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OUR STORY
A beat-up old car, a few dollars in the pocket and a sense of adventure. In 1972 that’s all Tony and Maureen Wheeler needed for the trip of a lifetime – across Europe and Asia overland to Australia. It took several months, and at the end – broke but inspired – they sat at their kitchen table writing and stapling together their first travel guide, *Across Asia on the Cheap*. Within a week they’d sold 1500 copies. Lonely Planet was born. Today, Lonely Planet has offices in Melbourne, London and Oakland, with more than 600 staff and writers. We share Tony’s belief that ‘a great guidebook should do three things: inform, educate and amuse’.

OUR WRITERS

**Carolyn McCarthy**  
**Coordinating Author**  
Author of more than 20 travel guides, Carolyn McCarthy has been traveling the Americas and chronicling her experiences since 1998. For her third visit to Panama she sailed the Caribbean, sat out a riot in Panama City, became the subject of a Kuna congress meeting and managed to kayak the canal without one crocodile encounter. She also drank the water. This is her second time writing the Panama guide. Her work has also appeared in *National Geographic, Boston Globe, Outside, Patagon Journal* and other publications.

Read more about Carolyn at: lonelyplanet.com/members/carolynmcc
Plan Your Trip

Itineraries

**1 WEEK Essential Panama**

For a taste of tropical Panama, this trip takes you to the hyper-charged capital. Explore the city and see colonial ruins and landmarks like the famous Panama Canal while getting a dose of rainforest adventure. Take the grand finale of a chill Caribbean getaway.

Start by imbibing the rush of **Panama City**, the country’s vibrant capital. Make a visit to Panamá Viejo to admire the grandiose ruins of Spain’s first Pacific settlement, destroyed in a massive pirate raid. Walk or pedal along Cinta Costera, downtown’s coastal green space, to the *ceviche* (seafood) stands at the Mercado de Mariscos. Continue to the historic neighborhood of Casco Viejo, with hip plaza restaurants and rooftop bars amid crumbling ruins, galleries and 18th-century churches. Take in the scene strolling the romantic Paseo las Bóvedas.

Take a day trip to nearby **Miraflores Locks**, where observation decks put you front and center with mammoth ships as they shimmy through the canal. Follow with a rainforest visit nearby. Options include checking out the wildlife-rich **Parque Nacional Soberanía**, a favorite...
of avid birders. Climb a canopy tower to search for toucans, capuchin monkeys and sloths or paddle a kayak on Lago Gatún alongside howler monkeys and sunbathing crocodiles.

From Panama City, fly to **Bocas del Toro** for four days of chill Caribbean vibes. Hire a water taxi to snorkel the clear waters filled with tropical fish and colorful coral reefs. Explore Isla Colón riding a cruiser bike out to Playa Bluff or Starfish Beach. Work up an appetite riding the waves and spend your evening wining and dining on the waterfront in quirky Bocas Town.

Split your time between this laid-back hub and a more remote setting such as **Isla Bastimentos**, with thatched resorts and jungle lodges, for a true island getaway. If you want to really get under the skin of the culture, take a chocolate tour on the Bocas del Toro **mainland** or visit indigenous groups on other islands with a community tourism initiative.

Fly back to the capital for another shot of urban decadence in the city’s many open-air restaurants, sleek bars and salsa clubs.
Whether you’re traveling on buses or with your own wheels, hit the Interamericana for a route that alternates between scenic beaches and highland cloud forests.

Spend your first few days exploring Panama City, taking tips from the previous itinerary. Then head west along the Interamericana, where you can stop for a leisurely seafood lunch and pass the hours playing in the waves at one of the string of beaches along the Pacific coast. The next stop is El Valle, a mountain retreat surrounded by lush cloud forests and green peaks. Return to the Interamericana, taking a quick stop at one of Coclé’s roadside attractions, then take the turnoff for Santa Fé, a tiny highland town amid sparkling rivers and gorgeous waterfalls.

For surf time, backtrack to the Interamericana and detour to the surf village of Santa Catalina. Soak up the laid-back vibe at thatched restaurants and join the local surfing kids nailing the waves on the town beach. Another very good reason to stop here is to connect to Parque Nacional Coiba, a far-flung yet pristine island in a vast marine park. Snorkeling, diving and hiking are all top-notch; although there’s minimal infrastructure, it’s worth staying a few days.

Head via David to the popular highland retreat of Boquete in Chiriquí. Enjoy the great hiking, go rafting, take a canopy tour and fill up on mountain-grown coffee. Birders can stalk the resplendent quetzal. Choose from among fine dining options and sleep sound in clean mountain air.

If you have your own wheels, take the new Orange Blossom Road to Volcán, a very scenic shortcut. Otherwise grab a bus via David to Cerro Punta. Retreat to a charming rainforest cabin before hitting the trail to hike the Sendero Los Quetzales, a stunning trail through wildlife-rich cloud forest. If traveling by bus, you can loop back to Boquete on this hike. If adventure still calls, from Cerro Punta you can access the trails of Parque Internacional La Amistad. Take a guide – the Panamanian side of this international park is virtually undeveloped and largely unexplored.

If you need to save time, you can fly back to Panama City from David.
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If you’re itching to get off the beaten path, this seafarer route will bring you to the less touristed Península de Azuero on the Pacific coast, the Afro-Caribbean heartland and the furthest reaches of Kuna Yala (and possibly even Colombia).

Start in the capital of Panama City. From there, take a ride in the luxury train along the historic Panama Railroad through the Canal Zone to Colón to admire the Unesco World Heritage Site of Fuerte San Lorenzo. While in the area, check out the Panama Canal expansion at the nearby Gatun Locks. Using Portobelo as your base, explore 16th-century Spanish forts, boat out to deserted island beaches, scuba dive or attend a festival.

Return to Panama City to travel to the Península de Azuero by bus. From time to time traditional festivals take over the streets of these tiny colonial towns. If your visit coincides, join the revelers! Otherwise, check out workshops where regional artisans craft Panama hats, lace dresses and colorful diablo (devil) masks. Make your base Pedasi for leisurely trips to the beach and a friendly village atmosphere. Move on to the more remote Playa Venao to enjoy a pretty half-moon bay, meet other travelers and ride some waves without the crowds. If turtles are hatching, it’s worth making the pilgrimage to Isla de Cañas.

When you’re ready, return to the capital and take a 4WD or flight to Kuna Yala, a string of hundreds of pristine islands ruled by the Kuna. Thatched huts on dozens of islands run the gamut from bare-bones to creature comfort, with meals and excursions always included. Snorkel and swim to your heart’s content, or charter a sailboat for the grand tour. Highlights include snorkeling the reefs and wrecks of Cayos Holandeses and meeting the locals on the tiny community island of Isla Tigre.

At the end of your trip, return to Panama City via Burbayar Lodge, in a stunning mountain setting on the edge of the Kuna mainland, with great hiking and wildlife-watching. If you are heading on to South America – and bent on adventure – consider a three- to four-day sailing or boat trip to Colombia.
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BOCAS DEL TORO MAINLAND
Tour a chocolate farm, search for endangered manatees or navigate in a dugout canoe to little-known Naso villages. Or trek through the rugged but beautiful Parque Internacional La Amistad. (p199)

SANTA FÉ
A highland gem, this cowboy town is all about mountain panoramas. Go tubing in the cool river, hike to lush waterfalls and swimming holes, or jump in the saddle to explore. (p137)

ISLA GOBERNADORA
Sun, surf and art are the draw of this out-of-the-way Pacific island with community art projects inspired by resident installation artists. (p147)

PARQUE NACIONAL COIBA
With extraordinary marine wildlife, Panama’s newest Unesco World Heritage Site was once its most infamous island prison. Far-flung yet pristine, this little-visited park offers excellent diving and wildlife-watching. (p145)

WESTERN AZUERO PENINSULA
With deserted beaches, seasonal visits from hatching turtles and alternative access to Parque Nacional Coiba, this little-known area including Mariato and Palmilla is worth checking out. Get there by bus from Santiago. (p148)
**PUNTA CHAME**
So close to the capital but oft-overlooked, this rugged peninsula with rolling hills and mangroves is a nice wilderness beach retreat – with the added kick of high adrenaline options like kitesurfing. (p89)

**SAMBÚ**
This jungle hub makes a good base for adventures further afield. Guides take visitors up the Río Sambú and its tributaries to Emberá and Wounaan villages or in search of harpy eagles and petroglyphs. (p244)

**PARQUE NACIONAL DARIÉN**
Call it the ultimate adventure. A visit to Central America’s most biodiverse park requires authorization and an experienced guide, but no self-respecting adventurer can forgo the jungles of the Darién. (p245)