



Península de Azuero

POP 199,500 / ELEV SEA LEVEL TO 3478M / AREA 6147 SQ KM

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Why Go?

Esteemed as the country's heart and soul, Península de Azuero is a farming and ranching hub in addition to the strongest bastion of Spanish culture left in Panama. These days the buzz is 'Tuscany of the Tropics,' with rolling hills alongside a long and lovely coastline. Surf is up.

Here, the passage of time is a countdown to the next festival, be it Corpus Christi, La Mejorana or Carnaval. Costumes range from swirling devils to curtsying *reinas*, teenage queens turned dolls in the lace finery of *polleras* (national dress of Panamanian women). It's a party to beat the band. Joining the throngs on sticky rum-soaked streets for these celebrations is a first-rate introduction to the real Panama.

Over time, the peninsula has 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.

When to Go

- ➔ **Jul–Sep** Traditional Azuero is ground zero for Panama's best festivals and these months feature some major celebrations all over the peninsula, featuring oxcart parades, *seco* (alcoholic drink made from sugarcane) and live bands.
- ➔ **Late Aug–Nov** Thousands of endangered olive ridley sea turtles come ashore to nest on the broad beach of Isla de Cañas; visitors come to watch the nighttime hatchings with guides.
- ➔ **Dec–Mar** Dry season is the best time to surf Pacific swells, and options from wilderness beaches to surf villages abound. Also hit Carnaval in Las Tablas – the country's best – in February or March.

Chitré

POP 41,600

One of Panama's oldest settlements, the hot city of Chitré is hardly geared toward travelers, but it's an agreeable stop on the way to the peninsula. Though it has mostly cement structures, a handful of ornate red-tiled row homes hark back to the early days of Spanish settlement. Colonial records indicate that there was a village here as early as 1558. The capital of Herrera Province, it's the largest city on the Península de Azuero, and the cultural and historic capital of the region.



For most travelers, Chitré serves as a springboard for nearby attractions like the ceramic shops in La Arena, the Humboldt Ecological Station at Playa El Aguillito, historic Parita, the *seco* (alcoholic drink made from sugarcane) factory at Pesé and the wildlife refuge at Cenegón del Mangle. Some of the country's best festivals are just a quick bus ride away, but Chitré does host a few wild parties of its own.

Sights

The town's cathedral and the adjacent central square, Parque Union, are one block south of Calle Manuel Maria Correa between Av Obaldía and Av Herrera. There are numerous hotels and restaurants within a short walk of the square.

Museo de Herrera

MUSEUM

( 996-0077; Paseo Enrique Geenzier; adult/child US\$1/0.25;  8am-4pm Mon-Sat) This anthropology and natural history museum contains many well-preserved pieces of pottery dating from 5000 BC until the Spanish conquest, some of which were found at the excavation sites outside Parita. There are also replicas of *huacas* (golden objects placed with indigenous peoples at the time of burial) found on the peninsula, as well as photos and maps of archaeological sites.

On the museum's 2nd floor you'll find photos of Azuero residents, authentic folkloric costumes and religious artifacts (including the original bell of Chitré's cathedral, which was cast in 1767). Signs are in Spanish only.

Catedral San Juan Bautista

CATHEDRAL

The 18th-century cathedral was substantially remodeled in 1988. Unlike many cathedrals that impress through ostentation, this one is striking for its elegant simplicity and fine balance of gold and wood. Today, the

ceiling is polished mahogany, and figures of saints, teak crosses and vivid stained glass windows adorn the walls.



Festivals & Events

Carnaval

RELIGIOUS

Chitré's Carnival festivities, held each year on the four days before Ash Wednesday, feature parades, folkloric dancing, water fights and lots of drinking.

Fiesta de San Juan Bautista

RELIGIOUS

Chitré's patron saint festival, the Fiesta de San Juan Bautista, held on June 24, starts with a religious service followed by bullfights (the animals are teased but not harmed), cockfights and other popular activities.

Founding of the District of Chitré 1848

HISTORY

Festivities on October 19 celebrate the 1848 founding of Chitré with parades, historical costumes and much merriment.







Sleeping

If you plan to attend any of the festivals in or around Chitré, you need a reservation – rates go up on these dates too. For Carnival, rooms often book up months in advance, though you can always visit on a day trip.

Hotel Santa Rita

HOTEL \$

( 996-4610; cnr Calle Manuel Maria Correa & Av Herrera; d with/without air-con US\$29/23;   ) One of the city's first hotels, Santa Rita is economical but basic. High-ceiling rooms feel musty around the edges, though bathrooms smell scoured with bleach. Perks include some private balconies, very friendly attention and cable TV.

Hotel Rex

HOTEL \$\$

( 996-4310; Calle Melitón Martín s/n; d/tr US\$55/72;   ) With a prime location on Parque Union and good dining downstairs, Rex is a solid midrange choice. Clean tile rooms have brick walls, cable TV, fresh towels and water thermoses.

Hotel Versalles

HOTEL \$\$

( 996-4422; www.hotelversalles.com; Paseo Enrique Geenzier; d/ste US\$50/85;   ) Spacious rooms feature comfortable beds and tile floors, and the onsite restaurant and bar is good for an evening meal and a nightcap. The high price tag is mostly justified with the swimming pool, ideal for those hot Azuero days. There's also onsite car rental.