

# Coclé Province



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

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

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

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

## HIGHLIGHTS

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



■ POPULATION: 235,241

■ AREA: 6075 SQ KM

■ ELEVATION: 1626M

## EL VALLE

pop 6900

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

## History

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

## Orientation

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

