

Darién Province



Mention that you're going to the Darién and you will no doubt be greeted with everything from fear and panic to horror and disbelief. Bad press and grave misconceptions about safety in the region give the impression that the Darién is a no-go zone of Colombian guerrillas and narco-traffickers. While the dangers of the province shouldn't be underestimated, they should at least be contextualized. There are certainly regions that shouldn't be visited. However, these isolated sectors are easily avoided by anyone with the slightest regard for personal welfare.

In a stroke of irony, the Darién has remained so pristine because of its volatile reputation. Home to a 5760-sq-km national park, in the southern Darién, the primeval meets the present with scenery that appears much as it did a million years ago. Even today, the local Emberá and Wounaan people maintain many of their traditional practices and retain generations-old knowledge of the rainforest. Parque Nacional Darién is also one of world's richest biomes and is home to the legendary bird-watching destination of Cana.

But while the southern Darién is home to Panama's most spectacular rainforests, the north is home to scenes of habitat destruction. Although most news focuses on Colombian conflict at Panama's borders, the real battle lines surround the province's rapidly disappearing forests.

The issues surrounding the Darién are complex and require careful consideration. But with the right planning, the Darién offers spectacular opportunities for intrepid travelers yearning for something truly wild.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Spotting macaws by the dozens in the historical gold-mining town of **Cana** (p272)
- Flying in on a chartered puddle jumper to **Reserva Natural Punta Patiño** (p269), a lush jungle reserve on the edge of Golfo de San Miguel
- Interacting with the Emberá in **Mogué** (p269), a traditional village by the Río Sambú
- Hiking along the spectacular jungle trails surrounding **Rancho Frio** (p272), a ranger station on the edge of the national park
- Going for a world record at the **Tropic Star Lodge** (p275), a remote fishing lodge that's the site of some of the world's largest catches



■ POPULATION: 45,680

■ AREA: 8653 SQ KM

■ ELEVATION: SEA LEVEL TO
3478M

THE EMBERÁ & WOUNAAN

History

Living within the boundaries of the Darién is the group commonly known as the Chocóes, who emigrated from the Chocó region of Colombia thousands of years ago. Anthropologists place the Chocóes in two linguistic groups – the Emberá and the Wounaan –

though with the exception of language, the groups' cultural features are virtually identical. Here their stories part, as both groups prefer to be thought of as two separate peoples.

Some historians contend that the Emberá emigrated from northern Ecuador and southern Colombia from 1830 and that the Wounaan emigrated from the Río San Juan –

