

San Andrés & Providencia



Geographically near Nicaragua, historically tied to England and politically part of Colombia, the islands of San Andrés and Providencia may at first glance seem a little schizophrenic. But after experiencing its isolated beaches, pristine coral reefs and unique island flavor, there is no doubting the reasons to visit the far-flung archipelago.

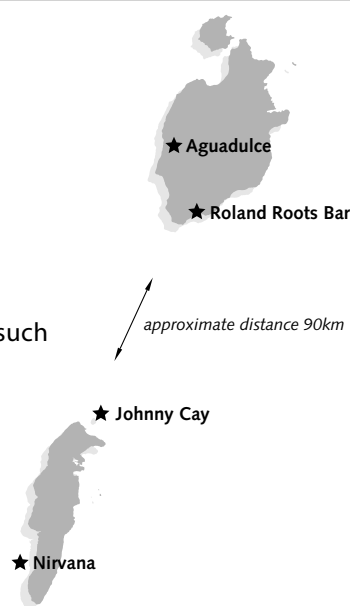
The lure of sun and sand (and duty-free imports) has been attracting tourists and mainland Colombians for several decades, and the principal town on San Andrés has grown into a bustling center of shopping malls and holiday resorts. The crowds, however, are not difficult to escape, and you could easily take up a Robinson Crusoe lifestyle on any number of isolated beaches.

In 2000 the archipelago was declared the Unesco Seaflower Biosphere Reserve. The reserve includes the islands proper and a vast surrounding marine area of 300,000 sq km, which is equal to about 10% of the Caribbean Sea. The objective is to encourage the conservation and environmental protection of an ecosystem of enormous biological diversity, and to foster sustainable development of the archipelago.

The islands, especially Providencia, provide a good opportunity to experience the unique Caribbean ambience. The turquoise sea, extensive coral reefs and rich underwater life are a paradise for snorkelers and scuba divers. The easygoing pace, friendly locals, relaxed lifestyle, developed tourist facilities and general safety are other factors that make the islands an attractive destination.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Sit back and enjoy the reggae rhythms at **Roland Roots Bar** (p154)
- Pack a lunch and spend the day on the beautiful **Johnny Cay** (p148)
- Dig your feet into the sand and while away the days in lovely **Aguadulce** (p153)
- Go scuba diving at some of Colombia's best coral reefs such as **Nirvana** (p148)
- Take a relaxing **bike ride** (p153) around either San Andrés or Providencia



■ POPULATION: 80,000

■ AREA: 45 SQ KM

TRAVELING SAFELY IN SAN ANDRÉS & PROVIDENCIA

San Andrés and Providencia are safe holiday destinations where the worst things you'll need to worry about are petty theft and sunburn. Be especially careful on the beaches of Providencia; the friendly nature of the place leads many travelers into a false sense of security, and this has made them easy targets for thieves.

History

The first inhabitants of the islands were probably a group of Dutch colonists who made their home on Providencia toward the end of the 16th century. In 1631 they were expelled by the English who effectively colonized the islands. They brought in black slaves from Jamaica and began to cultivate tobacco and cotton. The Spanish, irate at the English success on the islands, unsuccessfully invaded the archipelago in 1635.

Because of their strategic location, the islands provided convenient shelter for pirates waiting to sack Spanish galleons bound for home laden with gold and riches. In 1670 legendary pirate Henry Morgan established his base on Providencia and from here he raided both Panama and Santa Marta. Legend has it that his treasures are still hidden on the island.

Shortly after independence, Colombia laid claim to the islands, although Nicaragua fiercely disputed its right to do so. The issue was eventually settled by a treaty in 1928, which confirmed Colombia's sovereignty over the islands.

Geographic isolation kept the unique English character virtually intact, though things started to change when a flight service connected the islands to the mainland in the 1950s. In 1954, a government plan to make the islands a duty-free zone brought with it tourism, commerce, and entrepreneurs.

In the early 1990s, the local government introduced restrictions on migration to the islands in order to slow the rampant influx of people and preserve the local culture and identity. Yet, Colombian mainlanders account for two-thirds of San Andrés' population.

The tourist and commercial boom has caused San Andrés to lose much of its

original character; it's now a blend of Latin American and English-Caribbean culture. Providencia has preserved much more of its colonial culture, even though tourism is making inroads into the local lifestyle.

Although the political status of San Andrés and Providencia are unlikely to change, Nicaragua continues to press the issue of its sovereignty over the islands at the International Court of Justice in the Hague. The latest chapter in this saga saw Bogotá threatening military action if Nicaragua's oil prospectors crept into Colombian maritime space. In 2004 a Colombian frigate and submarine were sent to patrol the maritime borders, but analysts put the naval exercises down to mere 'saber-rattling.'

Climate

The climate is typical of the Caribbean islands, with average temperatures of 26° to 29°C, but humidity can be uncomfortably high. The rainy period is September to December and (a less wet period) May to June. Tourist season peaks are from late December to late January, during the Easter week and from mid-June to mid-July.

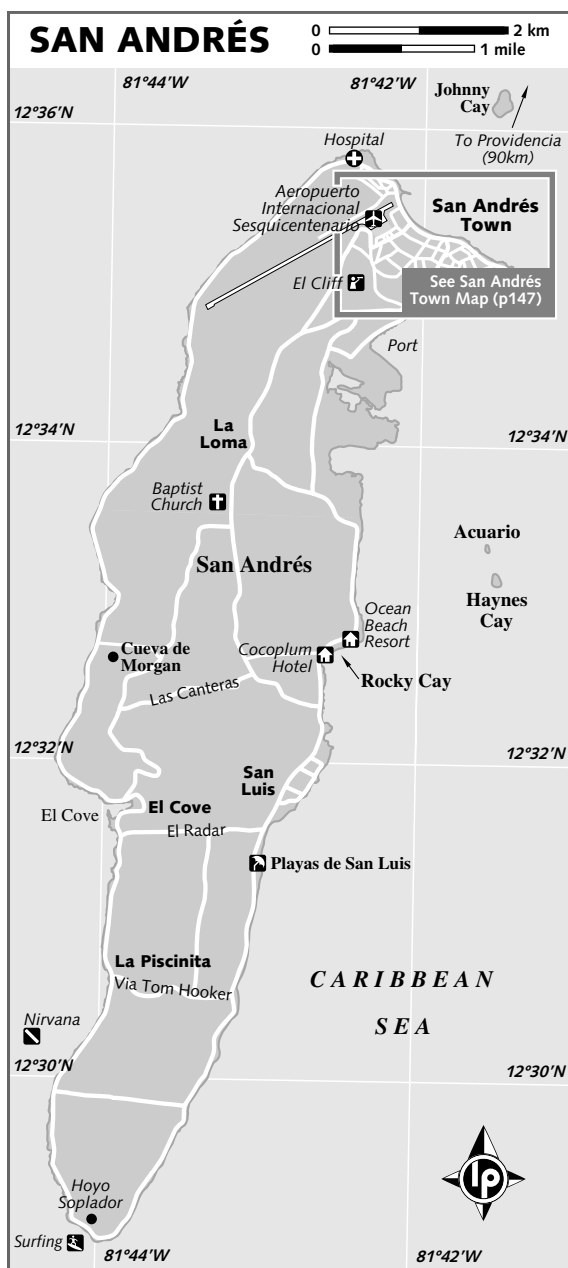
SAN ANDRÉS

 8 / pop 75,000 / temp 27°C

Covered in coconut palms and cut by sharp ravines that turn into rivers after rain, the seahorse-shaped San Andrés is the largest island in the archipelago, covering 27 sq km. It's the main commercial and administrative center of the archipelago. As the only transport hub to the mainland, it's the first and last place you are likely to see.

The town of San Andrés (known locally as El Centro), at the northern end of the island, is a hideous agglomeration of ferro-concrete blocks that look as if they were thrown together with a pitchfork. Fortunately, new zoning laws prevent its expansion and a recently constructed brick promenade along the waterfront will somewhat ease any sore eyes.

San Andrés Town is packed with hotels, restaurants and shops; it has more than two-thirds of the island's population. There are two other small towns: La Loma in the central hilly region and San Luis on the eastern coast, both far less tourist-oriented than



San Andrés Town. Both have fine English-Caribbean wooden architecture.

A 30km scenic paved road circles the island, and several minor roads cross inland, providing sufficient infrastructure to get around. It's relatively flat, with a small, low range crossing the island from north to south, reaching an altitude of 85m at the highest point.

San Andrés offers excellent scuba diving opportunities all around the island, but sunbathers should note that beaches are limited to the eastern coast. There's a pleasant beach at the northern end of the island, in San Andrés Town, but it can be crowded in the tourist season. Possibly the best beach is on the islet of Johnny Cay,

just opposite San Andrés Town, though it gets very crowded in the high season.

The commercial aspect of San Andrés has been another magnet for Colombian visitors. But measures to liberalize the economy have caused San Andrés to lose a lot of its commercial attractiveness. Today many products can be bought at competitive or lower prices on the Colombian mainland. With the duty-free heyday over, the main focus of local government now is tourism.

In the past, San Andrés was used by foreign travelers as a bridge between Central America and Colombia, but connections and airfares have changed. It's no longer a popular transit point, but it still draws in foreign visitors seeking a taste of the Caribbean.

Information

Bancolombia (Map p147; ☎ 512 4195; Av Atlántico, San Andrés Town) Changes traveler's checks and cash.

Café Internet Sol (Map p147; ☎ 512 2250; Av Duarte Blum, San Andrés Town; ☎ 8am-10pm)

Costa Rican consulate (Map p147; ☎ 512 4938; Av Colombia, Novedades Regina Shop, San Andrés Town) Next to the Calypso Beach Hotel.

Creative Shop (Map p147; ☎ 512 3416; Av Las Américas, San Andrés Town) Internet café located below the Hotel Hernando Henry on the stretch of Av Las Américas known as Calle 4.

Depris (Map p147; ☎ 512 9405; Av Colón, San Andrés Town) Post office.

Giros & Finanzas (Map p147; Centro Comercial San Andrés, Local 12, Av Costa Rica, San Andrés Town) The local agent of Western Union.

Honduran consulate (Map p147; ☎ 512 3235; Av Colombia, Hotel Tiuna, San Andrés Town)

Macro Financiera (Map p147; Edificio Leda, Av Providencia No 2-47) Changes US dollars.

Secretaría de Turismo Departamental (Map p147; ☎ 512 5058; www.sanandres.gov.co; Av Newball, San Andrés Town; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) In the building of the Gobernación, Piso 3. At the time of research it had a temporary office across from the Restaurante La Regatta.

Sights

CUEVA DE MORGAN

This is the cave where Welsh pirate Henry Morgan is said to have buried some of his treasure. The **cave** (Map p147; admission US\$1) is 120m long, but it's filled with water, so you see only its mouth. You can't enter the cave and there's not much to see here anyway, yet the magic of alleged riches draws in plenty of tourists.