

Panamá Province



Panamá Province has a rich history of pirates, plunder and pearls. Even before Henry Morgan's raid of Panamá, buccaneers such as Sir Francis Drake used Isla Taboga as a hideout and spring-board for attacks. Further off coast, an even better hideout was the remote Archipiélago de Las Perlas (Pearl Islands), named by Vasco Núñez de Balboa for its stunning abundance of pearls.

Today Panamá Province is known principally for the world's most daring engineering marvel. Cutting through the province, the Panama Canal can be explored by visiting its locks, riding a boat through its watery recesses or hiking along its jungle-clad shore. The entirety of the Panama Canal watershed is federally protected land, which makes the area one of the most accessible and best-studied tropical rainforests on the planet.

The province's attractions serve as popular day trips or minibreaks for Panama City's weekend warriors. The charming island village of Taboga is undergoing something of a revival, but its unhurried pace hasn't changed much since the days when visitors such as Paul Gauguin sojourned here. Along the coastline, a string of beaches attracts everyone from sun-worshippers to wave-seeking surf junkies. Further flung are the Archipiélago de Las Perlas, which draw everyone from the moneyed elite to the occasional *Survivor* TV series.

Although it's the most populated province in the country, Panamá can be as big or as small as you want it to be. Tranquil rainforests and sizzling beach scenes are yours to explore and the comforts of the capital are never more than an hour away.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Laying eyes on the awe-inspiring **Panama Canal** (p100), an engineering marvel in the midst of an expansion
- Spotting feathered friends along Pipeline Rd in **Parque Nacional Soberanía** (p103), one of the world's premier bird-watching sites
- Visiting the world-famous tropical biology center on **Monumento Natural Isla Barro Colorado** (p106), the most studied patch of rainforest in the world
- Escaping the urban grind of the capital on a day trip to the flower-dotted island of **Isla Taboga** (p107)
- Soaking up the sun, surfing gnarly breaks and making the most of romantic hideaways along the Pacific coast **beaches** (p115)



■ POPULATION: 1,761,112

■ AREA: 11,887 SQ KM

■ ELEVATION: SEA LEVEL TO 100M

History

Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, the Spanish used the isthmus as a transit point for shipping plundered gold between Peru and Spain. The main route was the famous cobblestoned Camino Real (King's Hwy), which linked Panamá to Portobelo, and served as the only road across the isthmus for hundreds of years. In the 1700s, however, the route was abandoned in favor of shipping gold around Cape Horn owing to repeated pirate attacks, the most famous of which was Sir Henry Morgan's sacking of Panamá Viejo in 1671.

As early as 1524, King Charles V of Spain had ordered a survey to be undertaken to determine the feasibility of constructing a transisthmian water route. But it wasn't until the 1880s that any country dared to undertake the momentous project of carving a trench through these dense jungles and mountains. The first canal attempt came from a French team led by Ferdinand-Marie de Lesseps, who was riding high on his prior success building the Suez Canal.

Sadly, he and his colleagues grossly underestimated the difficulties and some 22,000 workers died during the construction attempt. The majority of deaths were due to yellow fever and malaria, which led to the establishment of an enormous quarantine on Isla Taboga – at the time, it was not yet known that mosquitoes were the disease vector.

Several decades later, the Americans learned from the mistakes of the French and succeeded in completing the canal in 1914. Today the waterway rests firmly in the hands of the Panamanian government, and the face of the canal is rapidly changing as ambitious expansion plans slowly unfold.

AROUND PANAMA CITY

No visit to Panama City would be complete without taking a day trip to its famous waterway – though just remember that the Canal Zone is much, much more than just the canal. The rainforest surrounding the canal is easily accessed and one of the best places to view a variety of Central American wildlife.

PANAMA CANAL

The canal is truly one of the world's greatest manmade marvels. Stretching for 80km from Panama City on the Pacific side to Colón on the Atlantic side, the canal cuts right through

the Continental Divide. Nearly 15,000 vessels pass through the canal each year and ships worldwide are built with the dimensions of the Panama Canal's locks (305m long and 33.5m wide) in mind.

Ships pay according to their weight, with the average fee around US\$30,000. The highest amount paid was around US\$200,000, paid in 2001 by the 90,000-ton French cruise ship *Infinity*; the lowest amount was US\$0.36, paid in 1928 by Richard Halliburton, who swam through.

The canal has three sets of double locks: Miraflores and Pedro Miguel Locks on the Pacific side and Gatún Locks on the Atlantic side. Between the locks, ships pass through a huge artificial lake, Lago Gatún, created by the Gatún Dam across the Río Chagres, and the Gaillard Cut, a 14km cut through the rock and shale of the isthmian mountains. With the passage of each ship, a staggering 52 million gallons of fresh water is released into the ocean.

In a 2006 referendum, Panamanian voters overwhelmingly endorsed an ambitious project to expand the Panama Canal. The US\$5.25 billion plan, which calls for the largest expansion of the canal since it opened in 1914, will widen and deepen existing navigation channels as well as enable the construction of two new locks. The new locks are estimated to start operation on August 15, 2014, just in time for the canal's 100-year anniversary.

At present, the canal can only handle ships carrying up to 4000 containers, though the new locks and larger channels will allow the passage of ships carrying up to 10,000 containers. Although supporters say that the cost of the upgrades will be met from increased tolls (supplemented by a US\$2.3 billion loan), detractors claim that when the work is finished in 2014, the canal will still be unable to meet world shipping needs.

For more information on the expansion, see boxed text, p102. For more information on the history of the canal, see p25.

Sights

MIRAFLORES LOCKS

The easiest and best way to visit the canal is to go to the **Miraflores Visitors Center** (☎ 276-8325; www.panacanal.com; viewing deck/full-access US\$5/8; 🕒 9am-5pm), located just outside Panama City. The recently inaugurated visitors center features a large, four-floor museum, several viewing platforms and an excellent restaurant