

# Colón Province



With an edgy reputation more true crime than travel, Colón rarely makes travel wish lists. But there is more to this Caribbean province than its notorious capital. Stretching along the coast from Veraguas Province in the west to the Comarca de Kuna Yala in the east, much of Colón Province remains undeveloped. It's amazing, considering that its incredible history dates back to the earliest European explorers. Black roots run deep in the region, which is also the birthplace of today's ultrapopular *punta* music (better known abroad as reggaetón).

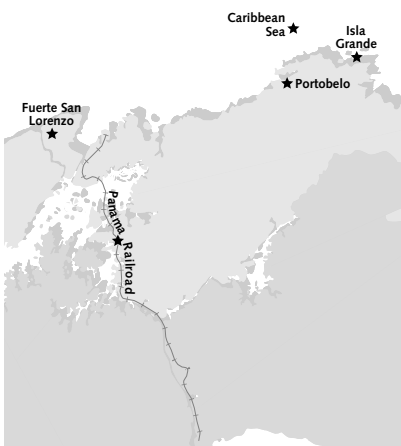
During the colonial era, the coastal cities ranked among the world's richest. Their gold and silver stores enticed pirates to scour these coasts. From English privateer Sir Francis Drake to Admiral Edward Vinton, the list of plunderers is a who's who of mid-century bad guys. Finally Spain abandoned the Panama crossing for the 'safer' prospect of sailing around Cape Horn. Today, the fallen fortresses and cannons embedded in the coral reefs stand as testaments to the faded glory of the Spanish empire.

Although the city of Colón, once again forgotten, is often dangerous, the surrounding area features everything from pristine beaches and lowland rainforests to colonial splendors and modern engineering marvels. Portobelo, with its growing music and art scene, shows the best of vibrant Congo culture. And of course, it's worth mentioning that the luxury train connecting Panama City to Colón is arguably one of the greatest rail journeys in the Americas.

COLÓN PROVINCE

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Traveling in a 1st-class luxury car from Panama City to Colón along the historical **Panama Railroad** (boxed text, p233)
- Exploring the hallowed ruins of **Portobelo** (p236), once the Caribbean's greatest port
- Living out your Pirates of the Caribbean fantasy at the historic fort of **Fuerte San Lorenzo** (p235), a historic Spanish fort that once stood guard over the Caribbean
- Soaking up the natural beauty and laid-back vibe of **Isla Grande** (p241), a picture-perfect gem of a Caribbean island
- Finding sharks, cargo ships and military planes while **scuba diving** (p238) the Caribbean sea around Portobelo



■ POPULATION: 246,991

■ AREA: 4890 SQ KM

■ ELEVATION: SEA LEVEL TO 979M

## COLÓN

pop 45,000

With its colonial grandeur crumbling and its neighborhoods marginalized, historical Colón is sadly the city that Panama forgot, in spite of vigorous renovations underway in isolated sectors to court Caribbean cruise ships. Prior to 1869 the railroad connecting Panama City and Colón was the only rapid transit across the continental western hemisphere. However, the establishment of the US transcontinental railroad put Colón out of business almost overnight. The last whiff of prosperity was seen during the construction of the Panama Canal.

In an attempt to revive the city, the Zona Libre (Free Zone) was created on the edge of Colón in 1948. Today, this sprawling 482-hectare complex is the largest free-trade zone in the Americas. Home to more than 1600 companies and several dozen banks, it links producers in North America, the Far East and Europe with the Latin American market. Unfortunately, none of the US\$10 billion in annual commercial turnover seems to get beyond the compound's walls, and the Zona Libre exists as an island of materialism floating in a sea of unemployment, poverty and crime.

The improved Ruta 3 between Panama City and Colón is now a four-lane highway, resulting in much quicker travel times.

### History

The discovery of gold in California in 1848 sparked the need for a transcontinental railroad. At the time, most Americans lived on the east coast of the US, and traveling to California via Panama was cheaper and quicker than going across the US. The isthmus route was also less dangerous than traveling through the USA's vast heartland, home to hostile indigenous groups. Gold-seekers took steamships from the eastern seaboard to the mouth of the Río Chagres, walked the historic 80km Sendero Las Cruces trade route to the Pacific coast, and then boarded ships bound for California.

In 1850 the city of Colón was established as the Caribbean terminus of the Panama Railroad. It was initially called Aspinwall in honor of William Aspinwall, one of the founders of the Panama Railroad. In 1890, however, the government of Colombia changed the name of the city to Colón and dubbed the surrounding province Cristóbal.

Following the completion of the Panama Railroad in 1855, Colón became a boomtown almost overnight. With scores of Americans passing through the city on a daily basis, Colón attracted entrepreneurs and business-people looking to cash in on the gold-rush fever. Unfortunately, the Panama Railroad became insignificant following the completion of the US transcontinental railroad in 1869 and Colón faded into obscurity less than 20 years after its founding.

At the peak of Colón's economic depression in 1881, the French arrived to start construction of an interoceanic canal, but the city was burnt to the ground four years later by a Colombian hoping to spark a revolution. In the years to follow, Colón entered a second golden age as the city was entirely rebuilt in the French colonial architectural style that was popular at the time. Rivaling Panama City in beauty and wealth, life in the Canal Zone was pleasurable and highly profitable.

The French abandoned their efforts eight years later when the monetary costs proved too great, and yellow fever and malaria had killed 22,000 workers, but the US was quick to seize the opportunity. For the next 25 years, the sleepy backwater town of Colón was transformed into a vibrant provincial capital as workers from around the world arrived by the shipload. However, immediately following the completion of the canal in 1914, the sudden lack of employment caused Colón's economy to disintegrate and the city spiraled into the depths of depravity almost overnight. Today, most of the colonial city is still intact, though the buildings are on the verge of collapse, with countless squatters living inside them.

### Orientation & Information

Colón sits on a former island that juts into the Bahía Limón (Lemon Bay). It was linked at its southernmost tip to the mainland via landfill in 1852.

The city is reached via two major roads on the southern side of town. The roads become Av Amador Guerrero and Av Bolívar at the entrance to the town and run straight up the grid-patterned city, ending near Colón's northern waterfront.

Perpendicular to these avenues are numbered streets; Calle 16 is the first of these you'll cross as you enter the town while Calle 1 is at the northern end of town. The Zona Libre occupies the southeastern corner of the city