

Península de Azuero



A semi-arid landmass more like rural USA than the American tropics, the Península de Azuero is esteemed by Panamanians as the country's heart and soul. Inland, the peninsula is one of the country's major farming and ranching centers. It is also the strongest bastion of Spanish culture left in Panama, with the lineage of many families linked directly back to Spain. These days talk has turned it into 'Tuscany of the Tropics,' with rolling hills and a long and lovely coastline. Surf is up.

Long before the Spanish conquistadors, the region was home to the Ngöbe-Buglé, an indigenous group who left behind a rich archaeological record, and Panama's cry for independence was first uttered in the village town of Los Santos. But it is the Spanish legacy that brands Azuero. In these provinces, the passage of time is marked by a countdown to the next festival, be it Corpus Christi, La Mejorana or Carnaval. Costumes range from swirling devils to curtsying *reinas*, teenage queens made-up like dolls in the lace finery of *polleras* (traditional dresses). Every festival is marked by a party to beat the band. Joining the throngs on sticky rum-soaked streets, for these celebrations rate as a first-rate introduction to the real Panama.

The region is comprised of Herrera and Los Santos provinces, with a small western sliver belonging to Veraguas Province (and covered in that chapter). Over time, these rural provinces have seen stark transformations – from verdant rainforest to cattle country, indigenous land to Spanish stronghold, and finally from sleepy backwater to surf central and Panama's next travel hot spot.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Visiting a mask-maker's studio and strolling the colonial center of historic **Parita** (p144)
- Bird-watching at **Playa El Aguillito** (boxed text, p145), a tidal mudflat that attracts rare migratory seabirds
- Squeezing through multitudes in the soaked streets at Carnaval in **Las Tablas** (p152)
- Catching a ride on an uncrowded wave at **Playa Venao** (p158)
- Spotting sea turtles by the thousands during their annual nesting at **Isla de Cañas** (p159)



■ POPULATION: 212,754

■ AREA: 6147 SQ KM

■ ELEVATION: SEA LEVEL TO 3478M

