



Panamá Province

POP 1,713,070 / ELEV SEA LEVEL TO 100M / AREA 11,887 SQ KM

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Best Spots to Explore

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Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Canopy B&B (p80)
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Why Go?

Panamá Province has a rich history of pirates, plunder and pearls. Although 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.

The principal attraction remains the world's most daring engineering marvel. Explore the Panama Canal and its expansion by visiting its locks, boating through its watery recesses or hiking along its jungle-clad shore. It is also the unlikely host of one of the most accessible and best-studied tropical rainforests on the planet.

Day trips from the city abound, ranging from beaches and surf breaks to ferry trips to the island village of Taboga. Further flung are the Archipiélago de Las Perlas, attracting everyone from the moneyed elite to the occasional *Survivor* TV series.

When to Go

- ➔ **Dec–Apr** Trade winds and dry weather translate to a perfect time to windsurf or kitesurf; beaches are usually full and hotels charge high-season rates.
- ➔ **May–Nov** Low-season rates in resorts and hotels translate to huge savings; calmer conditions mean wakeboarders can have their fun.
- ➔ **Aug–Oct** Migrating humpback whales put on spectacular displays, best viewed around Isla Taboga and Archipiélago de Las Perlas.

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 Captain Henry Morgan's sacking of Panamá Viejo in 1671.

As early as 1524, King Charles V of Spain had ordered a survey to determine the feasibility of constructing a trans-isthmian 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, bolstered by his prior success building the Suez Canal.

Sadly, the French team grossly underestimated the difficulties and some 22,000 workers died during the construction attempt. Most lives were lost to yellow fever and malaria, which led to the establishment of an enormous quarantine on Isla Taboga. 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 an ambitious expansion is made.

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

One of the world's greatest artificial marvels, the canal stretches 80km from Panama City on the Pacific side to Colón on the Atlantic side, cutting right through the continental divide. Around 13,000 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. In 2010 the canal brought in US\$2 billion in revenue.

Ships pay according to their weight, with the average fee around US\$30,000. The highest fee was around US\$376,000, paid in 2010 by the cruise ship *Norwegian Pearl*; the lowest was US\$0.36, paid in 1928 by Richard Haliburton, who swam through.

The pre-expansion 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. The passage of each ship releases a staggering 52 million gallons of fresh water into the ocean.

Panamanians voted to expand the canal in 2006. The US\$5.25 billion plan will widen and deepen existing navigation channels as well as enable the construction of two new locks. Originally planned for inauguration at the canal's 100-year anniversary, it now seems that the expansion will not open until 2015.

👁 Sights

👁 Miraflores Locks

Miraflores Visitors Center

MUSEUM

(☎276-8325; www.panacanal.com; viewing deck/full-access US\$5/8; ☀9am-5pm) The easiest and best way to visit the canal is to go to the Miraflores Visitors Center, located just outside Panama City. The recently inaugurated visitors center features a large, four-floor interactive museum, several viewing platforms and an excellent restaurant serving sumptuous buffet spreads within panorama view of the canal transit. Tip: the best time to view big liners passing through is from 9am to 11am and from 3pm to 5pm, when they are more frequent.

To get there, take any Paraíso or Gamboa bus from the Albrook Bus Terminal in Panama City. These buses, passing along the canal-side highway to Gamboa, will let you off at the 'Miraflores Locks' sign (US\$0.35) on the highway, 12km from the city center. It's about a 15-minute walk to the locks from the sign. Otherwise, you can take a taxi; there's a 30-minute wait at the locks and from there you get driven back to the capital. Expect to pay no more than US\$20 for the round-trip – agree on the price beforehand.