

# History

## LOST PANAMA

The coastlines and rainforests of Panama have been inhabited by humans for at least 10,000 years, and it's estimated that several dozen indigenous groups including the Kuna, the Ngöbe-Buglé, the Emberá, the Wounaan and the Naso were living on the isthmus prior to the Spanish arrival. However, the historical tragedy of Panama is that despite its rich cultural history, there are virtually no physical remains of these great living civilizations.

Unlike the massive pyramid complexes found throughout Latin America, the ancient towns and cities of Panama vanished in the jungles, never to be seen by the eyes of the modern world. However, tales of lost cities still survive in the oral histories of Panama's indigenous communities, and there is hope amongst Panamanian archaeologists that a great discovery lies in waiting. Considering that much of Panama consists of inaccessible mountains and rainforests, perhaps these dreams aren't so fanciful.

What is known about pre-Columbian Panama is that early inhabitants were part of an extensive trading zone that extended as far south as Peru and as far north as Mexico. Archaeologists have uncovered exquisite gold ornaments and unusual life-size stone statues of human figures as well as distinctive types of pottery and *metates* (stone platforms that were used for grinding corn).

Panama's first peoples also lived beside both oceans, and fished in mangrove swamps, estuaries and coral reefs. Given the tremendous impact that fishing has had on the lives of Isthmians, it seems only fitting that the country's name is derived from an indigenous word meaning 'abundance of fish.'

## NEW WORLD ORDER

In 1501 the discovery of Panama by Spanish explorer Rodrigo de Bastidas marked the beginning of the age of conquest and colonization in the isthmus. However, it was his first mate, Vasco Núñez de Balboa, who was to be immortalized in the history books, following his discovery of the Pacific Ocean 12 years later.

On his fourth and final voyage to the New World in 1502, Christopher Columbus went ashore in present-day Costa Rica and returned from the encounter claiming to have seen 'more gold in two days than in four years in Spain.' Although his attempts to establish a colony at the mouth of the Río Belén failed due to fierce local resistance, Columbus petitioned the Spanish Crown to have himself appointed as governor of Veraguas, the stretch of shoreline from Honduras to Panama.

The famous crossing of the isthmus included 1000 indigenous slaves and 190 Spaniards, including Francisco Pizarro, who would later conquer Peru.

## TIMELINE

11,000 BC

The first humans occupy Panama, and populations quickly flourish due to the rich resources found along both coastlines.

2500 BC

Panama is home to some of the first pottery-making villages in the Americas, such as the Monagrillo culture dating from 2500 to 1700 BC.

100 BC

Panama becomes part of an extensive trade network of gold and other goods that extends from Mesoamerica to the Andes.

### SALVAGING SUNKEN GALLEONS

During the period of colonization between the 16th and 18th centuries, Spanish galleons left home carrying goods to the colonies and returned loaded with gold and silver mined in Colombia, Peru and Mexico. Many of these ships sank in the Caribbean Sea, overcome by pirates or hurricanes. During these years, literally thousands of ships – not only Spanish but also English, French, Dutch, pirate and African slave ships – foundered in the green-blue waters of the Caribbean.

The frequency of shipwrecks spurred the Spaniards to organize operations to recover sunken cargo. By the 17th century, Spain maintained salvage flotillas in the ports of Portobelo, Havana and Veracruz. These fleets awaited news of shipwrecks and then proceeded immediately to the wreck sites, where the Spaniards used Caribbean and Bahamian divers, and later African slaves, to scour sunken vessels and the seafloor around them. On many occasions great storms wiped out entire fleets, resulting in a tremendous loss of lives and cargo.

Following Columbus' death in 1506, King Ferdinand appointed Diego de Nicuesa to settle the newly claimed land. In 1510 Nicuesa followed Columbus's lead, and once again tried to establish a Spanish colony at Río Belén. However, local resistance was once again enough to beat back Spanish occupation, and Nicuesa was forced to flee the area. Leading a small fleet with 280 starving men aboard, the weary explorer looked upon a protected bay 23km east of present-day Portobelo and exclaimed: '*¡Paremos aquí, en nombre de Dios!*' ('Let us stop here, in the name of God!'). Thus was named the town of Nombre de Dios, one of the first Spanish settlements in the continental New World.

Much to the disappointment of Columbus' conquistador heirs, Panama was not abundant with gold. Add tropical diseases, inhospitable terrain and less than welcoming natives to the mix, and it's easy to see why Nombre de Dios failed several times during its early years as a Spanish colony. However, a bright moment in Spanish exploration came in 1513 when Balboa heard rumors about a large sea and a wealthy, gold-producing civilization across the mountains of the isthmus – almost certainly referring to the Inca empire of Peru. Driven by equal parts ambition and greed, Balboa scaled the Continental Divide, and on September 26, 1513, he became the first European to set eyes upon the Pacific Ocean. Keeping up with the European fashion of the day, Balboa immediately proceeded to claim the ocean and all the lands it touched for the king of Spain.

### THE EMPIRE EXPANDS

In 1519 a cruel and vindictive Spaniard named Pedro Arias de Ávila (or Pedrarias, as many of his contemporaries called him) founded the city of Panamá on the Pacific side, near where Panama City stands today. The governor is best remembered for such benevolent acts as ordering the beheading of Balboa in 1517 on a trumped-up charge of treason as well as ordering

*The Sack of Panamá: Sir Henry Morgan's Adventures on the Spanish Main*, by Peter Earle, details the Welsh pirate's looting of Panamá in 1671.

*Panama: Four Hundred Years of Dreams and Cruelty*, by David A Howarth, chronicles the history of the isthmus from Balboa's 1513 exploration through 1964, with scintillating tales of conquistadors and buccaneers.

#### AD 1513

Balboa endures a tortuous trek from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and becomes the first European to lay eyes on what he dubbed the 'South Sea.'

#### 1519

Pedrarias founds the city of Panamá, which becomes a major transit point for gold plundered from Peru and brought by galleon to Spain.

#### 1671

Henry Morgan overpowers Fuerte San Lorenzo, and then sails up the Río Chagres to sack the city of Panamá. After suffering a crushing defeat, a new walled city is built a few kilometers away in present-day Casco Viejo.