

Veraguas Province



Nearly 500 years ago, the Spanish made their first attempt at a footing in the Americas in modern-day Veraguas Province. Lured by the region's natural beauty, its robust rivers, stunning peaks and the promises of vast gold reserves, Christopher Columbus failed to establish a Spanish colony here. Although the Spanish were successful in founding the town of Concepción, the gold was not to last. Today, the Mosquito Coast of Veraguas remains one of the most isolated and undeveloped regions in Panama.

These days, much of Veraguas is anything but a pristine wilderness. From a height, the Caribbean and Pacific slopes of Veraguas look as different from each other as Canada's Rocky Mountains do from Australia's Great Sandy Desert. While the Caribbean slopes are home to lush virgin forests, the Pacific slope of Veraguas is an environmentalist's nightmare. An estimated 5% of the province's original dry tropical forest remains. Most inhabitants make their living by subsistence farming or ranching.

Yet, in spite of its history of colonization and environmental devastation, Veraguas Province is attracting foreign investment and development. Interest is focused on the region's all-star highlights, Isla de Coiba and Santa Catalina. Known as the Galápagos of Central America, the Unesco World Heritage Site of Isla Coiba is home to an amazing array of wildlife. Santa Catalina is surf-central for any boarder worth his or her salt. Both are in the midst of redefining themselves; their future will also recast the fragile fortunes of Veraguas.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Exploring the astounding natural beauty of **Parque Nacional Coiba** (p172), above or below the water line
- Surfing some seriously sick waves at **Playa Santa Catalina** (p168), Panama's legendary surf spot
- Escaping to the highland retreat of **Santa Fé** (p165), famous for its waterfalls and lush forests
- Visiting the **Iglesia San Francisco de Veraguas** (p164), one of the Americas' best examples of baroque religious art and architecture
- Getting inspired off the beaten path with a retreat to **Isla Gobernadora** (boxed text, p169)



■ POPULATION: 226,248

■ AREA: 10,050 SQ KM

■ ELEVATION: SEA LEVEL TO 3478M

