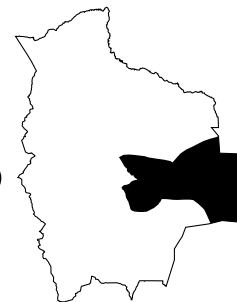


# Santa Cruz & Eastern Lowlands



## CONTENTS

|                               |            |
|-------------------------------|------------|
| History                       | 270        |
| Climate                       | 270        |
| National Parks                | 270        |
| Getting There & Away          | 270        |
| <b>Santa Cruz</b>             | <b>270</b> |
| Orientation                   | 272        |
| Information                   | 272        |
| Dangers & Annoyances          | 273        |
| Sights & Activities           | 273        |
| Festivals & Events            | 275        |
| Sleeping                      | 276        |
| Eating                        | 277        |
| Drinking                      | 278        |
| Entertainment                 | 279        |
| Shopping                      | 279        |
| Getting There & Away          | 279        |
| Getting Around                | 280        |
| <b>Around Santa Cruz</b>      | <b>281</b> |
| Buena Vista                   | 281        |
| Parque Nacional & Área de Uso |            |
| Múltiple Amboró               | 283        |
| Santa Cruz to Samaipata       | 287        |
| Samaipata                     | 288        |
| Around Samaipata              | 291        |
| Vallegrande                   | 293        |
| Pucará & la Higuera           | 293        |
| <b>Eastern Lowlands</b>       | <b>294</b> |
| History                       | 295        |
| Jesuit Missions Circuit       | 296        |
| Far Eastern Bolivia           | 303        |
| Puerto Suárez                 | 304        |
| Quijarro                      | 304        |
| San Matías                    | 305        |

Traveling through the Bolivian Oriente is like taking a walk through time. From bustling Santa Cruz you can visit pre-Inca ruins and the relatively undisturbed Parque Nacional Amboró, home to several species of endangered wildlife.

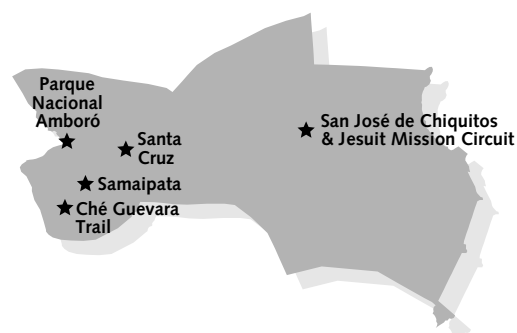
Santa Cruz' longstanding reputation as a drug-trafficking mecca is now being eclipsed by an agriculture boom. Large corporate sugarcane, rice, cotton and soybean plantations now dominate the lowlands east of the city, which only a decade ago were covered with thick tropical forest. This economic and agricultural potential has attracted not only optimistic settlers from the highlands, but also folks from many other walks of life. The region boasts rice-growing Japanese colonies as well as settlements of Italians, Palestinians, Indian Sikhs and thousands of German–Canadian Mennonites fleeing conflicts in Belize and Mexico. Once upon a time, the region was a haven for escaped Nazis but it now attracts more Brazilian opportunists, foreign oil workers, agribusiness tycoons, drug traffickers, scientific researchers, missionaries and environmental activists.

The 1986 film *The Mission*, which was set in the South American Jesuit missions, awakened an interest in Jesuit work in the continent's interior regions. Perhaps the height of mission architecture is represented in the unique and well-preserved churches in the lowlands north and east of Santa Cruz that form the Jesuit Mission circuit.

Culturally and economically, the Oriente looks toward Brazil rather than La Paz, and the 'Death Train' between Santa Cruz and Quijarro on the Brazilian border is its lifeline; over this dilapidating link flows a stream of largely contraband commerce and undocumented imports.

### TOP FIVE

- Hike and search for the blue-horned curassow in **Parque Nacional Amboró** (p283)
- Wander through **San José de Chiquitos** (p300) and its restored Jesuit mission complex
- Explore cosmopolitan **Santa Cruz** (p270) and its hedonistic range of clubs, resorts and eateries
- Acclimatize in the laid-back village of **Samaipata** (p288) and explore the mysterious pre-Inca ruins of El Fuerte
- Follow in the footsteps of **El Ché** (p293) from Vallegrande to Pucará and La Higuera



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 03

■ ELEVATION: 0 – 1300M

## HISTORY

Santa Cruz de la Sierra was founded in 1561 by Ñuflo de Chavez, a Spaniard who hailed from what is now Paraguay. The town originated 220km east of its current location. However, around the end of the 16th century, it proved too vulnerable to attack from local tribes and was moved to its present position 50km east of the Cordillera Oriental foothills.

The city was founded to supply the rest of the colony with products such as rice, cotton, sugar and fruit. Its prosperity lasted until the late 1800s, when transportation routes opened up between La Paz and the Peruvian coast and made imported goods cheaper than those hauled from Santa Cruz over mule trails.

During the period leading up to Bolivia's independence in 1825, the eastern regions of the Spanish colonies were largely ignored. Possession of the hostile lowlands and the hazy boundaries between Alto Peru, the Viceroyalty of La Plata and Portuguese territory was of little concern. Although agriculture was thriving around Santa Cruz, the Spanish remained intent upon extracting every scrap of mineral wealth that could be squeezed from the rich and more hospitable highlands.

In 1954 a highway linking Santa Cruz with other major centers was completed, and the city sprang back from the economic lull imposed by its remoteness. The completion of the railway line to Brazil in the mid-1950s opened trade routes to the east. Tropical agriculture prospered and the city began a flurry of growth that has continued to the present day.

For more on the pre-independence history of the Oriente, see History in the Eastern Lowlands section of this chapter, p295.

## CLIMATE

The Oriente's overall climate is tropical, but because it occupies the transition zone between the Amazon rainforest, the highlands and the dry Chaco plains, Santa Cruz enjoys more sun and less stifling temperatures than the humid Amazon Basin further north and west. Winter rainfalls mean little more than 10-minute downpours, but a single summer deluge can last for days. Santa Cruz also

experiences heavy winds that rarely subside and, at times during winter, chilly winds (*surazos*) blow in from Patagonia and the Argentine pampas. Outside of Santa Cruz, the Lowlands experience hot sunny days and an occasional afternoon shower to cool things off and settle the dust.

## NATIONAL PARKS

Parque Nacional Amboró (p283) is an unquestionable highlight of the region. The remote Parque Nacional Kaa-Iya del Gran Chaco (p303) is Latin America's largest park. It includes the vast Bañados del Izozog wetlands and will be another highlight when access is improved.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Many flights from Europe and neighboring countries come direct to Santa Cruz and are worth considering if you're arriving from sea level and don't want to spend days acclimatizing in La Paz. Direct flights depart daily for Buenos Aires, Miami, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

Trains trundle south to Argentina and east to the Brazilian Pantanal. With long-distance buses running along paved roads to the west and south and frequent domestic flights, Santa Cruz is the country's most connected city.

## SANTA CRUZ

Since 1950 Santa Cruz has mushroomed from a backwater cattle-producing town to its present position as Bolivia's most populous city – it surpassed La Paz in 2003 – and a trade and transport hub. With well over one million inhabitants, it's a metropolis on the fringe of a diminishing wilderness, displaying an incongruous amount of affluence not normally associated with Bolivia.

Despite its phenomenal growth rate, Santa Cruz retains traces of its dusty past, evident in its wide streets, frontier architecture and a rapidly fading small-town atmosphere. Few foreign visitors fail to notice that the streets shaded with colonnade-supported awnings recall the days of the North American Wild West, which leaves Santa Cruz looking like a bizarre cross between Miami and Tombstone!