



Panama

📍 507 / POP 3.4 MILLION

Includes ➔

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Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Anachoreo (p668)
- ➔ Cuatro (p670)
- ➔ Mercado de Mariscos (p650)
- ➔ La Rosa Mexicano (p651)
- ➔ Raw (p687)

Best Places to Stay

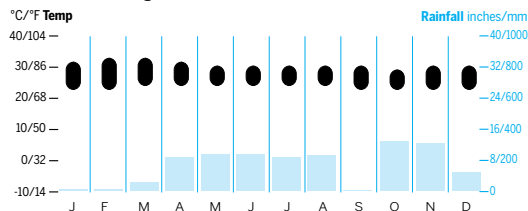
- ➔ Eco Venao (p665)
- ➔ Magnolia Inn (p648)
- ➔ Hibiscus Garden (p666)
- ➔ Lost & Found Lodge (p680)
- ➔ Al Natural Resort (p691)

Why Go?

Consider Panama a place of discovery: explore the ruins of Spanish forts on the Caribbean coast or boat deep into indigenous territories in a dugout canoe. There are plenty of beaches to choose from, from deserted islands to chill Caribbean hang-outs to Pacific surf. Panama City – culturally diverse, driven, rough-edged yet sophisticated – is to be among Latin America's most vibrant and outward-looking capitals, where English is widely spoken. In the last century, Panama was defined by the canal; what lies just beyond may define it for the next. The canal expansion spells growth and even more glitz, but for now you can still pick an empty islet and play *Survivor* for a day.

When to Go

Panama City



Dec–Apr High season on the Pacific coast is also the dry season. Best time to hike or dive.

May–Nov Rainy season means low-season travel rates.

Aug–Oct Migrating hump-back whales in the Pacific; shoulder season in Bocas.

AT A GLANCE

Currency US dollar (\$)

Language Spanish

Money ATMs widely available. Credit cards accepted in some areas.

Visas Generally not required for stays of 90 days or less.

Time GMT minus five hours

Fast Facts

- **Area** 78,200 sq km
- **Capital** Panama City
- **Police** ☎104

Set Your Budget

From US\$35 per day:

- Air-conditioned dorm bed: US\$13
- Dinner at a food cart or self-catering: US\$5; at a midrange restaurant: US\$18
- Four-hour bus ride: US\$9

Resources

- **ATP/Visit Panama** (www.atp.gob.pa; www.visitpanama.com) Official tourism website.
- **The Panama News** (www.thepanamanews.com) English newspaper.
- **Panama Info** (www.panamainfo.com) Good travel resource.
- **Casco Viejo** (www.cascoviejo.org) Panama City info.

Connections

The principal crossing to Costa Rica is on the Interamericana at Paso Canoas. Guabito on the Caribbean side and Río Sereno in the highlands are less chaotic border posts. For more detailed information, see Survival Guide on p723.

FIRST TIME IN PANAMA

Charge the capital, seek out a rainforest adventure and end with a Caribbean getaway on this one-week itinerary.

Start by imbibing the rush of **Panama City**. Visit **Panamá Viejo**, destroyed in a massive pirate raid, and explore **Casco Viejo**, a cobblestone neighborhood with plaza cafes and rooftop bars.

Take a day trip to nearby **Miraflores Locks** to witness mammoth ships squeezing through the canal. At nearby **Parque Nacional Soberanía** climb a canopy tower to search for toucans and sloths, or kayak down **Lago Gatún** alongside howler monkeys and sunbathing crocodiles.

Next, head to **Bocas del Toro** for four days of chill Caribbean vibes. Snorkel in the aquamarine waters with tropical fish and coral reefs, and explore Isla Colón by cruiser bike. Alternatively, escape to **Isla Bastimentos**, with its thatched resorts and jungle lodges. For a dose of culture, take a chocolate tour on the mainland or visit indigenous groups on other islands with a community tourism initiative.

Got a second week? Head over the divide to highland **Boquete** to explore coffee farms and cloud forests before hitting the great beaches of the **Pacific coast** and circling back to the capital.

Essential Food & Drink

- **Where to eat** Budget eateries like *cafeterías* (simple eateries), *panaderías* (bakeries), stands and market stalls sell a range of filling dishes and set meals from US\$3 to US\$6.
- **What to eat** Rice and beans are a staple in Panama and are usually served with *patacones* (fried green plantains), a small cabbage salad and meat. Seafood is inexpensive and abundant, including *ceviche* (marinated raw fish) at fish markets. More adventurous palates should try *pulpo al carbon* (grilled octopus). Fresh tropical juices and coconut water (known as *pipa*) are sold on the street. Don't miss regional specialties like *tortilla de maíz* (fried cornmeal cake), Caribbean coconut rice and bottled D'Elida's hot pepper sauce.