

San José



San José is not a pretty city. It's studded with unremarkable concrete towers, clogged pedestrian arcades and fast-food outlets redolent of everything fried. On some days, it is sensory overload: walk its teeming streets and you'll get jostled by businessmen grunting into cell phones and street vendors hawking fried bananas, all set to a soundtrack of tooting horns and roaring bus engines. But linger long enough and 'Chepe' – as San José is affectionately known – will begin to reveal its charms.

Duck into an anonymous-looking restaurant and you might find yourself in the middle of a garden, sipping wine beside a gushing fountain. A vintage house might conceal a cutting-edge contemporary art space. An unremarkable-looking hotel may have been the place where presidents once slept. It is a place rife with history. San José, after all, is where forward-thinking leaders once gathered to decide that this would be a country without an army.

Over the last century, the transformation from prewar agrarian coffee town to 21st-century urban sprawl has been unkind to the city's physical form. But regardless of what it may look like, San José is the beating heart of Costa Rica – home to its most influential thinkers, its finest museums and its most sophisticated restaurants. In a country that has been culturally transformed by vast amounts of tourism, there's nowhere better to begin to understand what it means to be Tico. For to truly love Costa Rica, you must first learn to love its capital.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Admiring Costa Rica's artistic traditions past and present at the **Museo de Jade** (p76) and **Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo** (p76)
- Dancing until the break of dawn at one of San José's hopping **nightclubs** (p92)
- Ogling the rich marbled floors and beaux arts interiors of the graceful **Teatro Nacional** (p73)
- Reveling in cold beer and country cooking at **La Casona de Laly** (p110) in the suburb of Escazú
- Grooving to live bands in San Pedro at **Jazz Café** (p105), the city's most storied music venue



HISTORY

For much of the colonial period, San José played second fiddle to the bigger and relatively more established Cartago, a city whose origins date back to 1563 and which, during the colonial era, served as the provincial capital. Villanueva de la Boca del Monte del Valle de Abra – as San José was first known – was not founded until 1737, when the Catholic Church issued an edict that forced the populace to settle near churches (attendance was down).

The city remained a backwater for decades, though it did experience some growth as a stop in the tobacco trading route during the late 18th century. Following independence in 1821, rival factions in Cartago and San José each attempted to assert regional supremacy. The struggle ended in 1823 when the two sides faced off at the Battle of Ochomongo. San José emerged the victor and subsequently declared itself capital.

Despite its new status, the city remained a quiet agricultural center into the 20th century. The calm was shattered in the 1940s, when parts of San José served as a battlefield in the civil war of 1948, one of the bloodiest conflicts in the country's history. Out of that clash, José Figueres Ferrer of the Partido de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Party) emerged as the country's interim leader – signing a declaration that abolished the army at the armory that now serves as the Museo Nacional (p73).

The rest of the 20th century would see the expansion of the city from diminutive coffee-trading outpost to sprawling urban center. In the 1940s San José had only 70,000 residents. Today, the population stands at more than 1.5 million. Recent years have been marked by massive urban migration as Ticos (Costa Ricans) and, increasingly, Nicaraguans have moved to the capital in search of economic opportunity (see boxed text, p230). As part of this, shantytowns have mushroomed on the outskirts, and crime is increasingly becoming a part of life for the city's poorest inhabitants.

Even so, the city remains a vital economic and arts hub, home to important banks, museums and universities – as well as the everyday outposts of culture: live music spaces, art centers, bookstores and the corner restaurants where *josefinos* (people from San José) gather to chew over ideas.

ORIENTATION

The city is in the heart of a wide and fertile valley called the Meseta Central (Central Valley). San José's center is arranged in a grid with *avenidas* (avenues) running east to west and *calles* (streets) running north to south. Av Central is the nucleus of the downtown area and is a pedestrian mall between Calles 6 and 9. It becomes Paseo Colón to the west of Calle 14. There are no exact street addresses, so these are given by the nearest street intersection. Thus, the address of the tourist office is Calle 5 between Avs Central and 2.

The downtown has several districts, *barrios*, which are all loosely defined. The central area is home to innumerable businesses, bus terminals, hotels and cultural sites. West of downtown is La Sabana, named after the park, and just north of it is the elegant suburb of Rohrmoser. Further west is the affluent outer suburb of Escazú. Immediately east (and within walking distance) of the downtown area are the contiguous neighborhoods of Los Yoses and San Pedro.

Note that the maps used in this book show streets and avenues. However, most locals do not use street addresses. To learn how to decipher Tico directions, see boxed text, p534.

You can pick up a free map of the city at the tourist office (p72).

INFORMATION

Look for free copies of **San José Volando** (www.sanjosevolando.com), a monthly pocket-sized guide that has arts, food and other cultural listings in English. You can find it at art galleries, museums and better restaurants and hotels.

Bookstores

English-language magazines, newspapers, books and maps are widely available in shops throughout the city. The following stores offer the best selection:

7th Street Books (Map p74; ☎ 2256-8251; Calle 7 btwn Avs Central & 1; ☏ 10am-5pm) The headquarters of all things English-language also carries maps.

Librería Lehmann (Map p74; ☎ 2223-1212; www.librerialehmann.com; Av Central btwn Calles 1 & 3; ☏ 8am-6:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat, 11am-4pm Sun) Good selection of English-language books, guidebooks (including Lonely Planet), as well as topographic and other maps (available upstairs).

Librería Universal (Map p74; ☎ 2222-2222; www.universallcr.com; Av Central btwn Calles Central & 1) On the