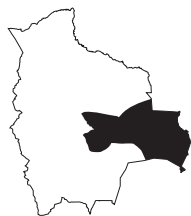


Santa Cruz & Gran Chiquitania



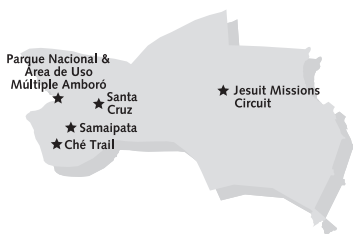
The Bolivian Oriente is not what you generally see in Bolivian tourist brochures. This tropical region, the country's most prosperous, has a palpable desire to differentiate itself from Bolivia's renowned highland image. It has an odd mixture of conservatism, cosmopolitanism and provincialism, with a business head and a multicultural population. The region's agriculture boom in recent years brought about a rise in income and a standard of life that isn't matched by any other Bolivian province.

Following Evo Morales' proposed changes to the Bolivian constitution, the Oriente appealed strongly for local autonomy, but a national referendum backed the president and the region has been forced to search for more diplomatic avenues to get its way.

Despite the fact that Santa Cruz is Bolivia's most populous city, it still has a small-town atmosphere, peppered with international restaurants, trendy youth, and Japanese, German, Italian, Eastern European, Arabic, Indian Sikh and German-Canadian Mennonite communities. From here you can visit the charming Jesuit mission towns, which contain the country's loveliest and most fascinating examples of Jesuit architecture. Pre-Inca ruins hide near the small town of Samaipata, and there are miles of trekking and tons of wildlife at the little-disturbed Parque Nacional Amboró. Revolutionaries can check out where Ché Guevara met his maker at the northern end of the work-in-progress Ché Trail in La Higuera and Vallegrande. If you want a look into a part of Bolivia that defies the stereotype, this is the place to be.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Check out the international cuisine of **Santa Cruz** (p269) and wander around the city's streets
- Trek the still-untouched wilderness and spot rare wildlife at **Parque Nacional & Área de Uso Múltiple Amboró** (p276)
- Explore the pre-Inca ruins in **Samaipata** (p278) and relax in this lovely village
- Get revolutionary on the **Ché Trail** in Vallegrande (p283) and La Higuera (p285)
- Admire the restored architecture around the wonderful **Jesuit missions circuit** (p287)



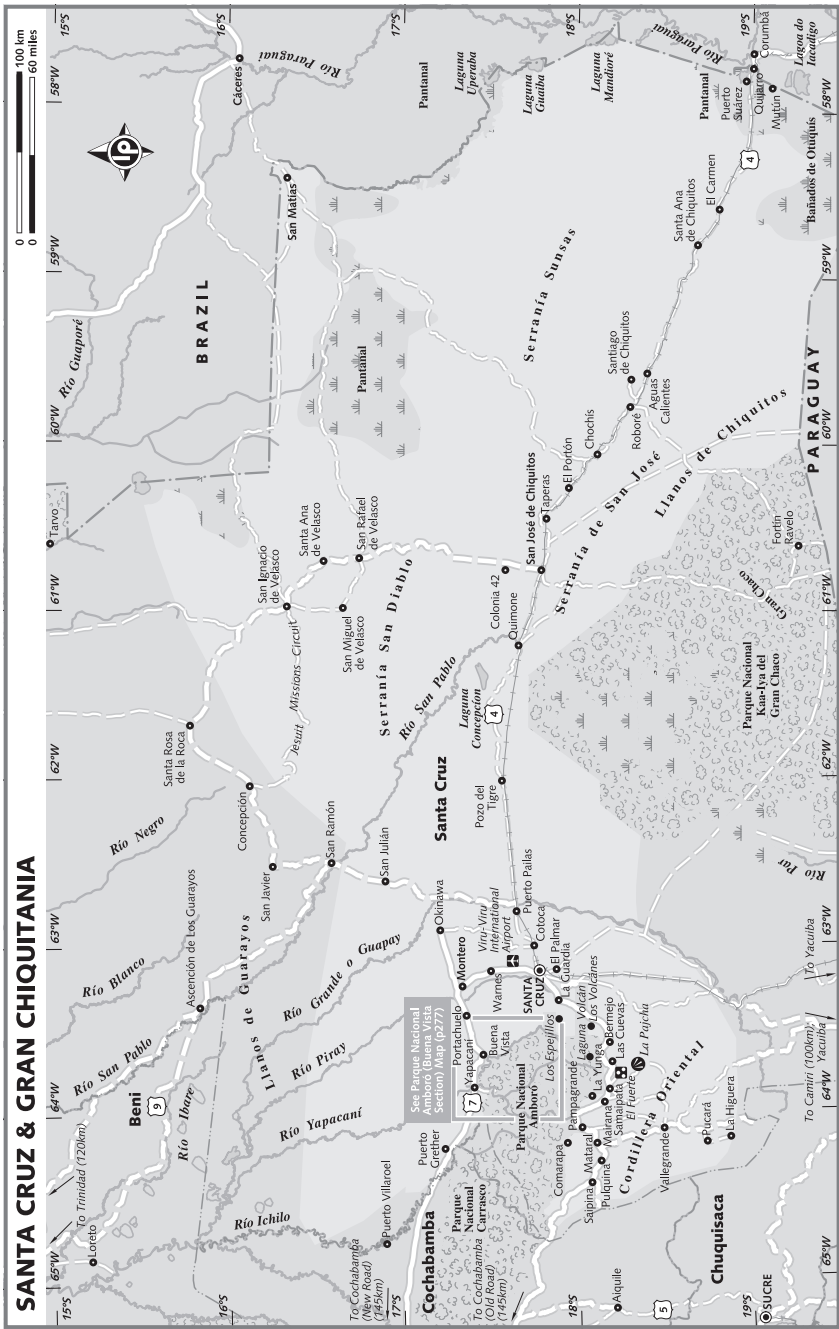
■ TELEPHONE CODE: 3

■ POPULATION: 2.03 MILLION

■ ELEVATION: 0M TO 1300M

SANTA CRUZ & GRAN CHIQUITANIA

SANTA CRUZ & GRAN CHIQUITANIA



Climate

The Oriente's climate is tropical, but because it occupies the transition zone between the Amazon rainforest, the highlands and the dry Chaco plains, Santa Cruz enjoys more sun and less stifling temperatures than the humid Amazon Basin. Winter rainfalls mean little more than 10-minute downpours, but a single summer deluge can last for days. At times during winter, *surazos* (chilly winds) blow in from Patagonia and the Argentine pampas and the temperature plummets.

National Parks

Parque Nacional Amboró (p276) is an unquestionable highlight of the region. The remote Parque Nacional Kaa-Iya del Gran Chaco is Latin America's largest park but is largely inaccessible.

Getting There & Away

Santa Cruz is the country's most connected city. Many flights from Europe and neighboring countries come direct to Santa Cruz and are worth considering if you're arriving from sea level and don't want to spend days acclimatizing in La Paz. Direct flights depart daily for Buenos Aires, Miami, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

Trains trundle south to Argentina and east to the Brazilian Pantanal, and there are long-distance buses running along paved roads to the west and south, as well as frequent domestic flights.

SANTA CRUZ

pop 1.54 million / elevation 417m

Santa Cruz may surprise you with its small-town feeling, lack of high-rise blocks and a lightly buzzing, relaxed tropical atmosphere. Bolivia's largest city oozes modernity yet clings stubbornly to tradition. The city center is vibrant and thriving, its narrow streets crowded with suited businessmen sipping *chicha* (fermented corn) at street stalls, whilst taxis jostle with horses and carts for pole position at traffic lights. Locals still lounge on the main square listening to *camba* (Eastern Lowlands) music, restaurants close for siesta and little stores line the porch-fronted houses selling cheap local products.

This is not the Bolivia that you see in pictures, but this is the place with the largest population diversity in the country – from

the overall-wearing Mennonites strolling the streets past local Goth kids, to a Japanese community, Altiplano (High Plateau) immigrants, Cuban doctors, Brazilian immigrants, bearded Russians and fashionable *cruceños* (Santa Cruz locals) turning sharp corners in their SUVs.

The *cruceños* are an independent lot who feel little affinity for their government in La Paz and are well aware of their stock value as the country's trade and transport center. Support for President Morales is thin on the ground here and *cruceños* voiced their overwhelming desire for the region's autonomy in 2006. Though they lost that battle following a national referendum, calls for independence continue to be the main source of inspiration for the city's graffiti artists and the matter is far from settled.

It's worth spending a few days here, wandering the streets, eating at the many international restaurants and checking out the rich kids' play area, Equipetrol, where nightlife is rife with naughtiness. Alternatively, simply chill out at the town square.

History

Santa Cruz de la Sierra was founded in 1561 by Nuflo de Chavez, a Spaniard who hailed from present-day Paraguay. The town originated 220km east of its current location, but in 1621, by order of the King of Spain, it moved to its present position, 50km east of the Cordillera Oriental foothills. The original location had proved too vulnerable to attack from local tribes. Nuflo himself was killed in 1568 at the hands of the mestizo Itatine tribe made up of indigenous and Spanish settlers.

The city's main aim was to supply the rest of the colony with products such as rice, cotton, sugar and fruit. Its prosperity lasted until the late 1800s, when transportation routes opened up between La Paz and the Peruvian coast, making imported goods cheaper than those hauled from Santa Cruz over mule trails.

During the period leading up to Bolivia's independence in 1825, the eastern regions of the Spanish colonies were largely ignored. Although agriculture was thriving around Santa Cruz, the Spanish remained intent upon extracting every scrap of mineral wealth that could be squeezed from the rich and more hospitable highlands.



In 1954 a highway linking Santa Cruz with other major centers was completed, and the city sprang back from its 100-year economic lull. The completion of the railway line to Brazil in the mid-1950s opened trade routes to the east, after which time tropical agriculture boomed and the city grew as prosperously as crops such as oranges, sugar cane, bananas and coffee. It has continued to grow to the present day.

Orientation

Roughly oval in shape, Santa Cruz is laid out in *anillos* (rings), which form concentric circles around the city center, and *radiales* (spokes) that connect the rings. Radial 1, the road to Viru-Viru airport, runs roughly north-south; the *radiales* progress clockwise up to Radial 27.

Most commercial enterprises, hotels and restaurants lie within the *primer* (first) *anillo*, which is centered on the Plaza 24 de Septiembre. The street of the same name becomes Av Monseñor Rivero, a stretch full of restaurants, cafes and bars. The bi-modal terminal (bus and railway station) is within the third *anillo* but is still only a half-hour walk east from the center. The second to seventh *anillos* are mainly residential and industrial.

Within the *primer anillo*, Junín is the street with most banks, ATMs and internet cafes, and Av René Moreno has loads of souvenir stores. To the northwest of the center, Av San Martín, otherwise known as Barrio Equipetrol, has tons of bars and clubs.

MAPS

The best city map, *Multiplano Santa Cruz City Guide*, covers the first to fourth *anillos* and is available free from the tourist office. A similar map is in the free Check-In magazine distributed by the Departmental tourist office.

Information BOOKSTORES

Near the plaza, **Los Amigos del Libro** (☎ 336-0709; Ingavi 114) and **Lewy Libros** (☎ 332-7937; lewylibros@cotas.com.bo; Junín 229) have limited selections of foreign-language books for sale or trade.

International periodicals are sold at street kiosks around the plaza.

CULTURAL CENTERS

Casa de la Cultura Raúl Otero Reiche (west side of Plaza 24 de Septiembre) Hosts free music and modern art exhibitions plus theater performances; also home to the city tourist office.

Centro Boliviano Americano (CBA; ☎ 342-2299; Potosí 78) Has an English-language library.

Centro Cultural Franco Alemán (Plaza 24 de Septiembre; ☎ 9am-noon & 3-8pm Mon-Fri) Houses the Alliance Française (☎ 333-3392) and Goethe Institut (☎ 332-9906; icbasc@scbs-bo.com), and offers courses in French, German, Spanish and Portuguese. Facilities include a trilingual multimedia library, the outdoor Kulture Café and an art exhibition gallery; it also sponsors lectures and screens foreign films.

EMERGENCY

Private ambulance (Clínica Foianini; ☎ 336-2211, 7162-7647)

Tourist police (☎ 322-5016; north side of Plaza 24 de Septiembre)

IMMIGRATION

Migración (☎ 333-2136; ☎ 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) is north of the center, opposite the zoo entrance. Visa extensions are available here. There's an office at the **train station** (☎ supposedly 10am-noon & 1:30-7pm), which is more convenient but which is reportedly plagued by phony officials. The most reliable office is at the airport.

INTERNET ACCESS

There are numerous internet places on Junín including **Punto Entel** (Junín 140; per hr B\$3; ☎ 8am-11pm) and you will have no problem getting online.

LAUNDRY

Central, efficient wash-and-dry places offer same-day service (with drop-off before noon) for around B\$12 per kilo:

España Lavandería (España 160)

Lavandería La Paz (La Paz 42)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Clínica Foianini (☎ 336-2211; Irala 468) Hospital used by embassies, but be aware that some travelers have reported unnecessary tests and being required to stay for longer than is strictly necessary.

Clínica Japonesa (☎ 346-2038) On the third *anillo*, east side; recommended for inexpensive and professional medical treatment.

Farmacia América (☎ 337-1094; Libertad 333) The best pharmacy, efficient and inexpensive.

MONEY

Cash advances are available at most major banks, and ATMs line Junín and most major intersections. The easiest place to change cash or traveler's checks (2% to 3% commission) is **Casa de Cambio Alemán** (east side of Plaza 24 de Septiembre). Street moneychangers shout '*¡Dolares!*' in your face on the main plaza, but make sure you know the value of what you are changing. **Magri Turismo** (☎ 334-4559; cnr Warnes & Potosí) is the American Express agent but doesn't cash traveler's checks.

TELEPHONE

Fun can be had using public telephone boxes, which come in a variety of shapes – anything from toucans to jaguars suspended mid-growl. Better rates are found at phone centers, such as the main **Entel office** (Warnes 82), and internet telecom stores along Bolívar that offer cheap international calls. The **Punto Entel** (Junín 284) office near the plaza has landlines. Local cell-phone rates are very cheap and chips already charged with credit can be bought at Tonytel on Junín.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Online information about the city of Santa Cruz and the main attractions of the Oriente region can be found at www.destinosantacruz.com and www.santacruz-online.net.

Departamental de Turismo (☎ 333-3248; Palacio Prefectural, north side of Plaza 24 de Septiembre)

Fundación Amigos de la Naturaleza (FAN; ☎ 355-6800; www.fan-bo.org; Km 7.5, Carretera a Samaipata)

Though no longer in charge of the parks, FAN is still the best contact for Amboró and Noel Kempff Mercado National Parks information. West of town (minibus 44) off the old Cochabamba road.

Main tourist office (☎ 334-5500; Ground fl, Casa de la Cultura, west side of Plaza 24 de Septiembre)

SERNAP (☎ 335-2325; www.sernap.gov.bo in Spanish; Calle 9 Oeste, Barrio Equipetrol) For information on national parks.

Dangers & Annoyances

Beware of bogus immigration officials and carefully check the credentials of anyone who demands to see your passport or other ID. No real police officer will ever ask to see your documents in the street; be especially wary of 'civilian' police who will most certainly turn out to be frauds. If you're suspicious, insist that they

accompany you to the police station, where things can legitimately be sorted out. Readers have reported several violent robberies in broad daylight during the week at Río Piray; it's best only to venture out there on weekends, when there's safety in numbers.

Sights & Activities

Santa Cruz is not the richest town when it comes to sightseeing. You'll probably spend most of your time here strolling around and sipping coffee in one of the city's many cafes.

PLAZA 24 DE SEPTIEMBRE & MUSEO DE HISTORIA NACIONAL

The city's main plaza serves as a lush tropical space where you'll see locals lounging on benches and strolling, *camba* bands banging out their tropical rhythms and families bringing their kids to play. Once there were resident jaywalking sloths here, but they were relocated to the zoo in an effort to protect them from electrocution and increasing traffic hazards in the city center.

A block away along Junín is the little **Museo de Historia Nacional** (☎ 8am-noon & 3:30-6pm Mon-Fri) which houses a permanent display of Chiquitania art and photographic exhibits explaining the customs of this little-known indigenous group.

BASÍLICA MENOR DE SAN LORENZO & MUSEO DE LA CATEDRAL

Although the original cathedral on Plaza 24 de Septiembre was founded in 1605, the present structure dates from 1845 and wasn't consecrated until 1915. Inside, the decorative woodwork on the ceiling and silver plating around the altar are worth a look. There are good views of the city from the **belltower** (admission B\$5; ☎ 10am-noon & 4-6pm Tue, Thu, Sat & Sun).

The cathedral's air-conditioned **Museo de Arte Sagrado** (admission B\$10; ☎ 8:30am-noon & 2:30-6pm Tue, Thu & Sun) has a collection of religious icons and artifacts but very little typical religious art. Most interesting are the many gold and silver relics from the Jesuit Guayaos missions.

PARQUE EL ARENAL & MUSEO ETNO-FOLKLÓRICO

Locals relax around the lagoon at Parque El Arenal, but it's best not to dawdle here at night. On an island in the lagoon, a

bas-relief mural by renowned Bolivian artist Lorgio Vaca depicts historic and modern-day aspects of Santa Cruz. Located at the park entrance on Beni and 6 de Agosto is the **Ethno-Folkloric Museum** (☎ 342-9939; admission free; ☎ 8am-noon & 2:30-6:30pm Mon-Fri), which has a small collection of traditional art and artifacts from several *camba* cultures including Guaraní, Mojeño, Ayoreo and Chiquitano.

JARDÍN ZOOLOGICO & MUSEO GUARANÍ

Santa Cruz' **zoo** (☎ 342-9939; adult/child B\$10/5; ☎ 9am-6:30pm) has a collection of native birds, mammals and reptiles kept in pleasingly humane conditions, although the llamas are a bit overdressed for the climate. If you're not into going to the jungle, this is a good place to see spectacular species such as tapirs, pumas, jaguars and spectacled bears. Keep your eyes open for free-ranging sloths and squirrel monkeys in the trees. Around the corner from the zoo entrance is the entry to the **Guaraní Museum** (admission B\$5; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri), a small but fascinating and professionally presented exhibition of Guaraní culture. Look for the animal masks and *tinajas* (huge clay pots) used for making *chicha*. You'll need to knock on the gate for entry.

Take *micro* 55 from Calle Vallegrande, 76 from Calle Santa Bárbara or anything marked 'Zoológico.' Taxis for up to four people cost around B\$15 from the center.

BIOCENRO GÜEMBE

A great place for a day out of Santa Cruz, **Güembe** (☎ 370-0541; www.biocentroguembe.com; Km 7, Camino Porongo, Zona Los Batos; admission adult/child B\$160/80) has a butterfly farm, orchid exhibitions, 10 natural pools, fishing and trekking in the surrounding forest. There's a restaurant with international cuisine, so you won't go hungry, and cabins if you wish to stay the night. The best way to get here is by taxi from Santa Cruz; expect to pay around B\$30.

PARQUE AVION PIRATA

On the *primer anillo*, this small plaza has a huge airplane as its centerpiece. According to local legend the plane belonged to drug smugglers who, after entering into difficulties, touched down at its current location only to be raided by police. The police

decided to leave the plane there as a reminder to other would-be *narcotraficantes*. It's not true of course, but it's a nice story!

AQUALAND

For a real splash, dive into this **water park** (☎ 385-2500; half day B\$35-50, full day B\$50-70; ☎ 10am-6pm Thu-Sun May-Sep) near the airport, north of the city center. The best way to get here is by taxi (around B\$30).

LOMAS DE ARENA

Located 16km south of the city, this small nature reserve is famed for its gorgeous sand dunes – a geological mystery, given that the sand apparently originates from Argentina and no other sand dunes have formed anywhere in the area. This is a great spot for birdwatchers, with temporary pools filling with migrant birds from September to November and February to March. The relict Chiquitania forest in the area is home to vocal titi monkeys and toucans. A taxi will take you to the entrance to the park (around B\$20 from the city center), but if you wish to explore further you'll either have to walk or you'll need a 4WD vehicle. Bird Bolivia (see below) runs recommended day-trips to the park. If you wish to stay there is an excellent hotel, **Soly Arena** (☎ 322-1375; cabins for 4 people B\$420), which is close to the park entrance.

Tours

Numerous companies offer organized tours, but it's hard to vouch for quality, particularly for those with cheap rates. Recommended agencies:

Amboró Tours (☎ 314-5858; www.amborotours.com; Pari 81) Trips to Amboró and Noel Kempff Mercado national parks and Jesuit missions.

Bird Bolivia (☎ 358-2674; www.birdbolivia.com) Professional birding and wildlife tours with expert guides for those with a special interest in nature.

Ruta Verde (☎ 339-6470; www.rutaverdebolivia.com; 21 de Mayo 332) Great for local information and tours to the Pantanal, Jesuit missions, Amboró and Noel Kempff Mercado national parks, plus Amazon riverboat trips and more.

Festivals & Events

If you're in Santa Cruz during **Carnaval**, you should most certainly head for the paintball-plagued streets and join in the collective chaos. Carnaval occurs annually

in February or March, one week before Lent begins.

International Theater Festival Theater groups from all over the world perform in venues around the city. Held from April 14 to 24 (odd-numbered years only), it's a great time to be in Santa Cruz.

International Festival of Baroque Music A 10-day festival, held from the end of April to the beginning of May, with concerts in Santa Cruz and the Jesuit mission towns.

International Festival of Cheese & Wine A relatively new festival, held in August, where locals showcase their best offerings. Great opportunity to taste Bolivian wine from Tarija.

ExpoCruz (www.fexpocruz.com.bo) Every year in mid- to late September, Santa Cruz hosts this enormous two-week fair where you can buy anything from a toothbrush or clothing to a new house, a combine harvester or a 20-ton truck.

Sleeping BUDGET

Alojamiento Santa Bárbara (☎ 332-1817; Santa Bárbara 151; s/d B\$35/50) This is a low-key place with a courtyard and bare rooms with hospital-like beds. It's much loved by backpackers and young Bolivians for being cheap and central.

Alojamiento Oriente (☎ 332-1976; Junín 362; s/d B\$35/60, with bathroom B\$60/90; ☎ ☎) A bit run-down and with peeling walls, but given its central location and the fact that floor fans come as standard even in the cheapest rooms, this is a good budget option.

Hotel Rio Magdalena (☎ 339-3011; Arenales 653; dm B\$50, s/d B\$110/120; ☎ ☎) Former Peace Corps hangout, this is a top-notch midrange option with comfortable rooms, an inviting pool and a roof terrace with glorious views of the city.

Jodanga Backpackers Hostel (☎ 312-0033; www.jodanga.com; El Fuerte 1380 696; dmB\$65-75, d B\$140, d with bathroom B\$200; ☎ ☎) The 'in' place for Santa Cruz backpackers, this superbly equipped hostel has a pool, jacuzzi, pool table, free internet and seriously groovy, air-conditioned rooms, as well as a party atmosphere inspired by its own bar. They also organize great value Spanish classes.

our pick Hotel Sarah (☎ 332-2425; Sara 85; s/d B\$70/120; ☎ ☎) Arguably the best option in this price range, this brand-new hotel boasts a great location and spotless rooms with cable TV. Walls are adorned with jungle scenes to prepare you for any Amazonian adventures that may lie ahead.

Residencial Bolívar (☎ 334-2500; Sucre 131; s/d B\$75/130) Leafy tropical patios, a toucan snoozing on a branch and clean, if small, rooms. You can laze in the hammocks or read in the courtyard. Breakfast is included and Spanish lessons available for guests.

MIDRANGE

Santa Cruz has a growing number of mid-range hotels, all with private bathrooms and reasonable prices.

Hotel Copacabana (☎ 336-2770; Junín 217; with-out air-con s/d B\$139/196, with air-con s/d B\$213/251) A strange sort of retro Buddhist joint that will appeal to some but be a turn-off for others. Dated, wood-paneled rooms with modern bathrooms and cable TV compound the mixed messages that this place sends. Breakfast included and 10% discount for HI members.

Hotel Globetrotter (☎ 337-2754; Sara 49; s/d B\$160/200; ☺) Lovely traditional Santa Cruz house converted into a hotel, with a long courtyard laden with plants and rooms with cable TV. The friendly multilingual owner is a well of local information who can book plane tickets and help with your itinerary. Breakfast, though included, isn't a standout and is best avoided.

Hotel La Paz (☎ 333-1728; La Paz 69; s/d B\$160/250; ☺) Decent value for comfortable suite-like double rooms arranged around a leafy courtyard. Single rooms are quite a bit smaller, but they will upgrade you to a suite for an extra B\$40.

Hotel Viru Viru (☎ 333-5298; www.viruviru.com; Junín 338; s/d B\$210/280; ☺) Great for stifling hot Santa Cruz days, Viru Viru has a pool in the center to cool off in. The rooms and rates are decent, with good beds, breakfasts, TVs and free internet access for guests, and the location is great.

Hotel Lido (☎ 336-3555; www.lido-hotel.com; 21 de Mayo 527; s/d B\$240/310; ☺) A nice but relatively simple upmarket choice in the center, above a Chinese restaurant, the Lido has comfortable rooms with TVs, and access to laundry facilities. There's also a weight-lifting gym on the ground floor.

TOP END

Santa Cruz' five-star hotels are away from the center and are more like resorts than hotels. Many were built during the oil boom, but things went pear-shaped in the

mid-1990s when the casinos were closed due to political wrangling.

Hotel Los Tajibos (☎ 342-1000, 800-10-2210; www.lostajiboshotel.com; San Martín 455, Barrio Equipetrol; s/d ste B\$1200/1300/1500; ☺) If you stay at Los Tajibos you won't want to go out to see the city. There's a nightclub to go wild in and a health club to recover in, while muscle flexing can go on at the racquetball courts, followed by a massage or relaxing in the lush tropical gardens. Weekend package rates (from B\$500 per person) are often available.

Hotel Yotaú (☎ 336-7799; San Martín 7, Barrio Equipetrol; s/d B\$1500/1700; ☺) This beautiful tropical-style high-rise has fitness facilities and a sauna, as well as executive and family rooms for up to six people (B\$2200). Lunches and dinners cost B\$60 each.

Eating

RESTAURANTS

The international population has rolled up its sleeves and opened some fine restaurants, so what the city lacks in sightseeing it makes up in gastronomic offerings.

Alexander (☎ 312-8888; Junín; mains B\$10-30) This is a haven for delicious breakfasts and good coffee. Part of a chain, Alexander is excellent for sampling local Madidi coffee and any range of breakfasts, including *huevos rancheros* (spicy scrambled eggs) and gigantic fruit salads served with yoghurt and honey.

Vegetarian Center Cuerpomonte (☎ 337-1797; Aroma 54; buffet per kg B\$15; ☺ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) Basic and simple, this place has a buffet selection, including quinoa cake, mashed sweet potato, salad bar goodies, veggie soups and lots of other nice wholesome things to keep your body healthy.

Los Lomitos (☎ 332-8696; Uruguay 758; mains B\$15-70) Argentinian-style *churrasqueria* (grilled meat restaurant): if you are a beef fanatic then look no further. Famed for its excellent-value tender cuts, the portions for two will feed four normal-sized people. Delivery to your hotel available.

Ken (☎ 333-3728; Uruguay 730; mains B\$20-35; ☺ closed Wed) Everybody's favorite Japanese eatery. The *yaki udon* (stir-fried noodles) is massive, laden with chicken and cashews, and there's a great choice of daily dishes to be savored. Just check out all the folk from the Japanese community licking their whiskers in satisfaction.

El Aljibe (☎ 335-2277; Ñufflo de Chavez; mains B\$25-40) An atmospheric little restaurant specializing in *comida típica* (typical food), which is increasingly difficult to find in cosmopolitan Santa Cruz.

Cada Día (Melchor Pinto; mains B\$25-40) Chinese-owned, this is one of the city's most popular vegetarian restaurants, with delicious tofu and gluten dishes that really do taste just like meat.

Pizzeria Marguerita (☎ 337-0285; north side of Plaza 24 de Septiembre; mains B\$25-50) Long known for its high-quality pizza, pasta and salads, and always popular with foreigners, this well-located place is good for a casual meal.

Casa Típica de Camba (☎ 342-7864; www.casadelcamba.com; Mendoza 539; mains B\$25-55) You are likely to end up at this lively, sprawling landmark if you ask Bolivian friends where to find the 'most typical' *cruceños/camba* experience. Juicy meat comes sizzling off the grill while live crooners holler traditional tunes and straw-hatted waiters attend to your every need. Take *micro 35* or *75* from the center.

La Bella Napoli (☎ 332-5402; Independencia 635; pizzas & mains B\$30-50; ☎ 6pm-midnight Tue-Sun) In a rustic barn six blocks south of the plaza, this place serves fine pizza and pasta dishes – including ravioli, cannelloni and lasagna – on chunky hardwood tables, some outside on a vine-covered patio.

La Casona (☎ 337-8495; www.bistolracasona.com; Arenales 222; mains B\$35-80; ☎ closed Sun) One of Santa Cruz' best places to eat, this German-run splash of California gourmet has seating in a shady courtyard or inside amid the colorful indigenous art that adorns the walls. The food is diverse, with a variety of salads, German dishes, or pasta in a spicy, palate-biting *arrabiatta* (spicy tomato sauce).

Yorimichi (☎ 334-7717; Busch 548; mains B\$36-70; ☎ 11:30am-2:30pm & 6-11pm) A swish Japanese restaurant with bamboo screens separating eating spaces and traditional music tinkling from the speakers, this is the place to come for brilliant sushi, sashimi, tempura and heart-warming sips of sake. It's a favorite of upmarket *cruceños*.

Lorca (☎ 334-0562; Moreno 20; mains B\$40-60; ☎ 8am-late) Arguably the city center's trendiest restaurant, bar, theater and general hangout, Lorca play with several world cuisines, and its llama steak, dribbled with a

blue-cheese sauce, is top class. If you are feeling more adventurous, try *cola de lagarto* (alligator tail).

Y Se Llama Peru (☎ 335-4969; Monseñor Rivero; mains B\$45-90) Adventurous seafood restaurant with a huge variety of imaginative fish and shellfish dishes. Try the *Picante de Mariscos* if you like your shellfish to come with a nip.

Maminco (☎ 337-1911; Busch 150; mains B\$45-130) Grill restaurant with a rustic *quincho* (open-air grill) atmosphere, this place specializes in duck, which it has been preparing on the premises since the early 1980s. If you work up a thirst in the process try the juice wagon in front for great-value tropical drinks.

Michelangelo's (☎ 334-8403; Chuquisaca 502; mains B\$50-80) Located in a classy house, complete with fireplaces and marble floors, this is a good choice for a romantic evening or a little Italian self-indulgence.

CAFES

Av Monseñor Rivero is lined with snazzy cafes and coffee shops that seem to get trendier, or at least more expensive, the further along that you walk.

Mr Café (Monseñor Rivero 260; snacks B\$20-40) Sandwiches, juices, cakes, light meals and ice cream to complement its rich espressos all make this place a favorite local hangout.

Bar El Tapekú (☎ 334-5905; cnr La Paz & Ballivián; ☎ from 7:30pm Wed-Sat) This casual yet upscale Swiss and Bolivian-owned place serves good, earthy food and has live music most nights (B\$15 to B\$20 cover).

QUICK EATS

As Bolivia's most modern, hustle-and-bustle town, Santa Cruz also boasts more junk food outlets than you can shake a happy meal at. For the highest concentration of fast-food places head south of the center to Plaza Blacutt. It's surrounded by cheap burger and chicken joints and all you can eat dives such as El Bibosi, where you can get a fill-your-boots lunch for B\$15.

Panificación del Oriente (☎ 336-7258; 24 de Septiembre 501; pastries from B\$3) If the smell of freshly-baked bread doesn't drive you crazy then take your pick from the mouthwatering variety of cakes, buns, pastries and tarts on offer.

Salón de Té Glamour (☎ 333-6633; Independencia 479; tea B\$5) So what is so glamorous about a

cup of tea you may ask? Well nothing really, but this minimalist, super-clean tearoom does its best to introduce you to the world of flavors that tealike drinks can provide, with herbal infusions, *mates*, coffees and sticky cakes on offer. Have a quick look at the teapot collection too – bizarre!

Bar Hawaii (cnr Sucre & Beni; mains B\$20) An expansive cross between an ice-cream joint and a fast-food eatery, this spot is popular for sundaes, cakes, light meals and good coffee. A reasonably priced buffet lunch is served in the garden.

Roky's Pollos Parrillados (☎ 333-8886; Cañoto 50; chicken B\$20-30) If you have a soft spot for fried poultry then try Roky's charcoal-grilled roosters. There's free home delivery if you are too lazy to walk.

Dumbo (☎ 336-7077; Ayacucho 247; ice creams B\$5-15, mains B\$20-50) Dumbo serves gourmet frozen yogurt in the usual flavors plus *maracuya* (passion fruit), papaya, *guayaba* (guava), almond, tangerine and so on. One thing you can say about the meals here is that you get a lot of food for your money.

GROCERIES

For simple, cheap eats, try Mercado La Ramada but consider hygiene levels carefully before indulging. Mercado Florida is wall-to-wall blender stalls serving exquisite juices and fruit salads for B\$5.

For a good variety of (relatively expensive) fixings to prepare meals yourself, try minimart **Hipermaxi** (cnr 21 de Mayo & Florida).

Supermercado Sur Fidalga (east Plaza Blacutt) is the best stocked, cheapest option for groceries.

Naturalia (☎ 333-4374; Independencia 452) organic grocery store has a wide selection of locally produced healthy goodies and a small café to try them in.

Drinking

The hippest nightspots are along Av San Martín, between the second and third *anillos* in Barrio Equipetrol, a B\$7 to B\$10 taxi ride from the center. Hot spots change frequently so it's best to dress to impress, cruise the *piranhar* (strip; literally 'to go piranha fishing') and see what catches your fancy. Cover charges run from B\$20 to B\$70 and drinks are expensive; most places start selling drinks between 6pm and 9pm but don't warm up until 11pm; they then continue until sunrise.

If you don't want to pay entry fees to the discos, at weekends a young beach crowd gathers with their cars at Río Pira'i, banging out unbelievably loud music from their gigantic car-boot speakers, while drinking beer, dancing and chatting till late. The area is potentially unsafe at other times though. Near the university, Av Busch is lined with places catering to more serious, mostly male drinkers with less ready cash.

Irish Pub (☎ 333-8118; east side Plaza 24 de Septiembre) A travelers' second home in Santa Cruz, this place has pricey beers, delicious soups and comfort food, plus tasty local specialties. It serves breakfast, lunch and dinner, though most people while the hours away drinking beer, relaxing and watching the goings-on in the plaza below.

Lorca (☎ 334-0562; Moreno 20; admission for live music B\$20; ☎ 8am-late) Meeting place of the city's arty crowd and those loving diversity, Lorca is one of the most innovative and happening places in town. It's perfect for chilled *caipirinha* and *mojito* cocktails while you enjoy the live music. Before the music starts, short films are screened and there is an art gallery in the back, right next to the little theater.

Clapton's Blues Bar (cnr Murillo & Arenales; admission B\$20; ☎ Sat & Sun) A tiny, dark jazz-and-blues bar with local bands playing to a sparse drinking audience till very late. There can be good jazz here (and very bad rock), so check what's playing by asking at the bar.

Entertainment

Santa Cruz has a number of discos and karaoke bars, which reflects the city's young, liberal and cosmopolitan character. The bars and clubs close and open monthly, so ask around for what's hot. For movie schedules and other venues, see the daily newspapers *El Mundo* and *El Deber*.

Cinecenter (☎ free phone 900-770077; second anillo; cinema admission B\$30-50) Modern mall with food court, trendy shops and a 12-screen US-style cinema that shows all the latest Hollywood releases. This place has rapidly become the place to be seen in Santa Cruz, to the detriment of a number of smaller cinemas and art-houses that have closed as a result.

Eleguá (libertad) During the week this is a Cuban cultural-center-cum-bar-cum-dance-school (it depends which day you visit!). At weekends it metamorphoses into

a groovy Latino disco where you can swing your thing to the latest samba sounds.

El Rincón Salteño (☎ 353-6335; 26 de Enero at Charagua; ☞ from 10pm Fri, Sat & Sun) Traditional *peñas* (folk-music programs) are scarce in modern Santa Cruz, but this is an excellent choice. Positioned on the second *anillo*, there's a great variety of musical styles, from Argentine guitarists to Cuban village drummers, local singers and dancers in costume.

Shopping

Wood carvings made from the tropical hardwoods *morado* and the more expensive *guayacán* (from B\$150 for a nice piece) are unique to the Santa Cruz area. Relief carvings on *tari* nuts are also interesting and make nice portable souvenirs. Locals also make beautiful macramé *llicas* (root-fiber bags).

Av René Moreno is a good place for souvenir shopping. Be aware that prices are much higher here than in La Paz for llama and alpaca wool goods. Paseo Artesanal La Recova, a block north from the plaza along Libertad is packed with little stores selling both authentic and fabricated handicrafts at reasonable prices.

Artcampo (☎ 334-1843; Salvatierra 407) The best place to find fine *artesanías* (locally hand-crafted items), this store provides an outlet for the work of 1000 rural *cruceña* women and their families. The truly inspired and innovative pieces include leatherwork, hammocks, weavings, handmade paper, greeting cards and lovely natural-material lamp shades.

Centro de Arte y Cultura Guaraní Ñandereko Ñomai (☎ 337-6285; Junín 229; ☞ 9am-12:30pm & 3-7pm) You'll find lovely wooden carvings and textiles from Guaraní villages here, all created by indigenous families who benefit directly from the sales. It's only small but worth a visit.

Coca Social (Junín) All manner of coca produce is on sale at this fascinating little store, the likes of which you won't find in your home town.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Viru-Viru international airport (VVI; ☎ 338-5000), 15km north of the center, handles domestic and international flights.

TAM (☎ 353-2639) flies direct to La Paz daily. It also runs popular direct flights to Puerto Suárez on Tuesday and Saturday, and on

Sunday there are flights to Riberalta and Tarija via Yacuiba. **AeroSur** (☎ 336-4446; Irala at Colón) has daily services to Cochabamba, La Paz and Sucre, as well as several other Bolivian cities, plus services to Asunción on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. **TAM Mercosur** (☎ 339-1999; La Riva & Velasco) flies to Asunción Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday, with connections to Buenos Aires, Santiago de Chile and several Brazilian cities. **Aerocon** (☎ 351-1200; El Trompillo Airport) flies several times daily to Trinidad with onward connections to Cobija and Riberalta from El Trompillo airport just south of the center.

American Airlines (☎ 334-1314; Beni 167) flies direct daily to Miami in the morning, with a second evening flight from Thursday to Sunday. **Aerolíneas Argentinas** (☎ 333-9776; Junín 22) flies several times a week to Buenos Aires.

BUS, MICRO & SHARED TAXI

The full-service **bimodal terminal** (☎ 334-0772; terminal fee B\$3), the combined long-distance bus and train station, is 1.5km east of the center, just before the third *anillo* at the end of Av Brasil. The main part of the terminal is for *flotas* (long-distance buses) and the train; on the other side of the tunnel is the *micro* (minibus) terminal for regional services. Taking a series of connecting *micros* or taxis can be a faster, if more complicated way, of reaching your destination, rather than waiting all day for an evening *flota*.

There are plenty of daily services to Cochabamba (B\$30, eight to 10 hours), from where there are connections to La Paz, Oruro, Sucre, Potosí and Tarija. Cosmos has two direct daily services to La Paz (B\$130, 15 to 23 hours) at 5pm and 5:30pm. Several companies offer daily evening services to Sucre (B\$80, 15 to 25 hours), connecting to Potosí. Most services to Camiri (B\$30, five to six hours) and Yacuiba (B\$50, 10 hours) depart in the late afternoon. Buses to Vallegrande (B\$35, six to seven hours) leave in the morning and afternoon. A number of buses leave every evening to Trinidad (B\$50 to B\$120, at least nine hours) and beyond. The trip frequently gets rough in the rainy season and it's worth paying a bit extra for a *bus cama* (bed bus).

To the Jesuit missions and Chiquitania, *flotas* leave in the morning and early evening (7pm to 9pm) to San Xavier (B\$40, five

hours) and Concepción (B\$40, six hours). Departures at 8pm go on to San Ignacio de Velasco (B\$50, 10 hours). *Micros* run throughout the day, every two hours or so, but only go as far as Concepción (B\$35, five hours).

International routes have offices at the left-hand end of the main terminal as you enter. Daily services connect Santa Cruz with Buenos Aires (B\$500, 36 hours), whilst Yacyreta run the most comfortable service to Asunción, Paraguay (B\$320, 24 hours).

Smaller *micros* and *trufis* (collective taxis or minibuses that follow a set route) to Viru-Viru airport, Montero (with connections to Buena Vista and Villa Tunari), Samaipata and other communities in Santa Cruz department leave regularly from outside the old bus terminal and less regularly from the *micro* platforms at the bimodal terminal. To Buena Vista (B\$20, two hours), they wait on Izozog (Isozo), near the old bus terminal. To Samaipata (B\$25, three hours), *trufis* leave on the opposite side of Av Cañoto, about two blocks from the old bus terminal.

TRAIN

Trains depart from the bimodal terminal bound for Quijarro (see the boxed text, p292) and Yacuiba. For access to the platform you need to buy a platform ticket and show your passport to the platform guard.

The rail service to Yacuiba (p256) on the Argentine border, via Villamontes (p257; the connection point for buses to Paraguay), is a reasonably quick and comfortable *Ferrobús* (passenger rail bus; *semi-cama/cama* B\$120/135, 11 hours), which departs at 6pm on Thursday and Sunday, returning on Friday and Monday at 6pm.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Handy minibuses leave Viru-Viru for the center (B\$3, 30 minutes) when flights arrive. Minibuses to the airport leave every 20 minutes starting at 5:30am from Av Cañoto at stops along the first *anillo*. Taxis for up to four people cost B\$50.

TO/FROM THE BUS & TRAIN STATION

The bimodal bus-train station is beyond easy walking distance, but you can get to the center in about 10 minutes on *micro 12*. Expect to pay B\$5 to B\$7 per person for a taxi.

BUS

Santa Cruz' system of city *micros* (B\$1.50) connects the transportation terminals and all the *anillos* with the center. *Micros 17* and *18* circulate around the first *anillo*. To reach Av San Martín in Barrio Equipetrol, take *micro 23* from anywhere on Vallegrande. A *Guía de Micros* documenting all the city routes is available from bookstores and kiosks (B\$25 to B\$50).

CAR

Most rent-a-car companies also have offices at the airport.

American Rent-a-Car (☎ 334-1235; Justiniano 28 at Uruguay)

Avis Rent-a-Car (☎ 343-3939; Km 3.5, Carretera al Norte)

Barron's Rent-a-Car (☎ 333-8823; www.rentacarbolivia.com; Cristóbal de Mendoza 286)

Localiza Rent-a-Car (☎ 343-3939; Km 3.5, Banzer)

TAXI

Taxis are very cheap but there is no rigid price structure. Typically the price is higher if you are in a group, are carrying lots of luggage or wish to travel after 10pm, and drivers will quote a fee that they consider fair for the journey. If you think it is too much refuse and try the next one: there are plenty to choose from. Typically a trip for one person within the first *anillo* during the day is about B\$5, rising to B\$7 if you stray to the second *anillo*. Agree your price in advance to avoid arguments.

BUENA VISTA

pop 13,300

Despite the presence of two hulking cell-phone masts overlooking the plaza, Buena Vista is a nice little town two hours (103km) northwest of Santa Cruz, serving as an ideal staging point for trips into Parque Nacional Amboró's forested lowland section. Though most foreigners prefer Samaipata (p278) for national park exploration, Buena Vista has some of the best places to view wildlife, observe birds and see local traditions.

Information

There is no tourist office at the time of writing. For information on Parque Nacional Amboró, visit **SERNAP** (Servicio Nacional de Areas Protegidas; ☎ 932-2055; www.sernap.gov.bo in Spanish; ☎ 7am-7pm), a block south of the plaza, where you can pick up an entry permit and

inquire about current park regulations and accommodations options.

There's no bank or ATM here, so bring cash from elsewhere. If you are desperate, a **Moneygram office** (☎ 8:30am-noon & 2:30-6pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat) on the street corner two blocks north of the plaza can wire money from abroad. An acceptable internet connection is available at **Punto Viva** (per hr B\$4; ☎ 8am-10pm) on the northwest corner of the plaza.

English-speaking **Amboró Tours** (☎ 314-5858; www.amborotours.com; Pari 81) in Santa Cruz runs adventurous trips to the northern section of the park, starting at B\$400 per person per day for two people, including transportation, a guide and food. They no longer have an office in Buena Vista.

Sights & Activities

IGLESIA DE LOS SANTOS DESPOSORIOS

Buena Vista's Jesuit mission was founded in 1694 as the fifth mission in the Viceroyalty of Peru, but in its current form dates from 1767. When the Jesuits were expelled from Bolivia later that year, the administration of the church passed to the bishop of Santa Cruz. Although the building is deteriorating, it has a lovely classic form, but you'd have to be a brave soul to scale the precarious ladder to the bell tower for views of the plaza.

RÍO SURUTÚ, SANTA BÁRBARA & EL CAIRO

Río Surutú is a popular excursion for locals, and there's a pleasant sandy beach ideal for picnics, swimming and camping during the dry season. From Buena Vista it's an easy 3km walk to the river bend nearest town. The opposite bank is the boundary of Parque Nacional Amboró.

A good longer option is the six-hour **circuit walk** through the community of Santa Bárbara and partially forested tropical plantation country. From Buena Vista, follow the unpaved road to Santa Bárbara and ask for the track that leads to an idyllic river beach on the Río Ucurutú. After a picnic and a dip, you can return to Buena Vista via the Huaytú road.

An even better swimming hole is at **El Cairo**, which is an hour's walk from town. To get there, head downhill from the plaza past the alcaldía (town hall) and follow the unpaved

road as it curves to the right. About 2km from town, take the left fork and cross over a bridge. After passing El Cairo, on your right, keep going until you reach the river.

Festivals & Events

The local fiesta, **Día de los Santos Desposorios** (November 26), features bullfights, food stalls and general merrymaking. Culinary festivals include: the **Chocolate Festival** (last Sunday in January), the **Coffee Festival** (third Sunday in April) and the **Rice Festival** (early May) after the harvest.

Sleeping

La Casona (☎ 932-2083; western cnr of plaza; r per person B\$30) This is a colorful place on the plaza, with a friendly owner and a nice patio with sagging hammocks. The rooms are decked out in pastel shades, have good beds and a floor fan. Spotlessly clean shared bathrooms only.

Residencial Nadia (☎ 932-2049; Sevilla 186; r per person B\$70) Just off the main square, the spacious rooms at this family home surround a patio. There are firm beds and the owner is a good source of park information. All rooms have fans.

Buena Vista Hotel (☎ 339-1080; www.buenavistahotel.com.bo; r per person B\$100-150; ☎ ☎) A glorious range of suites, cabins and rooms set in gorgeous gardens around a refreshing pool. There is something for everyone in this, the best hotel within walking distance of the center; restaurant is top class too.

Hotel Flora & Fauna (☎ 710-43706; amboro adventures@hotmail.com; r per person all-inclusive B\$350) British ornithologist/entomologist Robin Clarke runs this modern, utilitarian collection of cabins. Pluses include wildlife-viewing platforms, an extensive book exchange and guided walks (for guests only) from B\$70. Access is by car/moto-taxi (B\$25/15) from Buena Vista. Book in advance.

Amboró Eco-Resort (☎ 932-2048, in Santa Cruz 3-342-2372; s/d/ste B\$600/700/1000; ☎ ☎) A 20-minute walk outside of town, this resort is surrounded by its own tropical forest, complete with walking paths and fenced-in forest animals. Amenities include a swim-up bar in the pool, a sauna and a disco. It's not the world's quietest place, but it's fun if you're with children. The resort also operates Mataracú Tent Camp (p276).

Eating

A few places are dotted around the plaza, serving a similar uninspiring selection of deep-fried meat and chicken with rice and salad. None are particularly appetizing or cheap, and given the proximity to the national park the fact that they also serve wild game means that any responsible traveler should treat them with suspicion. Beware too of 'special tropical juices' served in some of these places; the only special thing about them is the inflated price. Patujú on the south side of the plaza sells homemade jams, honeys and *comida típica* to take away or eat in.

Pensión Gladibal (1 block north of plaza; almuerzo B\$12) Cheap and cheerful with wholesome, home-cooked food in spotless surroundings.

La Plaza (☎ 932-2079; north side of plaza; mains B\$35-70) By far the best eating in town, La Plaza serves a variety of beef, fish and chicken

dishes in rustic ranch house style surroundings. This is a good place to pig out if you are back from roughing it in the park.

Shopping

On the west side of the plaza, **El Tojo** sells lamp shades, handbags, boxes and panama hats made from *jipijapa* (the fronds of the cyclanthaceae fan palm); the use of these fronds for making *artesanías* is specific to Buena Vista. Up the street, the recommended Artecampo store also sells *jipijapa* products, plus other local creations.

Getting There & Away

From Santa Cruz, shared taxis (☎ 356-7084; per person B\$20) leave for Yapacaní from the *micro* side of the bimodal terminal and behind the old long-distance bus terminal. Make it clear that you want to get off at Buena Vista.

AMBORÓ COMMUNITY PROJECTS

The location of Parque Nacional Amboró is a mixed blessing; although it's conveniently accessible to visitors, it also lies practically within spitting distance of Santa Cruz and squarely between the old and new Cochabamba–Santa Cruz highways. Considering that even the remote parks of the Amazon Basin are coming under threat, Amboró feels 'people pressure' more than most.

When Parque Nacional Amboró was created in 1973, its charter included a clause forbidding settlement and resource exploitation. Unfortunately for naturalists and conservationists, hunters, loggers and *campesino* (subsistence farmer) settlers continued to pour in – many of them displaced from the Chapare region by the US Drug Enforcement Agency. By 1996, with conflicts increasing over the park, it was redesignated as the Área de Uso Múltiple Amboró, which effectively opened it up for settlement.

This reducing of the park's protection status necessitated a change in tactics by local NGOs and conservation groups keen to avoid the complete destruction of the natural treasures of the region, but also fully aware of the needs of the human population. As a result, a number of responsible and sustainable 'community projects' have sprung up in the area, using tourism as a means of generating income for locals without them having to exploit their natural resources. The following are some of the more interesting of these projects:

Candelaria Ecoalbergue (☎ 7600-7785; r per person B\$150) In the community of Candelaria 3km south of Buena Vista, this place manages comfortable four-person cabins and offers forest walks in the surrounding area. Perhaps more interesting is the opportunity to observe local craftsmen practicing the arts of weaving *jipijapa* and whittling *tacuara* (bamboo) into all manner of useful objects.

Hacienda El Cafetal (☎ 935-2067; www.anditradecoffee.com; s/d B\$150/220, st B\$330, cabañas B\$580; 🍷 🍷) Set up to support Bolivian coffee growers and their families; the accommodations are good, with stylish, self-catering *cabañas* (cabins) and suites, all with good views. You can go around the plantations and see how coffee is produced, taste different types of the strong black stuff, and then, caffeine-pumped, ride horses and go bird-watching.

Refugio Volcánes (☎ 337-2042; www.refugivolcanes.net; r per person all inclusive B\$500) Ecofriendly *cabañas* with hot showers in the breathtaking Los Volcánes region 4km off the Santa Cruz–Samaipata road at Bermejo. Transportation from the road is offered, as well as guided hikes through the wonderfully wild landscapes.

To return to Santa Cruz, wait for a shared taxi coming from Yapacaní, which will cruise around the plaza in search of passengers with its horn blaring, or ask at one of the taxi offices on the main plaza.

Getting Around

Car taxis and moto-taxis (B\$2) wait at one corner of the plaza; there's also another taxi stand along the road to Santa Bárbara for Hotel Flora & Fauna.

PARQUE NACIONAL & ÁREA DE USO MÚLTIPLE AMBORÓ

This 430,000-hectare park lies in a unique geographical position at the confluence of three distinct ecosystems: the Amazon Basin, the northern Chaco and the Andes.

The park was originally created in 1973 as the Reserva de Vida Silvestre Germán Busch, with an area of 180,000 hectares. In 1984, due to the efforts of British zoologist Robin Clarke and Bolivian biologist Noel Kempff Mercado, it was given national-park status and in 1990 was expanded to 630,000 hectares. In late 1995, however, amid controversy surrounding *campesino* colonization inside park boundaries, it was pared down to its current size.

The park's range of habitats means that both highland and lowland species are found here. Mammals include elusive spectacled bears, jaguars, tapirs, peccaries and various monkeys, while more than 800 species of birds have been documented. The park is the stronghold of the endangered horned curassow, known as the unicorn bird (see the boxed text, p316).

Buena Vista Section

Access to the eastern part of the reserve requires crossing over the Río Surutú, either in a vehicle or on foot. Depending on the rainfall and weather, the river may be anywhere from knee- to waist-deep. Inexperienced hikers should not attempt any of the treks in the park without a guide.

RÍO MACUÑUCU

The Río Macuñucu route is the most popular into the Área de Uso Múltiple Ambaró and begins at **Las Cruces**, 35km southeast of Buena Vista (taxi B\$30). From there it's 7km to the Río Surutú, which you must drive or wade across; just beyond

the opposite bank you'll reach **Villa Ambaró**. Villagers may charge an entrance fee to any tourist who passes their community en route to Macuñucu, regardless of whether you intend to stay there or not – avoid unpleasantness and pay.

From here a popular trek runs to the banks of the **Río Macuñucu** and follows its course through thick forest. After four hours or so you pass through a narrow canyon, which confines hikers to the river, and a little later you'll reach a large rock overhang accommodating up to 10 campers. Beyond here the trek becomes increasingly difficult and terrain more rugged as you head towards some beautiful waterfalls and a second camp site. Take a guide if you are considering doing the full hike.

RÍO ISAMA & CERRO AMBORÓ

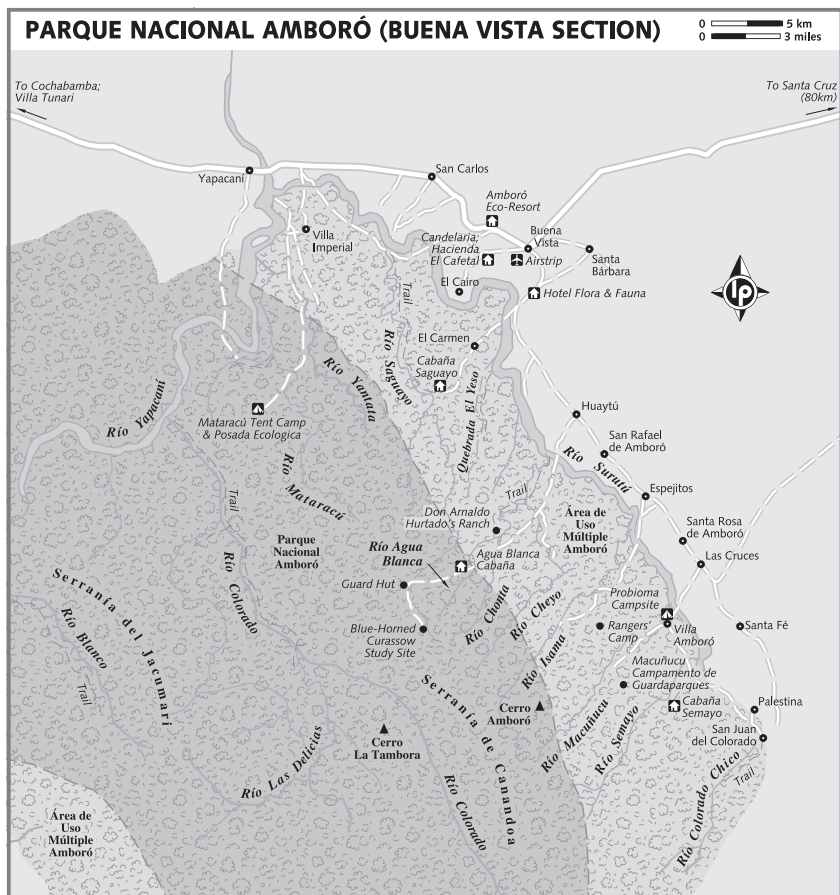
The Río Isama route turns off at the village of **Espejitos**, 28km southeast of Buena Vista, and provides access to the base of 1300m Cerro Ambaró, the bulbous peak for which the park is named. It's possible to climb to the summit, but it is a difficult trek and a guide is essential.

MATARACÚ

From near Yapacaní, on the main Cochabamba road, a 4WD track heads south across the Río Yapacaní into the northern reaches of the Área de Uso Múltiple Ambaró and, after a rough 18km, rolls up to Ambaró Eco-Resort's **Mataracú Tent Camp** (☎ 932-2048, in Santa Cruz 3-342-2372; r per person with breakfast & lunch B\$700), which has palm huts capped by thatched roofs, and *cabañas* on stilts. There is also the community-run **Posada Ecológica** (☎ 716-74582; dm B\$35, d B\$50), which offers all-you-can-eat meals (breakfast/lunch B\$10/15) and can be booked through any agency in Buena Vista. This is the only SERNAP *cabaña* accessible by motor vehicle; however, crossing the Río Yapacaní may be a problem except in the driest part of the year.

Samaipata Area

Samaipata sits just outside the southern boundary of the Área de Uso Múltiple Ambaró and provides the best access point for the Andean section of the park. There's no real infrastructure, or public facilities, in this area.



The best guides to the region are available in Samaipata. The road uphill from there ends at a small cabin, and from there it's a four-hour walk to a camping spot near the boundary between the primary forest, giant ferns and Andean cloud forest. From this point, you can continue an hour further into the park.

Mairana Area

From Mairana, it's 7km uphill along a walking track (or take a taxi) to **La Yunga**, where there's a community-run guest hut and a FAN office. It's in a particularly lush region of the Área de Uso Múltiple Amboró, surrounded by tree ferns and other cloud-forest vegetation. From La Yunga, a 16km

forest traverse connects with the main road near Samaipata.

To enter the park here, visit the guard post at the south end of the soccer field in La Yunga. Access to Mairana is by *micro* or *taxi* from Samaipata.

Comarapa Area

Northwest of Comarapa, 4km toward Cochabamba, is a little-used entrance to the Área de Uso Múltiple Amboró. After the road crosses a pass between a hill and a ridge with a telephone tower, look for the minor road turning off to the northeast at the settlement of **Khara Huasi**. This road leads uphill to verdant stands of cloud forest, which blanket the peaks.

Other worthwhile visits in this area include the 36-sided **Pukara de Tuquipaya**, a set of pre-Inca ruins on the summit of **Cerro Comanwara**, 1.5km outside of Comarapa; and the colonial village of **Pulquina Arriba**, several kilometers east of Comarapa.

Sleeping

Inside the park are five wilderness *cabañas* (around B\$30 per person per day). For bookings and information, contact SERNAP (p273). The *cabañas* are very basic, so you'll need your own sleeping bag. The most popular and accessible *cabaña* is the one on the Río Macuñucu. It's 4km upstream, with a sleeping loft and rudimentary cooking facilities. Other *cabañas* can be found on the lower Río Semayo, above the Río Mataracú, on the Río Agua Blanca and on the lower Río Saguayo.

Situated at Villa Amboró, near the mouth of the Macuñucu, the nongovernment organization (NGO) **Probioma** (☎ 343-1332; www.probioma.org.bo; Córdoba 7 Este No 29, Santa Cruz) helped start a community-run campsite with clean showers, toilets and some hiking trails. Local Spanish-speaking guides can provide info and the community can organize meals and arrange horse-riding. A two-day stay, including guides, horses, camping gear and meals, costs around B\$250 per person.

Getting There & Away

By far the easiest and safest way to visit the park is by guided tour with one of the recommended tour agencies in Santa Cruz. To do it yourself, a *micro* heads south from Buena Vista through Huaytú, San Rafael de Amboró, Espejitos, Santa Rosa de Amboró, Santa Fé and Las Cruces. This boundary provides access to several rough routes and tracks that lead southwest into the interior, following tributaries of the Río Surutú. To really probe into the park though you will need a 4WD vehicle and a good deal of previous experience in jungle trekking. Note that all access to the park along this road will require a crossing of the Río Surutú.

SANTA CRUZ TO SAMAIPATA

The spectacular route from Santa Cruz to Samaipata passes a number of attractions that are worth a brief stop. Any *micro* or *trufi* running this route pass by the places of interest mentioned in this section.

Los Espejillos Community Project (admission B\$5) has several waterfalls and natural swimming pools, with lovely, clean and refreshing water sparkling over the polished black rock that characterizes the area. It stands across the Río Pira'i 18km north of the highway. Get off just beyond San José and walk or hitch north along the 4WD track, following the signposts. Basic accommodation is available at the Tacuaracú community (per person B\$20) which oversees the project.

Bermejo, 85km southwest of Santa Cruz, is marked by a hulking slab of red rock known as **Cueva de los Monos**, which is flaking and chipping into nascent natural arches. A great place to stay here is the immensely popular organic farm **Ginger's Paradise** (www.gingersparadise.com; r per person half-board/full-board B\$80/100) with access from the main road across a rickety drawbridge.

Laguna Volcán is an intriguing crater lake 6km up the hill north of Bermejo. A lovely **walking track** climbs from the lake to the crater rim; it begins at the point directly across the lake from the end of the road. The beautiful nearby region known as **Los Volcánes** (see the boxed text, p275) features an otherworldly landscape of tropical sugarloaf hills.

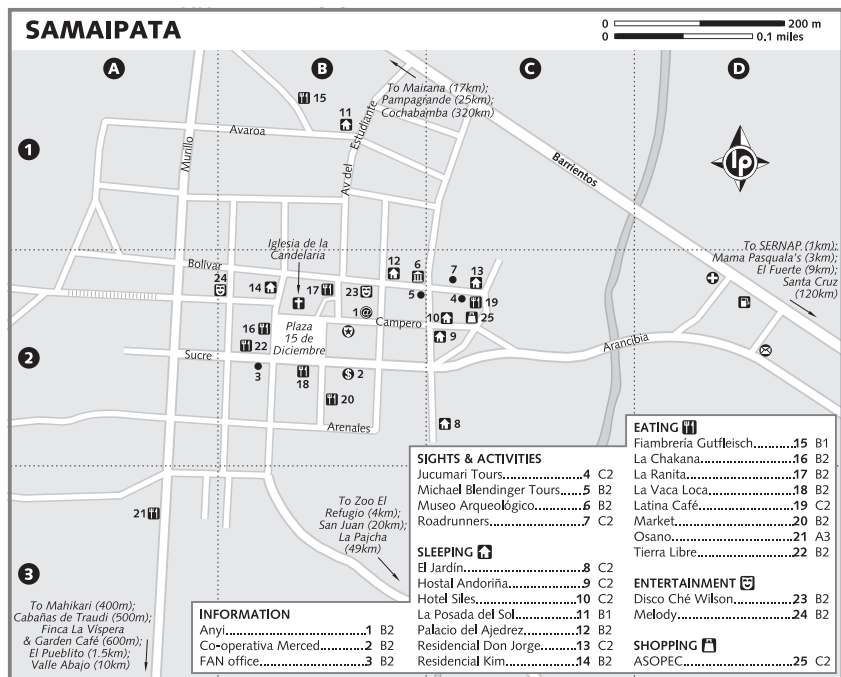
A turn off to the community of Bella Vista, 100km from Santa Cruz on the Samaipata road leads to the **Codo de los Andes**. In this dramatically beautiful area famed for its giant ferns and monkey-tail cacti, there is great trekking to be had, as well as an excellent community-run **lodge** (☎ 944-6293; www.andeselbow.com; per person B\$90, incl meals B\$120).

Just 20km short of Samaipata lies **Las Cuevas** (admission B\$10). If you walk upstream on a clear path away from the road, you'll reach two lovely waterfalls that spill into eminently swimmable lagoons bordered by sandy beaches. About 100m beyond here is a third waterfall, the biggest of the set. You can also camp here for a small fee.

SAMAIPATA

pop 9700 / elevation 1650m

Samaipata has developed into one of the top gringo-trail spots over the last few years. This sleepy village in the foothills of the Cordillera Oriental is brimming with foreign-run, stylish hostels and restaurants.



Visitors flock to see the pre-Inca site of El Fuerte, some in search of a dose of the ancient site's supposed mystical energy, whilst increasingly it is the main jumping-off point for forays to Parque Nacional Amboró (p276). But it's not just foreigners who come up here; Samaipata is a popular weekend destination for *cruceños* too. The Quechua name, meaning 'Rest in the Highlands,' could hardly be more appropriate.

Information

There are no banks or ATMs in Samaipata so it's best to bring cash. Alternatively you can draw cash on a credit card with your passport from the **Co-operativa Merced** just off the main plaza on Calle Sucre.

There is no official tourist office, though many of the tour companies and hostels can help you with information about the local sites. For reliably unbiased advice you may want to check out Samaipata's excellent tourist websites (www.samaipata.info, www.samaipaturistica.com and www.municipiosamaipata.com). **SERNAP** (www.sernap.gov.bo in Spanish) has an office 1km outside

of town on the road to Santa Cruz. The **FAN office** (Sucre & Murillo) can arrange trips to the community of La Yunga at the edge of the park, though it is open only sporadically.

The best internet connection is at **Anyi** (Campero; per hr \$54), one block east of the plaza.

Sights EL FUERTE

The mystical site of El Fuerte exudes such pulling power that visitors from all over the world make their way to Samaipata just to climb the hill and see the remains of this pre-Inca site.

Designated in 1998 as a Unesco World Heritage site, **El Fuerte** (admission per person B\$50, guides per group B\$55; ☎ 9am-5pm) occupies a hill-top about 10km from the village and offers breathtaking views across the rugged transition zone between the Andes and low-lying areas further east. There are two observation towers that allow visitors to view the ruins from above. Allow at least two hours to fully explore the complex, and take sunscreen and a hat with you. There is

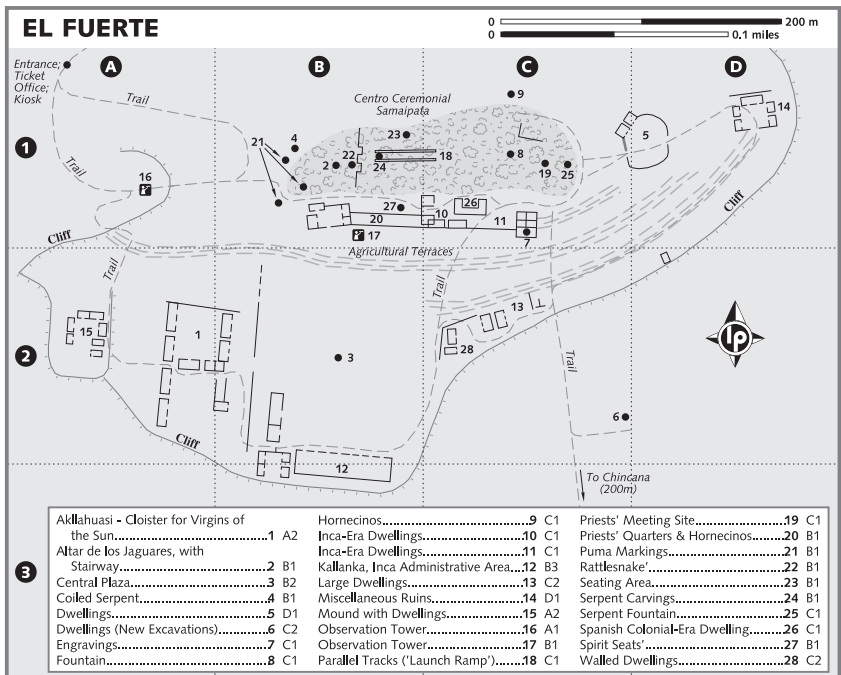
a kiosk with food and water next to the ticket office.

First occupied by diverse ethnic groups as early as 2000BC, it wasn't until 1470 that the Incas, the most famous tenants, first arrived. By the time the Spanish arrived and looted the site in the 1600s it was already deserted. The purpose of El Fuerte has long been debated, and there are several theories. The conquistadors, in a distinctly combative frame of mind, assumed the site had been used for defense, hence its Spanish name, 'the fort'. In 1832 French naturalist Alcides d'Orbigny proclaimed that the pools and parallel canals had been used for washing gold. In 1936 German anthropologist Leo Pucher described it as an ancient temple to the serpent and the jaguar; his theory, incorporating worship of the sun and moon, is now the most accepted. Recently the place has gained a New Age following; some have claimed that it was a take-off and landing ramp for ancient spacecraft.

There are no standing buildings, but the remains of 500 dwellings have been discovered in the immediate vicinity and

ongoing excavation reveals more every day. The main site, which is almost certainly of religious significance, is a 100m-long stone slab with a variety of sculpted features: seats, tables, a conference circle, troughs, tanks, conduits and *hornecinos* (niches), which are believed to have held idols. A total of seven steps leading up to the main temple represent the seven phases of the moon. Zoomorphic designs on the slab include raised reliefs of pumas and jaguars (representing power) and numerous serpents (representing fertility). *Chicha* and blood were poured into the snake designs as an offering to Pachamama. Sadly, these designs are unprotected from the elements and erosion is making them harder to discern with every passing year.

About 300m down an obscure track behind the main ruin is *Chincana*, a sinister hole in the ground that appears all the more menacing by the concealing vegetation and sloping ground around it. It's almost certainly natural, but three theories have emerged about how it might have been used: that it served as a water-storage cistern; that



it functioned as an escape-proof prison; and that it was part of a subterranean communication system between the main ruin and its immediate surroundings.

On the approach to the site look out for **La Cabeza del Inca**, apparently a natural rock formation that bears a startling resemblance to the head of an Inca Warrior, so much so that many insist it is a man-made project that was abandoned halfway through. Watch too for condors soaring on thermals overhead.

Taxis for the round-trip, including a two-hour stop at the ruins, charge B\$70 for up to four people from Samaipata. Better yet, taxi up and walk back down. Gluttons for punishment who prefer to walk up should follow the main highway back toward Santa Cruz for 3.5km and turn right at the sign pointing uphill. From here it's a scenic 5km to the summit. Guided tours from Samaipata start from about B\$90 per person.

MUSEO ARQUEOLÓGICO

Samaipata's small **archaeological museum** (Bolívar; admission B\$5; ☎ 8:30am-12:30pm & 2:30-6:30pm) makes an interesting visit, but offers little explanation of El Fuerte. It does have a few Tiwanaku artifacts and some local pottery. If you buy your admission to the ruins here you get into the museum for free.

ZOO EL REFUGIO

This charming and responsible little **zoo** (☎ 944-6169; admission B\$20; ☎ 8am-6pm) is actually a refuge for rescued animals. The zoo accepts volunteers who can lodge for free in exchange for their labor, and there is an attractive wooded camping area if you fancy spending a night among the animals. Horses are available for hire for B\$25 per hour.

Tours

Several agencies organize trips to nearby attractions and almost every hotel runs its own tours. Local taxi syndicates also run transport to many of the local attractions and rates are very reasonable, though not up for negotiation.

Amoró Tours (p268) is the most established of the Santa Cruz based agencies, but the Samaipata office is open sporadically. Biologist-run **Michael Blendinger Tours** (☎ 944-6227; www.discoveringbolivia.com; Bolívar) is best for orchid, birding and full-moon

tours in English and German. **Jucumari Tours** (☎ 7262-7202; Bolívar) is an excellent locally run agency; in addition to the local attractions it offers packages to the Ruta del Ché and Mission circuits. Visit Olaf and Frank at German- and English-speaking **Roadrunners** (☎ 944-6294; www.the-roadrunners.info; Bolívar) for self-guided hikes with GPS, and guided hikes to Amoró's waterfalls, cloud forests and El Fuerte.

Sleeping

You're spoiled for choice when it comes to accommodation in Samaipata. From basic dorms to lush campsites, rustic hostels and organic farms, it's all here. Excellent digs can be found in central hostels from around B\$30-50 per person. For cabins outside town ask at Blendinger tours for a series of options to fit all budgets.

El Jardín (camping/r per person B\$10/30) Hippy-style hangout squirreled away down an unlit dirt track in the southeast corner of town. Chilled music, basic digs and a relaxed scene for those who like to take it easy.

Mama Pasquala's (camping/r per person B\$20/40) Basic camping and simple cabins are available in this beautiful valley near some great swimming holes. It's 500m upstream from the river crossing en route to El Fuerte.

Finca La Vispera (☎ 944-6082; www.lavispera.org; camping with/without own tent B\$30/40, cabins per person B\$95-190) This relaxing organic farm and retreat is a lovely place on the 'outskirts' of Samaipata. The owners rent horses (B\$50 per hour) and organize adventurous trips throughout the region. The attractive rooms with communal kitchens, and four self-contained guesthouses (for two to 12 people) enjoy commanding views across the valley. Campsite includes hot showers and kitchen facilities. It's an easy 15-minute walk southwest of the plaza.

Residencial Kim (☎ 944-6161; r per person B\$40) Perhaps the best thing about this family-run budget hostel is the flowery courtyard adorned with jungle murals and masks. Rooms themselves are nothing to write home about; however it's a decent central option a stone's throw from the plaza.

Residencial Don Jorge (☎ 944-6086; Bolívar 20; s/d B\$40/90) Minimalist whitewashed rooms with private bathroom, set around the standard shady courtyard liberally scattered with hanging oropendola nests. Just

a short stagger across the road from the Latino Caf e.

Hotel Siles (☎ 944-6093; Campero; r per person B\$40, with bathroom B\$50) This neat and tidy little hostel even throws in a basic breakfast for the price. Rooms are simple but well-kept and there is even the use of a communal kitchen for those who prefer to cook for themselves.

our pick **La Posada del Sol** (☎ 7211-0628; www.laposadadelosol.net; Zona Barrio Nuevo; r per person B\$50) Hotel quality, hostel prices, this is easily the best value in town. Modern, tastefully furnished en-suite rooms, some with kitchens, set around attractive gardens, with spectacular views, and the best breakfasts in Bolivia (also available for nonguests). Owners Trent and Rosario have thought of everything, with a colossal DVD collection, a cozy fireplace, guided tours and even professional Spanish classes for those who are thinking of hanging around for a while. Located a few blocks north of the plaza.

Palacio del Ajedrez (☎ 944-6196; Bol var; r per person B\$50, s/d B\$80/120; ♣) Home of the chess club that has created Bolivia's national chess champions. The rooms are reminiscent of student halls, with modern furniture in oranges and blues, and there's a small swimming pool for guests to enjoy.

Caba as de Traudi (☎ 944-6094; www.traudi.com; r per person B\$70, caba as per person B\$50-105; ♣) Across from the Finca La V spera retreat, this amenable Austrian-run spread has ample manicured grounds and horses for rent. It's set up as a family-oriented recreation center with table tennis, tennis and equipment for other activities. The swimming pool is open to nonguests for B\$15 per person.

Hostal Andori a (☎ 944-6333; www.andorina.samaipata.com; Campero; s/d B\$70/90d with bathroom B\$110) Cluttered but characterful, the house and rooms are painted in earthy colors, the beds are comfy and the breakfasts (included in the price) big and healthy. There's a communal room downstairs, with a roaring fire in winter and a *mirador* (lookout) on the top with great views of the valley, plus a decent movie collection to while away rainy days.

Eating

RESTAURANTS

La Chakana (☎ 944-6146; www.chakanatours.com; west side of plaza; mains B\$15-30) Small and cozy, the long-established Chakana serves

reasonably priced breakfasts, sandwiches, vegetarian meals, excellent pizzas, homemade sweets, cocktails and European specialties. There is a ton of information for tourists here, plus a new tour company to help you plan your trips.

La Vaca Loca (south side of plaza; mains B\$20-30; ☎ Wed-Sun) This is where Samaipatans go for ice cream, devoured either on the small porch overlooking the square or in the back garden. It's a popular hangout for lunch and dinner too.

Tierra Libre (☎ 7602-2729; Sucre 70; mains B\$20-35) Top-notch dishes from around the globe are served in a bohemian setting at this new place that's rapidly gained a following among backpackers for its ample and affordable eats. Veggie meals and exotic Indian concoctions are among the treats on offer and you shouldn't miss the succulent *lomito* (steak sandwich) or tasty Lake Titicaca trout.

Latina Caf e (☎ 944-6153; Bol var 3; mains B\$20-40; ☎ dinner Mon-Fri, lunch & dinner Sat & Sun) Samaipata's most popular bar-restaurant (and rightly so), this place serves the best food in town: juicy steaks, saucy pastas, vegetarian delights and gorgeous brownies. The lighting is intimate and the sunsets beautiful. For a real treat try the steak in coca sauce. Happy hour is from 6pm to 7pm.

Garden Caf e (☎ /fax 944-6082; Finca La V spera; B\$25-40) You can gaze at La V spera's organic garden from its sunny, alfresco cafe and see kitchen staff running up and down to pick your salad fresh from the ground. There are good breakfasts and lunches, and special dietary needs are catered for on request.

QUICK EATS

La Ranita (☎ 944-6390; Estudiante; snacks B\$10-30) Inventive breakfast combos and fresh bread and pastries are on offer in this superb, French-style tea house.

Fiambrer a Gutfleisch (snacks B\$10; ☎ 7am-5pm Mon-Fri) You'll find some of Bolivia's best cheeses, salamis and cold cuts at this factory during the week, and at the market (8am to 4pm) on weekends. Knock on the door for entry.

Osano (☎ lunch Tue-Sun) Along the road to Finca La V spera, this Japanese religious sect sells organic vegetables fertilized with divine light. For under B\$7 you can be blessed with the 'energy' of the Mahikari Luz Divina – go on, don't be shy.

Entertainment

A slice of Santa Cruz teenage nightlife is transported to Samaipata each weekend and revived at the popular **Disco Ché Wilson** (Bolívar). Alternatively try Melody, a block northwest from the plaza, which has regular live shows. At least once a month there is a live open-air disco at El Jardín, where rock and salsa play to a mixed, and largely inebriated, crowd.

Shopping

Saturday and Sunday are market days. **ASOPEC** (Asociación de Productoras Ecológicas; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm) offers *artesanías*, produced and sold by Bolivian women from local communities, with all proceeds going to the makers. Wool, ceramics, soap, candles and even ice cream are on offer.

Getting There & Around

Sindicato El Fuerte (☎ in Santa Cruz 359-8958, in Samaipata 944-6336) run four-passenger services between Santa Cruz and Samaipata (per person week days/weekends B\$25/30, three hours). From Santa Cruz, services leave from Calle Aruma near Grigota when full. From Sampaipata, services depart from the main plaza.

Micros leave from near the plaza daily around 4:30am and between noon and 5pm on Sunday.

Finding a lift west to Vallegrande or Cochabamba is a bit trickier. For Vallegrande, buses pass the gas station on the main road at 11am, 4pm, 7pm and 9pm and typically have seats, while for Cochabamba services on the old road leave Mairana around 3pm on Tuesday, Friday and Sunday. To take the new road to Cochabamba it's easiest to just head back to Santa Cruz and catch a *flota* there.

AROUND SAMAIPATA

La Pajcha & El Nido de los Condores

A series of three beautiful waterfalls on a turbid mountain river, which plunge 45m into a dreamy tropical lagoon. **La Pajcha** has a sandy beach for swimming and some inviting campsites. It's 42km (one to two hours by car) south of Samaipata, toward San Juan where there is a turn-off that leads 7km to the falls. The site is privately owned and visitors are charged B\$10 to visit and swim here. The easiest way to get here is in

a shared taxi from the plaza in Samaipata (B\$250, two hours).

El Nido de los Condores (Condor Nest) is the end point of a hugely popular eight-hour hike that begins from the trailhead near La Pajcha. Here, as you might expect, you will find more than 25 condor nests perched precariously on the hillside and have the opportunity to admire these glorious birds at close quarters as they soar on thermals over the valley below. The site has been dubbed the best condor-watching place in South America.

El Pueblito

A beautiful place for a day trip is the resort of **El Pueblito** (☎ 944-6386, www.elpueblitoresort.com; r per person B\$210; 🏠) located just outside Samaipata on the road to Valle Abajo. Arranged like a little village complete with its own church and plaza, the resort has a swimming pool, *artesanía* shops and even a little farm, all set on a hillside with marvelous views of Samaipata in the valley below. There are cabins here and a four-star hotel in a homely, country-house style, as well as an excellent restaurant-bar called El Cabildo.

VALLEGRANDE

pop 16,800 / elevation 2100m

Vallegrande's claim to fame is that it was the spot where Ché Guevara's emaciated corpse was exhibited before its burial (see p285), and it is the main base for the **Ché Trail**, a community-based tourism project. The route traces Ché's final movements on foot, mule, bicycle and boat, with basic, rustic accommodations at encampments and with local families.

Visit the **Ché museum** (admission B\$10; ☎ 9am-noon & 3-5pm Mon-Fri), which features objects and artifacts that belonged to Ché's guerrilla group on the 2nd floor and a small archaeological museum on the ground floor.

Most visitors to the town are passing through on a Ché pilgrimage, but Vallegrande is also a nice spot to relax and walk in the hills. It's a quiet little town set in the Andean foothills and enjoys a lovely temperate climate.

Information

A tourist office next to the museum on the east side of the plaza provides information on the Ché Trail as well as offering guided

tours with local Ché expert Gonzalo Flores Guzmán (☎ 7318-6354). Tours start from B\$150 per person for a group of four, or B\$450 for a single person for a full day. An interesting aspect of the tour is the chance to chat with people who actually met Ché and gain a first-hand account of events.

Sights

HOSPITAL SEÑOR DE LA MALTA

After Ché Guevara's execution in La Higuera, south of Vallegrande, his body was brought to the now-dilapidated hospital laundry here. The hospital still functions, but the laundry itself has now been cordoned off as a pilgrimage site, where graffiti pays homage to this controversial figure. To get here, head one block south of the plaza along Escalante, and then five blocks east along Malta.

EL MAUSOLEO DEL CHÉ

In 1997, nearly 30 years after Ché's death, one of the soldiers who carried out the burial revealed that his body lay beneath Vallegrande's airstrip. The Bolivian and Cuban governments called for his exhumation and Ché was officially reburied in Santa Clara, Cuba on October 17, 1997. The spot where he was originally buried is marked by a mausoleum adorned with the typical smiling image of Ché that beams out across the valley. The interior can only be visited by guided tour, but the building is clearly visible from the bus station.

Festivals & Events

The weekly *feria* (market) is held every Sunday. Around February 23 the town marks its anniversary with various sporting and cultural events. Since the bodies of Ché and several of his comrades were recovered from the airport in 1997, the town has celebrated an annual **Ché Guevara festival** in October, featuring folk art and cultural activities.

Sleeping & Eating

Vallegrande has a fair number of basic, budget hostels, so while you're unlikely to be without a bed, you are likely to be without a private bathroom.

Hostal Juanita (☎ 942-2231; Manuel María Caballero 123; r per person B\$30) This is a clean, family-run hotel just two blocks from the main square.

La Posada del Guerrillero (☎ 942-2739; Malta 120; r per person B\$30) Aimed squarely at Ché pilgrims (let's face it, you wouldn't be here if you weren't one), this is the best budget option in town. Rooms are simple, but proximity to the delicious home-cooked food in the restaurant below is worth the fee alone. Tourist information and a book exchange are provided too.

Café Galeria de Arte Santa Clara (cnr Plaza 26 de Enero & Florida; snacks B\$10-20) Come here for good coffee and snacks.

El Mirador (☎ 942-2341; El Pichacu; mains B\$40) Literally the top spot in town, with excellent views, and good fish and meat dishes, this restaurant is run by the German man who took the famous photo of dead Ché.

Other budget options in the street around the plaza all charge around B\$25 for very similar rooms with shared bathroom. The better options include **Alojamiento Teresita** (☎ 924-2151; Escalante/Mendoza 107) and **Hotel Copacabana** (☎ 942-2014; Escalante/Mendoza 100).

Getting There & Away

From Plaza Oruro in Santa Cruz, buses and taxis leave for Vallegrande (B\$35 to B\$60, seven hours) between 10am and 2pm. A *flota* leaves from the bimodal terminal at 6pm. From Samaipata, taxis and *micros* run every two hours or so along the spine-shakingly bouncy road (four hours). Taxis to La Higuera (B\$200 – try haggling) via Pucará depart from the market, two blocks east of the main plaza along Sucre.

Vallegrande's new bus terminal 1km north of the center looks impressive, but very few services actually run from there. There are *micros* to Santa Cruz every two hours from 9am to 1pm, and 6pm to 10pm, and a 6pm service to Cochabamba. Taxis to Samaipata and Santa Cruz leave when full, though it is frequently a very long wait.

PUCARÁ

Pucará features on many of the Ché tours, largely because it helps break up the uncomfortably bumpy journey from Vallegrande. Though it has no direct link to Ché, the town itself is pleasant enough and typical of the Bolivian valley towns that dot the region.

From here it is a further 15km along a dusty track to La Higuera. The route is now traversable by ordinary vehicles, but it makes for a pleasant walk if the weather

is being kind. Along the route, signposts point out Ché-related sites of historic interest, the most notable being the long cliff, the Quebrada del Churo, where he was captured.

LA HIGUERA

The isolated town of La Higuera is where Ché Guevara was held prisoner following his capture. An oversized bust of the revo-

lutionary lords over the dusty **Plaza del Ché**, while the **Boina del Ché** monument is a replica of the famous star design that once adorned his beret. There's also a **mausoleum**, with the tombstones of Ché and his revolutionary comrades (though Ché himself was never buried here), which you can visit if you get the key from the caretaker – ask for his whereabouts in the village. The schoolroom –

HASTA SIEMPRE, COMANDANTE

As you travel around Bolivia, the iconic image of Ché – the revolutionary with a popularity status reached only by rock stars, and remembered in Cuban songs such as 'Hasta siempre Comandante' (Forever with You, Commander) – will be staring at you from various walls, paintings, posters and carvings. Bolivia is where Ché went to his death and where his image is being fervently resurrected.

Fresh from revolutionary success in Cuba (and frustrating failure in the Congo), Ernesto 'Ché' Guevara de la Serna was in search of a new project when he heard about the oppression of the working classes by dictator René Barrientos Ortuño's military government in Bolivia. Strategically located at the heart of South America, Bolivia seemed like the perfect place from which to launch the socialist revolution on the continent. Though Fidel Castro had required him to sign a letter of resignation upon leaving Cuba, thereby publically distancing the Cuban government from Guevara's activities, the two remained in close contact throughout the Bolivian escapade.

Ché's Bolivian base was established in 1966 at the farm Ñancahuazú, 250km southwest of Santa Cruz. Initially his corevolutionaries had no idea who he was, and only when his trademark beard began to grow back (he had shaved it off to arrive incognito in Bolivia) did they realize that they were in the presence of a living legend. Ché hoped to convince the *campesinos* (subsistence farmers) that they were oppressed, and to inspire them to social rebellion, but was surprised to be met only with suspicion. In fact a cunning move by Ortuño to grant *campesinos* rights to their land had guaranteed their support and all but doomed Ché's revolution to failure before it had even begun.

Bolivian Diary was written by Ché during the final months of his life. Originally planned as a first-hand documentation of the revolution, it reads as a somewhat leisurely adventure. Despite occasional minor setbacks Ché considered things to be moving along nicely and in his last entry on 7 October 1967, 11 months after his arrival in Bolivia, he writes that the plan was proceeding 'without complications.'

The following day he was captured near La Higuera by CIA-trained Bolivian troops under the command of Capitán Gary Prado Salgado, receiving bullet wounds to the legs, neck and shoulder. He was taken to a schoolroom in La Higuera and, just after noon on 9 October, he was executed by a flurry of bullets to the back of the neck from Salgado's gun. The finishing touch was a final shot through the heart by Colonel Andrés Selnich, Salgado's immediate superior. Once the deed was done the assassins were said to be perturbed by the open eyes and peaceful smile on the dead revolutionary's face.

The body was flown to Vallegrande, where it was displayed in the hospital laundry room to prove to the whole world that 'El Ché' was finally dead. Local women noted an uncanny resemblance to the Catholic Christ and took locks of his hair as mementos, while the untimely deaths of many of those involved in his capture and assassination has led to widespread belief in the 'Curse of Ché,' a sort of Tutankhamen-style beyond-the-grave retribution.

Almost 40 years later the socialist revolution finally arrived in Bolivia, via the ballot and not the bullet, with the election of Evo Morales Ayma. The country that executed Ché now embraces him as a hero, and celebrates his time in Bolivia with the establishment of the Ché Trail, a community-based tourism project that traces his last movements. Somewhat vaguely defined, the trail begins in distant Camiri (the southernmost point), though its quite a trek on to the sites of real interest which are clustered in the area immediately around Vallegrande.

now the local clinic – where Ché was kept before being executed is just off the plaza: it's the yellow building with a solar panel on the roof.

Especially for Ché tourists, **La Casa del Telegrafista** (www.lacasadeltelegrafista.com; per person B\$50) offers vegetarian lunches and rustic rooms in the historic house that was used by Ché's unit to send and receive messages from the outside world. You can also stay in the school for B\$10 per person, but note that it's very basic and there's no shower.

GRAN CHIQUITANIA

The Gran Chiquitania is the area to the east of Santa Cruz where the hostile, thorny Chaco and the low, tropical savannas of the Amazon Basin have a stand-off. Watched by the foothills of the Cordillera Oriental to the west, the Llanos de Guarayos to the north and the international boundaries of Paraguay and Brazil to the south and east, these two vastly different landscapes stand together, never making peace.

The flat landscapes of the Chiquitania are broken and divided by long, low ridges and odd monolithic mountains. Much of the territory lies soaking under vast marshes, part of the magnificent Pantanal region. Bisected by the railway line; it's also the area of Jesuit mission towns, with their wide-roofed churches and fascinating history.

The region takes its name from the indigenous Chiquitanos, one of several tribes that inhabit the area. The name Chiquitanos (meaning 'little people') was coined by the Spanish who were surprised by the low doorways to their dwellings.

History

In the days before eastern Bolivia was surveyed, the Jesuits established an autonomous religious state in Paraguay in 1609. From there they fanned outwards, founding missions in neighboring Argentina, Brazil and Bolivia and venturing into territories previously unexplored by other Europeans.

Keen to coexist with the numerous indigenous tribes of the region, the Jesuits established what they considered an ideal community hierarchy: each settlement, known as a *reducción*, was headed by two or three Jesuit priests, and a self-directed

military unit was attached to each one. For a time the Jesuit armies were the strongest and best trained on the continent. This makeshift military force served as a shield for the area from both the Portuguese in Brazil and the Spanish to the west, an autonomous theocracy.

Politically, the *reducciones* were under the nominal control of the *audiencia* (judicial district) of Chacras, and ecclesiastically under the bishop of Santa Cruz, though their relative isolation meant that the *reducciones* basically ran themselves. Internally, the settlements were jointly administered by a few priests and a council of eight indigenous representatives of the specific tribes who met daily to monitor community progress. Though the indigenous population was supposedly free to choose whether it lived within the missionary communities, the reality was that those who chose not to were forced to live under the harsh *encomienda* (Spanish feudal system) or, worse still, in outright slavery.

The Jesuit settlements reached their peak under the untiring Swiss priest Father Martin Schmidt, who not only built the missions at San Xavier, Concepción and San Rafael de Velasco, but also designed many of the altars, created the musical instruments, acted as the chief composer for the *reducciones* and published a Spanish-Chiquitano dictionary. He was later expelled from the region and died in Europe in 1772.

By the mid-1700s, political strife in Europe had escalated into a power struggle between the Catholic Church and the governments of France, Spain and Portugal. When the Spanish realized the extent of Jesuit wealth and influence they decided to act. In 1767, swept up in a whirlwind of political babble and religious dogma, the missions were disbanded, and King Carlos III signed the Order of Expulsion, which evicted the Jesuits from the continent. In the wake of the Jesuit departure the settlements fell into decline, their amazing churches standing as mute testimony to their sudden achievements.

Information

For online information about the Gran Chiquitania region and the mission circuits, see www.destinochiquitos.com and www.chiquitania.com.

JESUIT MISSIONS CIRCUIT

The seven-town region of Las Misiones Jesuíticas hides some of Bolivia's richest cultural and historic accomplishments. To travel through the entire circuit takes five or six days, but for those with an interest in architecture or history, it's a rewarding excursion.

Forgotten by the world for more than two centuries, the region and its history captivated the world's imagination when the 1986 Palm d'Or winner *The Mission* spectacularly replayed the last days of the Jesuit priests in the region (with Robert de Niro at the helm). The growing interest in the unique synthesis of Jesuit and native Chiquitano culture in the South American interior resulted in Unesco declaring the region a World Heritage site in 1991. Thanks to 25 years of painstaking restoration work, directed by the late architect Hans Roth, the centuries-old mission churches have been restored to their original splendor.

GETTING THERE AND AWAY

If you wish to travel the mission circuit on public transport, the bus schedules synchronize better going counterclockwise: that is starting the circuit at San José de Chiquitos (p290). Travelling the opposite way, unsynchronized and irregular bus schedules make for a frustrating journey. A much less time-consuming way of doing it is by taking a guided tour from Santa Cruz (p268), which costs around US\$450 for a four-day package taking in all the major towns.

San Javier

pop 11,300

The first (or last, depending on which way you travel) settlement on the circuit, San Xavier, founded in 1691, is the oldest mission town in the region. It's also a favorite holiday destination for wealthy *cruceño* families. Swiss priest Martin Schmidt arrived in 1730 and founded the region's first music school and a workshop to produce violins, harps and harpsichords. He also designed the present church, which was constructed between 1749 and 1752. It sits on a lovely forested ridge with a great view over the surrounding low hills and countryside. Restoration work was completed in 1992 to beautiful effect, and the newly restored

building manages to appear pleasantly old and authentic.

San Xavier has some inviting **hot springs** 13km northwest of town along a rough road (B\$150 return in a taxi). A further 5km along is a natural pool and waterfall, **Los Tumbos de Suruquizo**, where you can enjoy a refreshing swim.

SLEEPING & EATING

Alojamientos San Roque (☎ 963-5154; r per person B\$25) Quite basic and a little pokey, this hostel is on the main road and offers budget rooms for those travelers who don't mind sharing a bathroom.

Residencial de Chiquitano (☎ 963-5072; r per person B\$60) A little way up from the bus stop is this clean, bright hostel on two floors. Ask for a room with views of the surrounding hills.

Cabañas Totaitú (☎ 963-5171; r per person B\$80-150; 🍷) This four-star dairy farm, 4km northwest of town, is probably the mission circuit's loveliest place to stay, with a pool, golf course and tennis courts. You can go on lovely walks or rent mountain bikes and horses and to explore the area.

El Ganadero (☎ 963-5240; mains B\$15-20) has half-decent meals and a good value *almuerzo* (B\$17). If it doesn't tickle your fancy try the similar **Pascana** (☎ 963-5017; mains B\$15-20) next door.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

All Santa Cruz–Concepción buses (six hours) pass through San Xavier, stopping on the main road a short walk from the main plaza. Connections to Concepción pass through every three hours or so from midday to midnight. Buses for San Ignacio de Velasco pass through between 3pm and 4pm. For the return to Santa Cruz you can avoid the often overcrowded buses by taking a taxi; these leave when full. Listen for them honking for passengers along the main road.

Concepción

pop 14,500

Sleepy 'Conce' is a dusty village with a friendly, quiet atmosphere in the midst of an agricultural and cattle-ranching area. It stands 182km west of San Ignacio de Velasco and is the center for all the mission restoration projects. The elaborately restored 1709 **Catedral de Concepción** (open for mass only), sitting on the east of the

plaza, has an overhanging roof supported by 121 huge tree-trunk columns and a similar bell tower. It is decorated with golden baroque designs depicting flowers, angels and the Holy Virgin. The decor gives some idea of the former opulence of the village.

Architectural aficionados should visit the **restoration workshops** (☎ 10:30am-3:30pm) behind the mission, where many of the fine replicas and restored artworks are crafted. More intricate restoration work is performed in the **Museo Misional** (south side of plaza; admission B\$8; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sat, 10am-noon Sun), which, apart from being the birthplace of the former Bolivian president Hugo Suárez, also has scale models of all the churches on the mission circuit.

SLEEPING & EATING

Alojamiento Tarija (☎ 964-3020; r per person B\$30, with bathroom B\$50) A block south of the plaza, it's little more than a bed in a room but it makes up for the unappealing decor with a warm welcome, and if you are on a tight budget it's the cheapest in town.

Our pick Hotel Oasis Chiquitano (☎ 964-3223; r per person B\$70, d with air-con B\$180; ☎) Beautifully maintained with sparkling, stylish rooms and an orchid garden. This is the best value hotel in town and the price includes access to the Oasis Chiquitano pool complex (admission for nonguests B\$15) next door.

Gran Hotel Concepción (☎ 964-3031; west side of plaza; s/d B\$200/320; ☎) The most upscale place to lay your head is this charming, unapologetically Jesuit-styled hotel with a pool, a quiet patio with a lush, pretty garden, and intricately carved wooden pillars. There is no air-con, but the laundry comes in handy if you are finishing the dusty mission circuit.

Graffito's (south side of plaza; mains B\$7-12) The only place open on a Sunday for food, it serves a basic menu of junk food including burgers and *lomito*.

El Buen Gusto (☎ 964-3117; north side of plaza; almuerzo B\$20) Good value *almuerzos* with salad bar are served here, all enjoyed on the leafy, quiet patio.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses from Santa Cruz to Concepción run every three hours from 7:30am till 8pm via San Xavier. If you are thinking of visiting

Concepción and San Ignacio de Velasco on the same day, you need to leave Santa Cruz early. The San Ignacio bus from Santa Cruz (11 hours) passes through Concepción around 5pm and 2am, stopping on the main road 1km from the plaza. Sardine-can *micros* leave for San Xavier (one hour) and Santa Cruz (six hours) approximately every three hours from 7am to 11pm.

San Ignacio de Velasco

pop 41,400

The first mission church at San Ignacio de Velasco, founded in 1748, was once the largest and most elaborate of all the mission churches. It was demolished in the 1950s and replaced by a modern abomination. Realizing they'd made a hash of it, the architects razed the replacement and designed a reasonable facsimile of the original structure. The new version retains a beautiful altar and wooden pillars from the original church and overlooks an extensive and well-pruned plaza. Several attractive, large wooden crosses (a trademark of Jesuit mission towns and villages) stand at intersections just off the plaza.

Only 700m north of the church is the imposing **Laguna Guapomó**, where you can swim or rent a boat and putter around.

INFORMATION

The Casa de la Cultura on the southwest corner of the plaza houses a small **tourist office** (☎ 8am-noon & 2:30-6:30pm Mon-Fri).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

There's a big party celebrating the **election of Miss Litoral** during the last weekend in March. San Ignacio fetes its patron saint every July 31. Every summer, the Chiquitania hosts the **International Festival of Baroque Music** (see p268), which runs for several weeks and centers on San Ignacio de Velasco.

SLEEPING

San Ignacio de Velasco is the commercial heart of the mission district, so there's a good choice of accommodations.

Casa Suiza (☎ 7630-6798; r per person B\$35) The helpful proprietor here speaks German and Spanish, has a wonderful library and can organize horseback riding, fishing trips and visits to surrounding haciendas. Paying B\$15 extra gets you a fantastic homemade

breakfast. Casa Suiza is located seven blocks west of the plaza.

Hotel Palace (☎ 962-2063; west side of plaza; r per person B\$50) Palace is overdoing it a bit, but for budget travelers this simple hotel in the shadow of the church couldn't be better placed. Rooms are en suite and lack much in the way of imagination but this is a cheap central option.

Hotel Misión (☎ 962-2333; www.hotel-lamision.com; east side of plaza; s/d B\$318/424; 🍷) For a bit of luxury, neocolonial style, try this place with stylish rooms, a little pool and opulent suites. There's also a good upmarket restaurant serving an eclectic choice of dishes. Check out the wooden pillars in front, one is beautifully carved with the image of a group of Bolivian musicians.

EATING

Unfortunately, eating options are pretty poor here and on Sunday everything is closed; eat at your hotel if you can. If you are on a budget try the following, all on the plaza.

Bar-Restaurant Renacer Princezinha (south side of plaza; mains B\$15-30) Fortunately, the name of this place isn't the only mouthful on offer here. Basic, filling fare will help you fuel your mission tour, and why not finish off with an ice cream at the Heladería San Ignacio next door?

Restaurant Venecia (southwest corner of plaza; almuerzo B\$20) Ignore the name, no pizza or pasta here, just an affordable *almuerzo* with a menu that changes daily.

Club Social (west side of plaza; mains B\$30-50) Arguably the best in town, at least at week-ends when they serve up juicy *churrasco* (steak) for all and sundry. A la carte menu during the week.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Micros leave from their respective offices scattered inconveniently around the market district, a B\$5 moto-taxi ride from the center. Cover your luggage to prevent it from arriving with a thick coating of red dust.

A midday service with 131 del Este runs to Santa Cruz (11 hours) via San Xavier and Concepción. Several companies run an overly complicated timetable to San José via either San Miguel or Santa Ana (sometimes depending on the day of departure!) with most services leaving in the early hours of

the morning. It can be extremely frustrating if you intend to stop off briefly at San Miguel or Santa Ana en route – necessitating an overnight stay. Departure times change constantly and it is worth inquiring locally about your onward trip on arrival.

San Miguel de Velasco

pop 10,300

Sleepy San Miguel hides in the scrub, 38km from San Ignacio. Its **church** was founded in 1721 and is, according to the late Hans Roth, the most accurately restored of all the Bolivian Jesuit missions. Its spiral pillars, carved wooden altar with a flying San Miguel, extravagant golden pulpit, religious artwork, toylike bell tower and elaborately painted facade are simply superb.

Although not designed by Martin Schmidt, the church does reflect his influence and is generally considered the most beautiful of Bolivia's Jesuit missions. A unique feature of San Miguel is the presence of no fewer than seven bells in the bell tower. When rung in combination they transmit a complicated code language to the populace. The largest bell rung in tandem with two others signals the departure of a dignitary, rung alone it's the baptism of a child, while a special bell calls the faithful to prayer. You might want to pray that you never hear the smallest bell in tandem with a medium-sized bell; it means a child has died.

SLEEPING & EATING

Alojamiento Pardo (☎ 962-4209; Sucre; r per person B\$50) Just off the plaza, this is a simple but spartan option.

Alojamiento Altiplano (☎ 962-4241; Belisario; r per person B\$50) A decent option that has comfortable rooms.

If you'd prefer to camp, speak with the nuns at the church, who can direct you to a suitable site.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

A complicated system of *micros* run the circuit between San Miguel, San Ignacio de Velasco and San Rafael de Velasco, with departures sometimes running clockwise and sometimes counterclockwise (according to the day, rain, driver's fancy etc). Typically they leave in the early morning with an occasional additional service early afternoon, but timetables change constantly and

locals recommend that you inquire about your onward travel on arrival.

Santa Ana de Velasco

The mission at this tiny Chiquitano village, 24km north of San Rafael de Velasco, was established in 1755. The **church**, with its earthen floor and palm-frond roof, is more rustic than the others and recalls the first churches constructed by the Jesuit missionaries upon their arrival. In fact the building itself is post-Jesuit, but the interior contains exquisite religious carvings and paintings.

Given its age, the original structure was in remarkable condition and the church has been recently restored. During renovations a diatonic harp, more than 1.5m tall, was found; it's displayed in the church and is a lovely complement to the local children's music practice.

San Rafael de Velasco

pop 5000

San Rafael de Velasco, 132km north of San José de Chiquitos, was founded in 1696. Its **church** was constructed between 1743 and 1747, the first of the mission churches to be completed in Bolivia. In the 1970s and 1980s the building was restored, along with the churches in Concepción and San José de Chiquitos.

The interior is particularly beautiful, and the original paintings and woodwork remain intact. The pulpit is covered with a layer of lustrous mica, the ceiling is made of reeds and the spiral pillars were carved from *cuchi* (ironwood) logs. It's the only mission church to retain the original style, with cane sheathing. Most interesting are the lovely music-theme paintings in praise of God along the entrance wall, which include depictions of a harp, flute, bassoon, horn and maracas.

At the corner of the main road and the street running south from the church, the **Casa de Húspedes San Rafael** (☎ 962-4018; r per person B\$30) has basic rooms with shared bathroom, good enough for a night's stay. On the main road itself, **Alojamiento Paradita** (☎ 962-4008; r per person B\$30) is along similar lines but also has a basic *comedor* (dining hall).

The best place to wait for rides south to San José de Chiquitos (five to six hours) or north to Santa Ana, San Miguel or San Ignacio is on the main road in front of Alojamiento San Rafael. In the morning, buses run in

both directions. Ask at the small **tourist office** (☎ 962-4022) in the municipal building for the latest timetables. To reach Santa Ana with your own vehicle, use the right fork north of town.

San José de Chiquitos

pop 17,000

An atmospheric place, San José de Chiquitos has the appeal of an old Western film set. The frontier town, complete with dusty streets straight out of *High Noon* and foot-paths shaded by pillar-supported roofs, is flanked on the south by a low escarpment and on the north by flat, soggy forest. With an enormous and handsome plaza flanked by *toboroche* (thorny bottle) trees, the most accessible Jesuit mission town is also arguably the nicest.

The Jesuits arrived sometime in the mid-1740s, and began construction of the magnificent town church in 1750.

INFORMATION

There is no ATM in town but local banks will give cash advances on Visa and MasterCard. A useful **tourist information office** (☎ 972-2084) in the Alcaldía on the corner of the plaza has information about all the missions.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Jesuit Mission Church

San José has the only stone Jesuit mission church and merits a visit even if you miss all the others. Although the main altar is nearly identical to those in other nearby missions and has vague similarities to churches in Poland and Belgium, the reason behind its unusual exterior design remains unclear.

The church compound consists of four principal buildings arranged around the courtyard and occupying an entire city block. The bell tower was finished in 1748, the *funerario* (death chapel) is dated 1752 and the *parroquio* (living area) was completed in 1754. It is believed, however, that only the facades were finished before the Jesuits were expelled in 1767. All construction work was done by the Chiquitano people under Jesuit direction.

The restoration of the church was nearing completion at the time of writing. Work has been going on for over a decade with some delay caused by the unexpected discovery of 1008 sq meters of glorious frescoes depicting

the history of the town from the Jesuit era to the Spanish colonization.

Santa Cruz la Vieja Walk

Just south of town, an **archway** supported by *bañistas* (literally 'bathers', in this case women protecting their modesty with towels) indicates your entry into the **Zona Balnearia** where there are a number of open-air swimming options.

A few kilometers further along is the **Parque Histórico Santa Cruz la Vieja** (admission B\$10) site of the original city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra. The only thing left behind of the old city is an abandoned guardhouse. Just beyond here is a statue of town founder Ñuflo de Chavez next to a reconstructed *choza* – a typical Chiquitano dwelling with the characteristic low doorway used for defensive purposes. Excavations taking place at the time of writing were believed to be uncovering the original church.

Uphill from here there is a trek to the **Cataratas del Suton** waterfall and a stunning viewpoint, though it is easy to get lost and a guide is recommended. Ask at the tourist office.

SLEEPING

Hotel El Patriarca (☎ 972-2233; main plaza; s/d B\$60-70/100; 🍷) A standard but clean hotel that represents good value for money.

Hotel Turubó (☎ 972-2230; main plaza; s B\$60-100, d B\$80-120; 🍷) This is the most attractive place to stay in town. More expensive rooms have air-con.

EATING

El Cubanito (☎ 7766-6981; main plaza; mains B\$20-40) A mishmash of decorative styles give this restaurant a somewhat unfinished look, but smiling straw-hatted waiters serving pastas and meats more than make up for it. Located next to Hotel Turubó.

Sabor y Artes (☎ 7210-1666; off the main plaza; mains B\$25-40) There's a distinctly French ambience here, though the menu is Italian with mainly pizza and pasta. The paintings and *artesanías* that adorn the place are all for sale. Owner Pierre is a mine of local tourist information.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The route between San Ignacio and San José (via San Rafael de Velasco and San Miguel de

Velasco) suffers from a confused, irregular and frequently changing timetable. Check locally for the latest departure times. Buses from Santa Cruz depart daily from the bimodal terminal between 4pm and 6pm (B\$50 to B\$80), though the road is in a terrible state.

Easily the easiest and most comfortable way to travel between San José and Santa Cruz or Quijarro is by train (p292). You'll need to show your passport on purchasing your ticket and again to access the platform.

FAR EASTERN BOLIVIA

Between San José de Chiquitos and Roboré the railway line passes through a bizarre and beautiful wilderness region of hills and monoliths. Further east, along the Brazilian border, much of the landscape lies soaking beneath the wildlife-rich swamplands of the Pantanal.

Roboré & Santiago de Chiquitos

There isn't much fun to be had in militarized Roboré, but the landscape surrounding the town is spectacular and it's the access town to Santiago de Chiquitos, a lovely Jesuit mission village.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

A pleasant day trip from Roboré will take you to **El Balneario**, a mountain stream with a waterfall and natural swimming hole. It's a two-hour walk each way from town; you'll need a local guide who knows the right paths in order to find it.

Set in the hills, the Jesuit mission at **Santiago de Chiquitos**, 20km from Roboré, provides a welcome break from the tropical heat of the lowlands. Its church is well worth a look, and there are some great excursions from Santiago, such as **El Mirador**, a 15-minute walk from the village, with dizzy views of the Tucavaca valley. The round-trip taxi fare from Roboré is B\$100 for up to four people.

The 40°C (105°F) thermal baths at **Agua Calientes**, 31km east of Roboré, are popular with Bolivian visitors who believe in their curative powers. Taxis charge B\$100 for up to four passengers and though the train stops here it does so in the middle of the night. There is nowhere to stay but it makes for a great day trip.

TRANS-CHIQUITANO TRAIN

No longer the harrowing journey that earned this route the nickname 'Death Train,' the route from Santa Cruz to Quijarro via San José de Chiquitos and Roboré (for Santiago de Chiquitos) is now plied by three different types of train. It's a glorious journey through forest, scrub and Pantanal teeming with wildlife, though you might be advised to take mosquito repellent. Most operate *cama* and *semi-cama* classes with comfortable reclining seats, but note that there are no departures from Santa Cruz on Sunday.

The slowest and most frequent is the *Tren Regional*. It departs Santa Cruz Monday to Saturday at noon, passing through San José de Chiquitos (6:43pm; semi-cama/cama B\$19/53), Roboré (11:36pm; B\$27/77) and arriving at Quijarro (7:10am; B\$52/115) the following day. The return departs Quijarro at 12:45pm, passing through Roboré (7:50pm), San José de Chiquitos (1:23am) and arrives at Santa Cruz at 9:25am.

Next in line in terms of quality is the *Expreso Oriental* which operates a single comfortable Super Pullman class. It departs Santa Cruz on Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 4:30pm, passing through San José de Chiquitos (10:20pm; B\$58), Roboré (2:28am; B\$85) and arriving at Quijarro (8:45am; B\$127) the following day. The return departs Quijarro on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday at 4:30pm, passing through Roboré (10:11pm), San José de Chiquitos (2:21am) and arrives at Santa Cruz at 8:40am.

The fastest and priciest is the *Ferrobús*. It departs Santa Cruz on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday at 7pm, passing through San José de Chiquitos (12:09am; semi-cama/cama B\$175/205), Roboré (3:23am; B\$199/288) and arriving at Quijarro (8:40am; B\$222/257) the following day. The return departs Quijarro on Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 7pm, passing through Roboré (11:56pm), San José de Chiquitos (3:10am) and arrives at Santa Cruz at 8:50am.

There is rarely a problem getting a seat from Santa Cruz or Quijarro, but if joining the service midway along the line then tickets are best bought in advance – only a limited number of seats are allotted for these stations. Hot and cold food and drinks are available during daylight hours, and a constant stream of vendors pass through the carriages selling all manner of goods.

SLEEPING & EATING

Eating options in both towns are restricted to fried chicken and pizza joints that do little to inspire the gourmet visitor.

Hotel Pacheco (☎ 974-2074; 6 de Agosto; d B\$50, with bathroom B\$80) A decent, conveniently located option in Roboré with simple but bright and clean rooms.

Hotel Beulá (☎ 313-6274; s/d B\$180/250) On the plaza in Santiago de Chiquitos, the stylish Beulá has big breakfasts and dinners (B\$30 to B\$55), but they need to be arranged in advance. You can also hire local guides here.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Flota Trans Carretón leaves Santa Cruz daily at 5pm, but due to the poor condition of the roads the easiest and most comfortable way to arrive is by train (see the boxed text, above).

QUIJARRO

pop 12,900

The eastern terminus of the railway line has its home in Quijarro, a muddy collection

of shacks and the border crossing point between Bolivia and the city of Corumbá, Brazil (see the boxed text, opposite). On a hill in the distance you will glimpse a wonderful preview of Corumbá, the gateway to the Brazilian Pantanal, a UNESCO-recognized ecoregion.

Sights & Activities

Hotels in Quijarro can organize boat tours through the wetlands of the **Bolivian Pantanal**, an alternative to the well-visited Brazilian side. A comfortable three-day excursion, including transportation, food and accommodations (on the boat) should cost around B\$900 per person.

Sleeping & Eating

There are *alojamientos* (basic accommodations) on the left as you exit from the railway station. Better options are below.

Hotel Bilbosi (☎ 978-2113; Luis Salazar de la Vega; s/d B\$70/120; ☎) This friendly hotel is two blocks from the railway station and has clean rooms with air-con.

CROSSING THE BORDER TO BRAZIL

The main border crossing to Brazil is at Quijarro at the end of the train line, with a second, minor crossing at San Matías, the access point to the northern Brazilian Pantanal.

You'll more than likely arrive in Quijarro by train between 7am and 9am to be greeted by a line of taxi drivers offering to take you the 2km to the border (B\$5). **Customs offices** (☎ 8am-noon & 2-5:30pm) are on opposing sides of the bridge. Bolivian officials have been known to unofficially charge for the exit stamp, but stand your ground politely. Crossing this border you are generally asked to show a yellow-fever vaccination certificate. No exceptions are granted and you will be whisked off to a vaccination clinic if you fail to produce it. On the Brazilian side of the border yellow *canarinho* (city buses) will take you into Corumbá (R\$1.70). Brazilian entry stamps are given at the border or at the Polícia Federal at the *rodoviária* (haw-doo-vyahr-ya; bus terminal); it's open until 5pm. Get your stamp as soon as possible to avoid later problems and make sure you have the necessary visas if you require them.

For a slightly more adventurous border crossing try San Matías. In the dry season, a Trans-Bolivia bus leaves from Santa Cruz to Cáceres in Brazil (30 hours), via San Matías (26 hours). Brazilian entry or exit stamps should be picked up from the Polícia Federal office at Rua Antônio João 160 in Cáceres; get your exit and entry stamps for Bolivia in Santa Cruz (p266).

El Pantanal Hotel-Resort (☎ 978-2020; www.elpantanalhotel.com; s/d B\$560/750; ♿) This five-star place is in the beautiful Arroyo Concepción, 12km from Puerto Suárez and 7km from Corumbá. It offers wide-ranging luxury, 600 hectares of grounds and several restaurants, as well as a number of touristic packages exploring the Pantanal.

Both these hotels have good restaurants. Alternatively, lots of inexpensive places are lined up along the street perpendicular to the railway station entrance.

Getting There & Away

Train services cross the Chiquitania en route from Quijarro to Santa Cruz, arriving at the border town between 7am and 9am each day. The ticket office opens around 7am and tickets sell out fast, so don't hang around. For train departure information, see the boxed text (opposite). The bus station is two blocks from the train station. Services to Santa Cruz (B\$120; 16 hours) via San José (B\$60; seven hours) leave at 4pm.

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