visa, the cost is US$30. The standard length of stay is 30 days, but you can request up to 90 days – do so quickly before the official stamps your passport! If you leave and return within the allotted time, you can use the same tourist card.

The new Central America-4 agreement allows for travel between the borders of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua with one entry fee and one passport stamp (in this case, be sure you ask for the 90-day option). If you are traveling overland, please note the change; it’s possible you will have to ‘remind’ some border guards about the agreement.

No vaccinations are required unless you are coming from an area infected by yellow fever (some are recommended, however; see p744).

VOLUNTEERING
In San Salvador’s Blvd de los Héroes area, Centro de Intercambio y Solidaridad (2225 1330; www.cis.org; Colonia Libertad, Av Bolivar 103) offers Spanish classes to tourists and English classes to low-income and activist Salvadorans, always with a strong emphasis on progressive politics. A friendly place to visit, the CIS has positions for volunteer English teachers (10-week minimum), and information about NGOs working on various issues, including community development, gang intervention, the environment and more. CIS cannot arrange an actual volunteer position, but can provide some information. During national elections, you can volunteer with CIS’s well-respected international election observer mission. CIS can also arrange ‘solidarity partnerships’ for groups interested in meeting with people and organizations related to a particular issue (eg labor, the civil war).

WOMEN TRAVELERS
Foreign women spark interest, there is no doubt. Men will hiss or catcall but for many it’s harmless hormonal babble, as much about male bonding as the female passerby. Nearby all the men you actually meet are extremely courteous and polite. Solo women are unlikely to encounter dangerous situations if they take ordinary precautions. A good way to reduce unwanted attention is to ignore it, not make eye contact and wear clothing appropriate to the area (save shorts for the beach, the lycra leopard-skin hotpants for the club). On long bus rides, sit next to a woman or kids avoids painful, ‘Do you have a boyfriend?’ conversations. At least, enjoy Latin culture’s chivalric aspects while you’re here.