



Chiriquí Province

POP 416,900 / ELEV SEA LEVEL TO 3478M / AREA 8653 SQ KM

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Why Go?

Chiriquí claims to have it all: Panama's tallest mountains, longest rivers and most fertile valleys are here. The province is also home to spectacular highland rainforests and the country's most productive agricultural and cattle-ranching regions.

Bordering Costa Rica to the west, Chiriquí is often the first province in Panama encountered by overland travelers and serves as a subtle introduction to Panama's immense beauty.

On the coast, the pristine Golfo de Chiriquí boasts powdery white-sand beaches and a rich diversity of marine life. Although the mist-covered mountains near Boquete have been colonized by waves of North American and European retirees, the town is a good base for adventures such as white-water rafting and hiking the flanks of Panama's highest point, Volcán Barú (3478m). Boquete is also the center of Panama's coffee industry, which means that a potent cup of shade-grown arabica is never more than a cafe away.

When to Go

→ **Apr–May** The best time to spot the resplendent quetzal nesting in highland destinations such as Parque Nacional Volcán Barú and Parque Internacional La Amistad. Boquete's Orchid Fair lights up April.

→ **Dec–Apr** High season on the Pacific coast has little precipitation, making it the best time to hit highland trails that get muddy and damaged during the rainy season.

→ **Jan–Mar** Boquete's Feria de las Flores y del Café draws crowds to the fairgrounds in January. Early February brings Fiesta de Concepción, and David's huge Feria de San José takes place over 10 days in early March.

History

When the Spaniards first visited Chiriquí in the early 15th century, they were astonished by what they found. Instead of discovering one or two main population groups, they encountered a large number of tribes living in relative isolation. Often separated by only a few kilometers, each group maintained a distinct language, culture and religion.

Spanish missionaries arrived and began their conversions. In the early 17th century a group led by Padre Cristóbal Cacho Santillana rounded up 626 indigenous people from across the region. Hoping that his work would be easier if he could identify similarities in the languages, Santillana started to record a vocabulary of the most common words, and he was successful in identifying six distinct languages.

Sadly, measles brought by the colonists swept through the towns and killed half of the study population. The survivors, having had enough of the Spaniards, their linguistic studies and their religion, took to the hills. Unfortunately, their fate was already sealed – of the Cotho, Borisque, Dorasque, Utelae, Bugabae, Zune, Dolega, Zariba, Dure and others, only the Ngöbe-Buglé survived. Today, the Ngöbe-Buglé are the most populous of Panama's seven indigenous groups, though their numbers are but a fraction of what they once were.

During the 17th century and into the 18th century Chiriquí Province was the subject of pirate attacks, much like the rest of Panama. It was just outside Remedios in 1680 that English buccaneer Richard Sawkins, attempting to lead an assault against the well-defended city, was fatally wounded. Six years later, English privateers from Honduras sacked the towns of Alanje and San Lorenzo. Even the Miskito tribes from up north behaved like pirates after invading the region in 1732, and plundering and burning the city of David.

In the 19th century, farmers from North America and Europe viewed the climate and slopes of the Chiriquí highlands as prime for coffee, timber and other crops. Their descendants still work the fields today. Though the wave of immigration hasn't subsided, recent arrivals are mainly foreign retirees and real-estate speculators, which has led many *chiricanos* to question who it is that actually owns the land they love so much.

LOWLANDS

Chiriquí has much more to offer than its famous highland rainforests – the lowlands are home to Panama's second-largest city, David, as well as large stretches of striking Pacific coastline.

David

POP 104,500

Although it feels more like a country town, David is Panama's second-largest city and the capital of Chiriquí Province. Think more major agro industry than cultural hub; you will be disappointed if you have museums, clubs and fine dining on your mind. Yet, with a powerful wave of foreign capital flowing into Chiriquí, David is rapidly gaining wealth and importance. With tens of thousands of North American and European retirees expected to settle in the region in the years to come, it's poised to boom.

For travelers, David is a pit stop on the way to surrounding destinations. Half way between San José, Costa Rica and Panama City, the city is an important transportation hub. If the road has you weary, slip into the slow pace, grab a *jugo de caña* (sugarcane juice) in downtown's Parque de Cervantes, the heart of the city, or day trip to the beach or highlands.

Festivals & Events

Feria de San José de David

FAIR

This big international fair is held for 10 days each March; contact the ATP tourist office for exact dates, as they vary from year to year.

Fiesta de Concepción

RELIGIOUS

A half-hour drive west of David, Concepción celebrates its patron saint's day on February 2, or the following Saturday if it lands on a weekday.

Sleeping

Bambú

HOSTEL \$

(☎730-2961; www.bambuhotel.com; Calle de la Virgencita, San Mateo Abajo; dm US\$10-12, d with/without bathroom US\$30/25;                  