

On the Road



CAROLYN MCCARTHY *Coordinating Author*

Within minutes of my arrival to the village, an Emberá woman offered to paint me. Tagua juice is decorative, it works as bug screen and can even indicate marital status. I didn't know that it takes 24 hours to dry, smudges easily and lasts for weeks. But for a few hours, the event offered plenty of entertainment for the locals.

MY FAVORITE TRIP

Panama has incredible beaches, but for adventure the Darién is legendary. My favorite trip was cruising the Golfo de San Miguel, up twisting jungle rivers in a dugout to finally reach an isolated Emberá community. Every child in the village came out to greet us. With the exception of a telephone booth and a concrete school, the

community lives much as it always has. A family welcomed me into their thatched hut for two days and in the end I decided that some locations are best left anonymous.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author of 10 travel guides, Carolyn McCarthy has been writing about the Americas since 1998. Her work has taken her through the Amazon Basin by dugout canoe and overland to the tip of Patagonia. This edition of *Panama* is her latest guidebook and a new favorite. Carolyn's writing has also appeared in *National Geographic*, *Boston Globe*, *Lonely Planet's Best in Travel*, *The Travel Book* and other publications. For an insider view of Latin America, you can visit her blog at www.carolynswildblueyonder.blogspot.com.



Destination Panama

Think hub. The waistline of the Americas, Panama has always been a crucial connection. When this land bridge appeared three million years ago, it became a conduit for species expanding their range both north and south. They moved, adapted and flourished through this one narrow isthmus. These encounters produced an incredible biological boom. Like one great cocktail party, the event had no bedtime. Back then, it was plants, amphibians, primates, flowers and insects. Today's Panama has become a mix of peoples: among them Chinese immigrants, Latinos, North Americans and indigenous groups.

Panama has been blessed with prosperity, owed largely to the Panama Canal. Its 80km belt of locks links the Atlantic to the Pacific, and east with west. In the last century, the canal has cast the isthmus as the western hub of global commerce. Each year, more than four million containers travel it, carrying a range of goods in their hulls, from bananas and grains to oil, lumber and shiny new cars. You may have never visited Panama. But it is quite likely that both the fruit in your juice and the accessories in your pocket once did.

In 2006 voters unanimously approved a referendum to expand the canal. One of the world's largest transportation projects, the expansion is expected to triple the traffic in the canal, which already hauls in US\$2 billion yearly. Detractors fear that the project, estimated to cost US\$5 billion, will just spring the country into debt. With the supersizing of merchant ships worldwide, the gamble bodes necessary if Panama is to remain a key shipping hub. The inauguration is slated for 2014.

Although the canal has defined Panama for the last century, it's what lies just beyond this engineering marvel that could define the next 100 years. A third of the country is set aside as protected areas and national parks, and the culture and customs of Panama's indigenous populations remain largely intact. Yet visitor numbers are nowhere near those of neighboring Costa Rica. Many outsiders assume that Panama is all about its capital and commerce. But while Panama races toward rapid-fire development, the resources it has always had and oft neglected have started to attract attention.

Panama's intrigue, which dates from the voyages of Columbus and its plundering by pirates, may be its one treasure that remains intact. One of the most biodiverse places in the world, Panama is a refuge for an incredible array of species. Its first-rate nature destinations range from lush, untapped rainforests to solitary beaches and uninhabited isles. Everyone is asking: is it packaged and tourist ready? Not exactly. Yet many travelers will find that's precisely its charm.

Always a creature of potential, Panama lives with a sharp contrast between its urban and rural counterparts. Panama City is all sparkling skyscrapers, cement mixers and scaffolds, yet an hour outside of the capital, indigenous Emberá paddle dugout canoes. The modern and ancient strangely coexist, but each year there is friction at their boundaries. Many from the provinces have relocated to Panama City in search of opportunity. City dwellers blame the most recent growth spurt for increasing traffic, pollution and crime, while effective solutions have yet to take shape. Ironically, many residents welcomed the 2009 world economic crisis in relief – that mega-developments and real-estate speculation would slow down for a pace.

For Panama, it's time to get back to the essential.

FAST FACTS

Population:	3.4 million
Annual growth rate:	1.5%
Life expectancy at birth:	77.25 years
Infant mortality rate per 1000:	12.67
Adult literacy:	91.9%
GDP:	23.1 billion
Unemployment rate:	5.6%
Population below poverty line:	28.6%
Number of bird species:	950
Number of endangered species:	105

Getting Started

Traveling is all about spontaneity, and plenty of people jump on the plane to Panama without making a single plan. Although this method works fine, you'll get more out of your trip if you do a bit of planning before you go.

For starters, there are a few destinations in Panama where advance reservations are a good idea. This is especially true for the Comarca de Kuna Yala (p245), where the demand for flights far exceeds the supply. Fortunately, you can book your outbound and inbound flights in advance (see p251). Advance reservations for Isla Barro Colorado (p106), an outpost for the Smithsonian's Tropical Research Institute (STRI), are also necessary.

If you're planning a guided tour (see p296), advance reservations are usually necessary. This is especially true for destinations such as the far-flung corners of the Darién (p259) and the remote island of Coiba (p172).

Panama is a country for any budget. There is a plethora of budget accommodations around the country as well as many decent, inexpensive restaurants. At the other end of the scale, there are idyllic mountain B&Bs and five-star lodges commanding sea views. So, whether you're shoestringing or spending Benjamins like they're going out of style, the only thing limiting your trip to Panama is your imagination.

WHEN TO GO

Panama's high tourist season corresponds with its Pacific-side dry season, from mid-December to mid-April. During these months, there is relatively little rain in Panama City and elsewhere south of the Continental Divide. North of the mountains, on the Caribbean side of Panama, it rains all year round. However, it tends to rain less in February, March, September and October than it does the rest of the year.

The best time to visit Panama really depends on what you plan to do. If you intend to spend most of your time on the Pacific side, you might want to visit in December or January, when there's generally little rain and the weather is pleasant. Bear in mind, however, that hotel prices and airfares are generally higher from mid-December to mid-April.

If you'll be doing any serious hiking, the dry season is the most comfortable time to do it. For planning purposes, be aware that Panama's mountains can get very cold at night; if you're considering camping at altitude (in Boquete, El Valle or Cerro Punta, for example), be sure to bring warm clothing.

See Climate Charts (p278)
for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Some basic phrases in Spanish (see Language, p304)
- A poncho for rainy days and wet boat trips
- A mosquito net for jungle trips
- Strong insect repellent (30% to 50% DEET)
- A flashlight (torch)
- Binoculars for bird-watching
- Sun protection – sunscreen, sunglasses, a hat
- A fleece for chilly nights in the mountains
- An alarm clock

If you'll be spending most of your holiday surfing, bear in mind that swells are fairly constant in the Pacific year-round, though offshore winds from December to mid-April can add a few meters to curl. However, Caribbean swells are a bit more fickle, and are usually dependent on weather patterns in the region.

Other outdoor pursuits are also weather dependent. Rafting is at its best in Chiriqui Province from May to December when the rivers are running high, while diving is best from December to mid-April when the dry season lends better visibility.

Panama's colorful festivals draw enormous crowds, and are well worth attending if you're in the area. The *Península de Azuero* is the epicenter of traditional festivals. Its most popular is Carnaval (Mardi Gras; p152) celebrated over the four days leading up to Ash Wednesday. Panama City's Carnaval is also popular (and one of the world's largest; p84). Hotel reservations during Carnaval are a must and should be made well in advance.

COSTS & MONEY

Prices in Panama tend to be slightly higher than in other parts of Central America, such as Guatemala and Nicaragua, though they are about on par with Costa Rica.

Throughout the country, you can get a budget hotel room for about US\$22 to US\$35 a night, while die-hard shoestring travelers can probably find some questionable digs for about US\$10. In recent years a number of backpacker-friendly hostels have popped up around the country, particularly in Panama City, Bocas del Toro and Boquete – a dorm bed at any of these places will set you back less than US\$10 a night.

Good, inexpensive food isn't hard to come by. You can eat *comida corriente* (set meals) at Panamanian restaurants for about US\$2 to US\$4 no matter where you are in the country. Buses and taxis are also reasonable – a two-hour bus ride costs a few dollars, while a cab ride in the capital costs slightly more. All in all, if you're traveling frugally, it's possible to get by on US\$30 a day in Panama.

Midrange accommodations are reasonably priced in Panama, and compared to other parts of Latin America, you tend to get a lot more for your money. You can eat at better restaurants for US\$8 to US\$15 per person and stay in decent quarters for US\$36 to US\$75 a night. Add in a flight or two (Kuna Yala, Bocas), a few activities (national-park fees, snorkeling and/or boat trips), a nightly cocktail or two and you can easily get by on US\$65 to US\$120 per day.

With that said, you'll get more value for your money if you can split the costs with someone. At midrange hotels, single rooms aren't much cheaper than doubles, and you'll save money on excursions if there are more of you to share the cost.

If you're looking to have a blowout vacation, there are numerous ways to experience Panama's natural and cultural riches at the top end. Some excellent all-inclusive lodges throughout the country are designed for everything from wildlife-watching to sportfishing. Travelers looking to part with a little cash can also take advantage of the decadent restaurants in Panama City, secluded B&Bs in the highlands and luxury oceanside resorts along the coasts.

TRAVELING RESPONSIBLY

At its best, travel is a form of altruism. Each decision we make on the road can have positive and negative impacts on the place we are visiting. Choosing more sustainable forms of travel, using resources wisely and becoming informed about the options is important.

Panama's indigenous cultures provide a fascinating window to another world, but mass tourism has had negative impacts on these fragile communities. Recent

HOW MUCH?

Dorm bed in Bocas del Toro US\$7

Surfboard rental in Santa Catalina per day US\$15

Cozy mountain cabin for two in Boquete US\$88

Flight from Panama City to San Blas US\$46

Discovery dive off the coast of Portobelo US\$110

If you're ready to hit the surf, see the Panama Surfer's Map on p64.

initiatives to develop small-scale tourism in indigenous communities include homestays, farm visits and cultural tours. These encounters can provide excellent off-the-beaten-path experiences. In the Comarca de Kuna Yala, lodgings are exclusively owned and operated by Kunas. The Bocas Sustainable Tourism Alliance in Bocas del Toro offers good information for the area, for more, check out our GreenDex (p327).

TOP 10

Costa Rica

PANAMA

Colombia

BEST FESTIVALS

For the true essence of Panama, follow the crowds and take to the streets.

- 1 Festival de Diablos y Congos, every other year post-Carnaval, Portobelo (p239)
- 2 Carnaval, four days prior to Ash Wednesday (February or March), Las Tablas (p154) and Panama City (p84)
- 3 Feria de Azuero, late April or early May, Villa de Los Santos (p149)
- 4 Corpus Christi, 40 days after Easter (May or June), Villa de Los Santos (p149)
- 5 Nuestra Señora del Carmen, July 16, Isla Taboga (p108)
- 6 Fiesta de Santa Librada and Festival de La Pollera, July 21, Las Tablas (p154)
- 7 Festival del Manito Ocueño, third week of August, Ocú (p147)
- 8 Feria de la Mejorana, September 23 to 27, Guararé (p151)
- 9 Festival of Nogagope, October 10 to 12, followed by the Kuna Feria, October 13 to 16, Isla Tigre (p250)
- 10 Festival de Cristo Negro, October 21, Portobelo (p240)

INCREDIBLE CREATURES

In the lush landscapes of Panama, big wildlife encounters await.

- 1 Resplendent quetzals near Volcán Baru
- 2 An elusive whale shark off the Veraguas coast
- 3 The golden frog in Valle Anton
- 4 Scarlet macaws in Parque Nacional Coiba
- 5 Howler monkeys in Lago Gatún
- 6 The poisonous fer-de-lance in Parque Nacional Darién
- 7 Titi monkeys in Parque Nacional Darién
- 8 Sloths in the old Canal Zone near Panama City
- 9 Thousands of olive ridley sea turtles in Isla de Cañas
- 10 Manatees in Humedal de San-San Pond Sak

LEGENDARY SURF

Think you've got what it takes to paddle into Panama's sickest waves?

- 1 Punta Teta (Panamá Province)
- 2 Playa Venao (South Venado, Los Santos Province)
- 3 Playa Santa Catalina (Veraguas Province)
- 4 Punta Brava (Veraguas Province)
- 5 Morro Negro (Chiriquí Province)
- 6 Dumpers (Isla Colón, Bocas del Toro Province)
- 7 Playa Bluff (Isla Colón, Bocas del Toro Province)
- 8 Carenero (Isla Carenero, Bocas del Toro Province)
- 9 Silverbacks (Isla Bastimentos, Bocas del Toro Province)
- 10 Playa Grande (Mainland, east of Isla Grande, Colón Province)

In extremely popular destinations, such as Bocas del Toro and Boquete, keep in mind that attitudes make an impact too. Using Spanish and adjusting to local customs goes a long way toward maintaining paradise.

While visiting, try to keep your energy use to a minimum. At present, recycling is still in early stages in Panama, but it does help to travel with a water bottle that you can refill instead of purchasing bottled drinks.

Lastly, when purchasing souvenirs, choose locally made sustainable goods over valuable hardwoods or mass-made products. Panama City has a good selection of crafts (p95), but if you travel through indigenous communities you can buy goods directly from artisans and skip the middle man.

For a list of sustainable businesses in Panama that we have checked out, consult the GreenDex, p327.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Anyone who doubts that Panama is still an overlooked country has only to take a look at its selection of travel literature. Unlike Guatemala, Peru or even Nicaragua, there are very few accounts of travel within the country. This is good news for would-be travel writers but bad news for anyone wanting to get something other than a historical look at the country. *Travelers' Tales Central America*, published in 2002, has three stories about Panama, but they are interesting tales (one touches on life in Isla de Coiba's penal colony, while another provides an interesting account of shamanism and the Kuna). It's a decent book for those interested in learning about other Central American countries.

For a fictional look at one of Panama's spiciest cultures, read the work of short-story writer José María Sánchez. His work was first published in the 1940s but was rereleased in an anthology titled *Cuentos de Bocas del Toro* (Tales of Bocas del Toro). Set in that beautiful province, where the author was born and raised, these fun stories – whose protagonists are driven by the sensuous, baroque excesses of the tropical jungle and sea – possess a language charged with powerful imagery.

Although *Panama*, by Carlos Ledson Miller, is a work of fiction, the story takes readers on a journey through the political turmoil of the country during the Noriega years. The author, who lived in Panama as a boy, also takes readers further back in history, giving snapshots of Balboa's arrival in 1514, Sir Henry Morgan's sacking of Panama City in the 17th century and more recently the 1964 student riots that later led to the Torrijos-Carter treaty that returned the canal to Panamanian hands.

Getting to Know the General, by Graham Greene, is a fascinating portrait drawn from Greene's longtime friendship with General Omar Torrijos. It examines the Panamanian political climate of the 1960s and '70s.

INTERNET RESOURCES

ATP (www.atp.gob.pa, in Spanish) The official website of Panama's national tourism department.

Lanic (<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/panama>) Outstanding collection of links from the University of Texas Latin American Information Center.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) The popular Thorn Tree forum, travel news and links to other useful sites.

Panama Info (www.panamainfo.com) Panama's best web-based travel resource, with lots of practical information as well as info on provinces and historical background.

Visit Panama (www.visitpanama.com) ATP's English version of its website, with a small selection of practical and historical info, a few articles and links to other sites.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

THE BEST OF PANAMA

Two Weeks / Panama City to **Comarca de Kuna Yala**

In **Panama City** (p68), the country's vibrant capital, start your journey at **Panamá Viejo** (p77), the ruins of Spain's first Pacific settlement. After its sacking by pirates, the settlement was moved to present-day **Casco Viejo** (p72), where you'll find colonial buildings, 18th-century churches and scenic plazas amid the old quarters. And of course, you shouldn't leave the capital without a day trip to the nearby **Miraflores Locks** (p100) of the Panama Canal.

From Panama City, take a quick flight to **Bocas del Toro** (p204), where you can snorkel coral reefs, surf great breaks and soak up the Caribbean vibes. Fly back to the capital and then grab another quick flight to the **Comarca de Kuna Yala** (p245), a string of hundreds of pristine islands that are lorded over by the Kuna. At the end of your trip, return to Panama City for a bit of urban decadence in open-air **restaurants** (p88) and salsa-infused **nightclubs** (p93).

For a taste of all that Panama has to offer, this classic travelers' route will take you to colonial cities, the locks of the canal and two far-flung Caribbean getaways.



DRIVING THE INTERAMERICANA Two Weeks / Panama City to Boquete

From Panama City, head west along the Interamericana to the string of **beaches** (p116) along the Pacific coast. Whether you settle on a quiet strip of sand or live it up in the lap of luxury, chances are you'll find what you're looking for. When you're ready for a detour, take the turnoff for **El Valle** (p121), a mountain retreat surrounded by lush cloud forests and green peaks. Head back to and continue along the Interamericana, taking a quick stop to shop for some Panama hats at **Penonomé** (p130), then take the turnoff for **Santa Fé** (p165), a tiny highland town amid sparkling rivers and gorgeous waterfalls.

If you're starting to miss the beach, backtrack to the Interamericana and take a detour to **Santa Catalina** (p168), a serious surfing destination worthy of taking your board down from the roof rack. Get your fill of sun here before heading via **David** (p180) to the popular town of **Boquete** (p188) in Chiriquí. Once in Boquete, you can hike into nearby forests, lounge in hot springs, take a canopy tour and fill up on mountain-grown coffee.



If you've got your own wheels, hit the Interamericana for a route that passes through the interior and alternates between scenic beaches and highland cloud forests.

ROADS LESS TRAVELED

CARIBBEAN COASTAL EXPLORER

Three Weeks / Panama City to
El Porvenir

Starting in Panama City, take a ride in the luxury train along the historical **Panama Railroad** (p233) through the Canal Zone to **Colón**. Although there's little reason to linger in Colón, divers will want to explore the nearby underwater world along this stretch of coast while history buffs should head to the Unesco World Heritage Site of **Fuerte San Lorenzo** (p235). You also shouldn't miss the historical Spanish forts that guard the bay in **Portobelo** (p236).

Anyone looking to slow things down for a bit should check out the wind-swept beaches of **Isla Grande** (p241), which are perfect for surfing, sunning or simply lazing about. When you're ready, head back to the capital and then grab a quick flight to **El Porvenir** (p252) in Kuna Yala. From here, you can head as far south along the archipelago as your time and money will carry you. Of course, serious adventurers should consider taking a sailboat to Colombia – see p250 for details.

If you're looking to get off the beaten path, this seafarer route will bring you from the well-trodden Canal Zone to the furthest reaches of Kuna Yala (and possibly even Colombia).



ADVENTURES ACROSS THE ISTHMUS Three Weeks / Boquete to Parque Nacional Darién

From Panama City, travel by bus to the tourist town of **Boquete** (p188) in the Chiriquí highlands. From here, your first destination should be an ascent up **Volcán Barú** (p197), an extinct volcano that is also Panama's tallest point. After checking out the panoramic views of both the Pacific and the Caribbean, head back to Boquete and grab a bus via **David** (p180) to **Cerro Punta** (p201). From here, you can hike the **Sendero Los Quetzales** (p197), a stunning mountain pass that winds through wildlife-rich cloud forest. Now that you've acclimatized yourself to Panama's outdoors, your next stop should be the **Parque Internacional La Amistad** (p201). The Panamanian side of this binational park is virtually undeveloped and largely unexplored. Your final stop will require the services of a good guide or tour operator (p263), but no self-respecting adventurer can leave Panama without trekking through the jungles of the **Parque Nacional Darién** (p271).



If you're the kind of traveler who gets their kicks hiking through dense jungles and scaling towering peaks, then check out this seriously rugged route through Panama's stunning wilderness.

TAILORED TRIPS

WORLD HERITAGE SITES

Panama's five Unesco World Heritage Sites provide visitors with a chance to discover the remainders of its storied past, a plethora of neotropical wildlife and the indigenous cultures that lie inside its borders.

The 576,000-hectare **Parque Nacional Darién** (p271) is Panama's crown jewel, with lush primary rainforest, an astounding range of animal life and Emberá and Wounaan villages scattered through remote jungle. Inside the park, **Cana** (p272), with its hundreds of tropical avian species, is regarded as one of the top bird-watching destinations in the world.

Panama City is home to the ruins of **Panamá Viejo** (p77), the first European settlement on the Pacific coast of the Americas. On the other side of town lies the colonial district of **Casco Viejo** (p72).

Travel north of Panama City to reach several Spanish forts along the Caribbean coast. The well-preserved ruins of **Fuerte San Lorenzo** (p235) stand guard over the mouth of the Río Chagres. Further east near the historic town of Portobelo stands the impressive **Fuerte San Jerónimo** (p238).

In the western part of the country, it's back into the rainforest at **Parque Internacional La Amistad** (p201), a binational park shared with Costa Rica.

Panama's newest Unesco World Heritage Site is **Parque Nacional Coiba** (p172), a far-flung yet pristine island that is the center of a vast marine park.



WILDLIFE-WATCHING

Close to Panama City, the **Parque Natural Metropolitano** (p77) is an excellent (and convenient) place to get a taste of the country's wildlife. Of course, serious bird-watchers should head to the **Parque Nacional Soberanía** (p103) in the Canal Zone, which is home to the famous Pipeline Rd. Nearby is the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute on the island of **Monumento Natural Isla Barro Colorado** (p106), and you can spot lounging crocodiles on the banks of the canal during the jungle cruise out there. Little-visited **Parque Nacional Omar Torrijos** (p133) also boasts rich wildlife, well-maintained hiking trails and few tourists.

Turtle lovers shouldn't miss nesting season on **Isla de Cañas** (p159), **Isla Iguana** (p157) or in the marine park near **Isla Bastimentos** (p217).

On the Caribbean coast, four species of turtle come to the **Humedal de San-San Pond Sak** (p223). If you're looking for marine life such as whales and dolphins, the best spots are **Parque Nacional Coiba** (p172) and the reefs and islands in the **Golfo de Chiriquí** (p185).

In the mountains and highland cloud forests, **Parque Internacional La Amistad** (p201) and **Parque Nacional Volcán Barú** (p196) have trails for seeking rare birds, such as the resplendent quetzals, and several species of primate. For unparalleled wildlife viewing, there's no better place than **Parque Nacional Darién** (p271).



ISLAND & BEACH HOPPING

A short flight from Panama City, **Isla Contadora** (p112) has a dozen fine beaches – and the country's only nude one. The charming island of **Isla Taboga** (p107) is closer in, with beaches, hiking trails and fine views. The windswept **Isla Grande** (p241) is a favorite of weekend urbanites, while the hundreds of islands of the **Comarca de Kuna Yala** (p245), with their white sands, coconut palms and countless coral reefs, are among Panama's loveliest. Just west of the capital along the Interamericana lie a string of **beaches** (p116), which range from low-key fishing settlements to resort getaways.

Head to the **Península de Azuero** for fine, untouched beaches on **Isla Iguana** (p157) and serious surf on **Playa Venao** (p158). Even better surf – and fantastic diving – is found at **Playa Santa Catalina** (p168). For a pure island getaway, head to Boca Brava in **Golfo de Chiriquí** (p185) where local fishers can show you all the secret snorkeling spots, or join an expedition out to **Isla de Coiba** (p176). And of course, don't miss out the islands and beaches of Panama's ultimate destination, the **Archipiélago de Bocas del Toro** (p206).



FLOATING ON A CLOUD

Panama's highlands are teeming with wildlife-rich cloud forests. The quickest escape from the hustle and bustle of the capital is **El Valle** (p121), a tiny town in the crater of an extinct volcano that is surrounded by forest-covered mountains. Further west in Veraguas Province is the town of **Santa Fé** (p165), which abounds with towering waterfalls and hiking trails. Panama's highland tourist capital is **Boquete** (p188), which provides access to the Chiriquí highlands and is the traditional starting point for hikes up **Volcán Barú** (p197). Nearby, the mountain town of **Cerro Punta** (p201) is the traditional starting point for the **Sendero Los Quetzales** (p197), the country's finest cloud-forest trail. For a taste of the cloud forest without all the tourist crowds, there's no better place than **Parque Internacional La Amistad** (p201).

