

Central Honduras



Practically nobody goes here – we’re talking a trickle of a few hundred foreign tourists a year at best – and what more reason do you need to visit this uncharted territory in an already uncharted country? Sure, the infrastructure is rustic and the developed attractions few, but sometimes a journey beyond the tourist trail is just what the doctor ordered.

Most people who visit the area come for a multi-day forest hike to the top of Olancho’s highest mountain in Parque Nacional Sierra de Agalta. Along the route, you’ll pass through numerous microclimates, ascending through jungle up to the cloud and dwarf forests near the summit. It’s a tough tromp, but well worth the effort. There’s also excellent hiking in El Boquerón Natural Monument, and cave exploration at the Cuevas de Susmay and de Talgua. If that doesn’t tire you out, then prepare yourself for one of Honduras’ truly great adventures – a 10-day float down the rivers Patuca or Plátano into La Moskitia.

And while this modern-day Wild West is a bit rough around the edges – anticipate a few unfriendly stares, and don’t be surprised that nearly everybody is carrying a gun – it does offer a bit for the culture hound. One of Honduras’ biggest archaeological discoveries took place near the city of Catacamas, where the ‘Glowing Skulls of Talgua’ were discovered in a cave in 1994. Unfortunately, you don’t get to see the skulls (they really do glow, thanks to a coating of phosphorescent calcite) but it does go to show you that discoveries rating a perfect 10 on the ‘Indiana-Jones-O-Meter’ are still possible in this rugged little corner of the world.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Spirit your way through dripping rainforest to a bizarre dwarf forest on the dizzying summit of **La Picucha** (p103)
- Get dirty on a day hike through the **Monumento Natural El Boquerón** (p99), passing through river valleys, cloud forests and small-time coffee plantations along the way
- Imagine the possibilities as you duck through the **Cuevas de Talgua** (p101), where amateur spelunkers discovered dozens of ‘glowing skulls’ left there 3000 years ago
- Shiver your way through the dark as you follow a bone-chilling river to the limestone formations at the **Cuevas de Susmay** (p105)
- Test yourself in the seldom-visited **Reserva Biológica El Chile** (opposite), where waterfalls and untrammelled trails await



DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Olancho's north-south highways have been the scene of numerous roadside assaults; the one via La Unión has the unsettling nickname *camino de la muerte* (road of death). The problem has abated somewhat – and President Zelaya, an Olanchano, once proposed paving these roads – but avoid driving here if possible and certainly don't do so at night. If you get to a road block, don't get out of your car, just turn around and return from where you came.

CENTRAL HIGHLANDS & BEYOND

Most people skip this area altogether, heading on instead to the more renowned attractions out in Olancho, but a day or two exploring the waterfalls of Reserva Biológico El Chile or visiting the local troop of howler monkeys in the Misoco Biological Reserve may be worth the effort. Stay in the dusty towns of Yoro and Cedros along the way.

RESERVA BIOLÓGICA EL CHILE

A beautiful and rugged stretch of highland forest, this protected area includes several peaks, including Pico de Navaja (2150m) and numerous rivers and important watersheds.

Access to the reserve is through **San Marcos**, a town of around 1000 people and about 1½ hours by rough dirt road from Guaimaca. There's a small **visitors center** (no phone; ☎ opening hrs vary) in San Marcos where you may be able to hire a guide. Two trails leave from San Marcos, taking you to either a set of waterfalls near the village of Piñuela or to a smaller waterfall known as Majastre II. Either trail will take you about an hour or two to hike.

You may be able to camp at, or near, the visitors center in San Marcos, or in a small cabin in Piñuela. Ask around town, or at the visitors center if it's open.

The park has a second entrance on its far side via the town of Teupasenti, near Danlí. There, a short but steep hike from the community of El Aguantal leads to an impressive waterfall of the same name. Hiking across the reserve is possible but very difficult – hire a local guide.

Admission to the reserve is free, but it is a good idea to stop in at the local **Honduran Corporation for Forest Development** (COHDEFOR; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri) before heading in. The office is 300m off the highway (behind a plywood factory, ironically) about 2km west of Guaimaca.

Any bus between Juticalpa and Tegucigalpa can drop you at the turnoff to Guaimaca. From there, buses leave for San Marcos (L\$20, 1½ hours) at 1:30pm only; the return bus departs from San Marcos at 7am. Should you choose to hitch, mornings are best.

RESERVA BIOLÓGICA MISOCO

This even smaller reserve has one maintained trail and is known for its howler monkeys. The turnoff is 750m east from Guaimaca and the reserve itself is at the hamlet of Arenales up an extremely rough road. A **visitors center** (no phone; ☎ opening hrs vary) there has simple accommodation where you may be able to hire a guide.

CEDROS

pop 19,700

There's very little to do in this dusty mining berg, situated on the edge of the Montañas de Comayagua mountain range, aside from soaking in that good-ol' small-town atmosphere. If you do decide to poke around the surrounding hills, be extremely careful of unfenced, unmarked mine shafts.

The **police** (☎ 24hr) and **Hondutel Call Center** (☎ 7:30am-9pm Mon-Sat) are located on Parque Central. Across from the police station is the **Casa de Cultura** (admission free; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-4:30pm Mon-Fri), which occasionally has photo exhibits of the area.

El Cerrito is the name of a small hill in the center of town. At the top, there's a large shady kiosk and a rather obtrusive cell-phone tower. The view, of the town church on one side and the pine-covered valley on the other, is quite nice.

Sleeping & Eating

Doña Elinda (☎ 917-3138; r with shared bathroom per person L\$60) Located in a simple home behind the *iglesia* (church), this guesthouse is the only place to stay in town. It's a lucky thing that it's comfortable. Doña Elinda also prepares meals (around L\$50) for her guests.

Restaurante Típicos (mains L\$40-100; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Located kitty-corner from