

Welcome to Panama

From clear turquoise seas to the coffee farms and cloud forests of Chiriquí, Panama can be as chilled out or as thrilling as you wish.

Endless Summer

With a spate of deserted islands, chill Caribbean vibes on one side and monster Pacific swells on the other, Panama sits poised to deliver the best of all beach worlds. And a whole other world begins at the water's edge. Seize it by scuba diving with whale sharks in the Pacific, snorkeling the rainbow reefs of Bocas del Toro or setting sail in the indigenous territory of Kuna Yala, where virgin isles wear nary a footprint. Meanwhile surfers will be psyched to have world-class breaks all to themselves. Hello, paradise.

Cosmopolitan Panama

The dazzling blue coastline and shimmering skyscrapers say Miami, though many joke that you hear more English spoken in Panama. Panama City is nothing if not culturally diverse and driven, rough-edged yet sophisticated. Always a work in progress, construction is underway to add a subway and complete the massive canal expansion. But it's the particulars that make it special. Pedal the coastal green space, explore the historic Casco or attend an avant-garde performance and you will realize this tropical capital isn't just about salsa, that's just the backbeat.

The Great Outdoors

In Panama, nature is all about discovery. Explore the ruins of Spanish forts on the Caribbean coast or boat deep into indigenous territories in a dugout canoe. Wildlife is incidental: a resplendent quetzal on the highland trail, the unruly troupe of screeching howler monkeys outside your cabin or the breaching whale that turns your ferry ride into an adrenaline-filled event. Adventure tourism means zipping through rainforest canopies, swimming alongside sea turtles or trekking to sublime cloud forest vistas. One small tropical country with two long coasts makes for a pretty big playground.

Lost World Adventure

You don't have to make it all the way to the Darién to get off the beaten path – though if you do, you'll hit one of the most biodiverse spots on the planet. Go where the wild things are. Soak in the spray of towering waterfalls near highland Santa Fé. Visit one of Panama's seven indigenous groups through community tourism. Live out your castaway fantasies in the Kuna Yala or idle on a wilderness beach in Península de Azuero. Howl back at the creatures sharing the canopy. Panama is as wild as you want it to be.



Why I Love Panama

By Carolyn McCarthy, Author

In a world where the wilderness and native cultures are disappearing, Panama – against all odds – continues with its essence intact. Trekking through exuberant rainforests, seeing indigenous culture and sailing between pristine tropical islands opened up my sense of wonder. The wildlife viewing is astounding – from expected places, like the waters of Isla de Coiba to patches of preserved forest just outside the capital. For me Panama is a confluence – an explosion of nature, cultures and beliefs in that messy, musical arrangement that's everyday life in Latin America. All that energy feeds you, and you see the world in new ways.

For more about our authors, see page 320

Panama's Top 15

Panama City

1 Panama City (p40) is high-octane Latin America: think *ceviche* (marinated seafood), casinos and stacked skylines. For this city of nearly one million, transformation is in the air: a new coastal green space, an anticipated biodiversity museum soon to open and a subway system under construction. Sure, the traffic resembles a boa constrictor digesting one megalithic meal, but its appeal persists. People are real here and nature is never very far away. Beauty lives in the skewed rhythms, incongruous visions and fiery sunsets.

Panama Canal

2 One of the world's greatest shortcuts, the canal (p73) cuts right through the continental divide, linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. And it's worth marveling. Just as stunning as the hulking steel container ships passing through the locks are the legions of creatures watching from the jungle fringes. Two visitors centers offer viewing platforms and museums that showcase the construction and its expansion. There's also worthwhile boat and kayak trips on the waterway. Or you can book a partial transit and squeeze through the locks yourself.







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LATIN AMERICA/ALAMY ©

Casco Viejo

3 Don't miss Panama City's historical neighborhood of Casco Viejo (p45), full of crumbling convents and cobblestones. The colonial architecture may hark back to Havana, but this is not a spot where time stands still. It's as much about today's urban mix as the eclectic, easygoing vibe. The Cinta Costera, a new green space, takes walkers and bikers from downtown to the tip of the peninsula. On sticky evenings artist's booths line the promenade, couples dine under parasols and skinny boys cannonball into the bay.

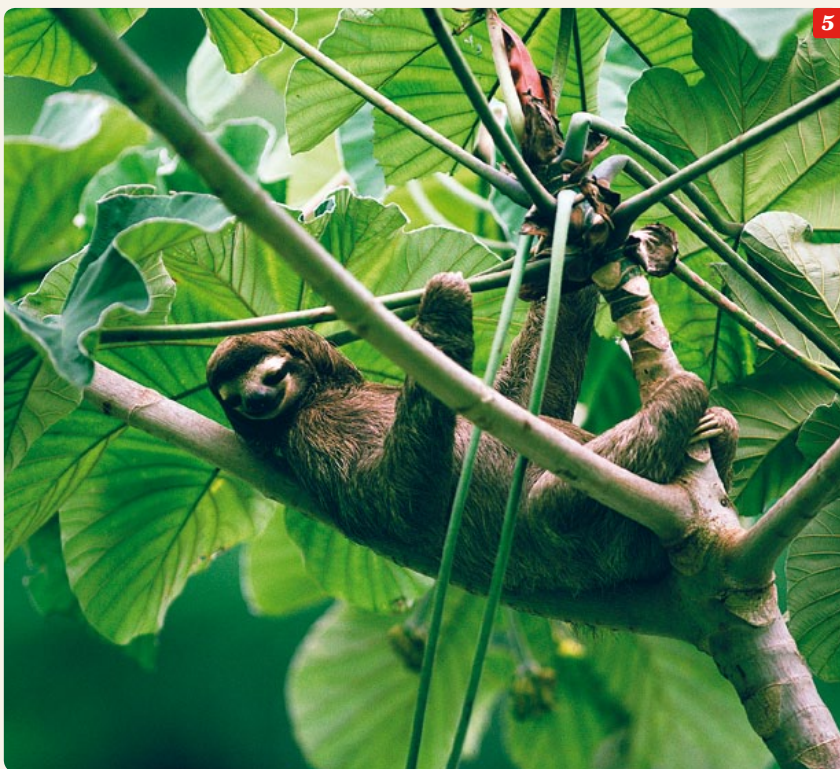
Santa Catalina

4 This surf village (p141) is all small town, with just one paved road. Here, nature is a delight and 'resort' is still a foreign word. The biggest draws are the world-class waves that roll in year-round (but peak in February and March). The town is also the launching pad for excursions and diving trips into the wildlife-rich Parque Nacional Coiba (p145), an island journey that may be heavy in logistics but worth every dogged effort. Right: Fishers, Santa Catalina

Wildlife-Watching

5 Bring your binoculars. With more than 300 mammals and 900 bird species, Panama is crack for naturalists. Scarlet macaws, toucans, sloths and squirrel monkeys are just a few local stars. As a spectator sport, wildlife-watching is nothing short of thrilling, but it's the calls, cries and rumbles of the rainforest that will stamp your memory forever. Serious birders might head to the highlands to spot a resplendent quetzal (p169) or brave the Darién for a glimpse of the legendary harpy eagle (p244). Top right: Brown-throated three-toed sloth

5



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Parque Nacional Coiba

6 Often compared to the Galápagos, this remote marine park (p145) is a veritable lost world of pristine ecosystems and unique fauna. Spy flocks of scarlet macaws, enormous schools of fish, migrating humpback whales with calves, and manta rays scuffing the ocean floor. Scuba divers might even glimpse a hammerhead or a whale shark. Most importantly, it's still wild, with few visitors and little infrastructure. Not long ago an infamous prison operated on the main island, but now everyone comes here by choice. *Right: Hawkfish*

RIP EWANS/LAMY ©

6



The Highlands

7 In the tropics, the highlands are the equivalent of a breath of fresh air. Panama's highlands range from lush forests with tiny golden frogs to mist-covered coffee plantations. From Panama City, weekenders take to El Valle (p94) and El Copé (p107). Boquete (p163) is the classic mountain town, but if you are looking to get off the beaten path, the tiny hamlet of Santa Fé (p137) has true mountain tranquility, with local-led horse rides and hikes to waterfalls with swimming holes. Paradise is not lost.



Archipiélago de San Blás

8 With little to do but negotiate the price of a coconut, sway in a hammock or snorkel in turquoise waters, many find it to be paradise here. Locally known as Kuna Yala, this 400-plus island archipelago (p221) in the Caribbean is an independent indigenous territory steeped in tradition. Most guest lodges are remote palm-fringed islets surrounded by clear waters, while Kuna residents live on community islands teeming with livestock, commerce, and thatched and cement homes. *Below:* Traditionally dressed Kuna woman



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ALFREDO MANQUEZ/GETTY IMAGES ©

Península de Azuero

9 Sweet landscapes of sculpted hills, lonely beaches and crashing surf feed the growing buzz that this rural peninsula (p110) has become today's hot getaway. Yet the strongest impression is one of tradition. Spanish culture has deep roots here, evident in the charm of tiled colonials, country hospitality, religious festivals and elaborate *polleras*. Playa Venao (p131) has emerged as a major surf destination, while the more remote Playa Cambutal (p132) is still the wild beach of your dreams. *Top:* Colonial-style cottage, Villa de Los Santos (p119)

Archipiélago de Bocas del Toro

10 No wonder this Caribbean island chain (p178) is Panama's number one vacation spot. *It's all good*, say the locals. Pedal to the beach on a cruiser bike, hum to improvised calypso on Isla Bastimentos, and laze over dinner in a thatched hut on the waterfront. Lodgings range from cheap digs to stunning jungle lodges and luxury resorts. Surfers hit the breaks, but there's also snorkeling with dazzling corals and oversized starfish or volunteering to help nesting sea turtles. *Bottom:* Cayos Zapatillas (p193)

Water Sports

11 Soaking up the best of Panama means getting wet – dive with whale sharks, kayak around uninhabited islands or raft in the highlands. For many, it's fantasy enough to dive waters teeming with tropical fish. The Pacific is the best place to spot marine mammals, including whales, especially in spots like Parque Nacional Coiba (p145) and the Golfo de Chiriquí (p159). The Caribbean is known for its colorful coral and giant starfish around Bocas del Toro (p178) and the powdery white-sand beaches of the Archipiélago de San Blas (p221).

Parque Nacional Volcán Barú

12 Panama's only volcano (p172) dominates the misty Chiriquí highlands. At 3478m it's also the highest point in the country. Enthusiasts can make the steep and usually muddy pre-dawn climb for the reward of viewing both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans at the same time. Another, perhaps saner, option is the Sendero Los Quetzales (p173), a stunning trail that traverses the park, crosses over the Río Caldera and provides the chance to see exotic orchids, tapir and resplendent quetzals. *Bottom: Golden-headed gecko*





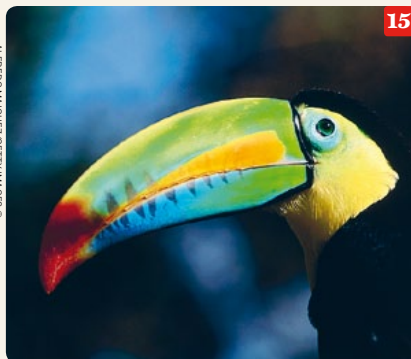
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Festivals

13 A window into the country's wilder side, Panama's many festivals also reveal the breadth of cultures in this small country. From Caribbean Congo (p216) celebrations in Portobelo to the vibrant folkloric traditions of the Península de Azuero, the three-day Kuna stomp that is Nogagope (p224) or Panama City's open-air jazz festival (p53), all of Panama loves a good rum-soaked time. When it's all over, a replenishing bowl of 'Get Up Lazarus' soup (a potent seafood soup) at Mercado de Mariscos (p59) is in order. Top left: Congo dancer

Boquete

14 Equal parts adventure hub and mountain retreat, Boquete (p163) is a magnet for expats, retirees and travelers of all stripes. Bird-watchers come for a glimpse of the resplendent quetzal, while adventurers come to climb a mountain, ride a zip line or raft the white water. But what really moves this small town is the principal crop of the world: coffee. Coffee farms dot the countryside, with tours showing the process from leaf to cup. Fuel up, and you're ready for the next adventure. Top right: Coffee berries

Parque Nacional Soberanía

15 A quick day trip from the glass towers of Panama City and you're in one of the world's premier bird-watching sites. Parque Nacional Soberanía (p78) has one of the most accessible tropical rainforests in Panama. While out on the trail, look for sloths, howler monkeys or white-face capuchins. On Pipeline Rd more than 500 bird species – from toucans to motmots – have been sighted. For an alternate view of the canopy, climb the towers at Rainforest Discovery Center (p79) or visit the neighboring Emberá and Wounaan communities. Bottom right: Keel-billed toucan

Need to Know

For more information, see Survival Guide (p282)

Currency

US dollar (\$)

Language

Spanish

Visas

Generally not required for stays of 90 days.

Money

ATMs widely available. Credit cards accepted in some areas.

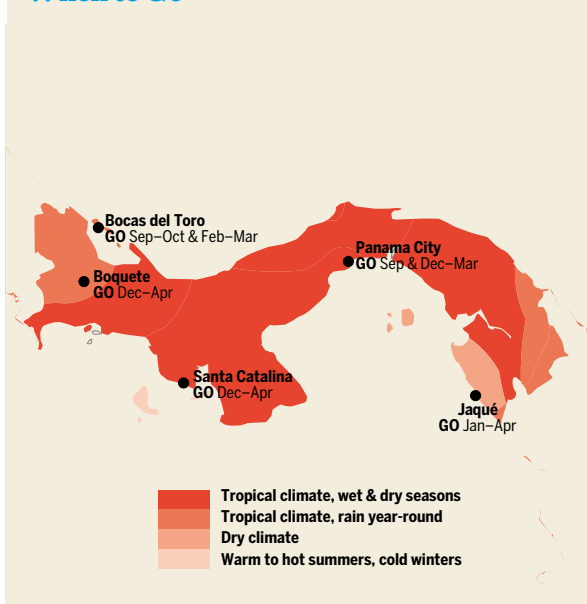
Cell Phones

Local SIM cards can be used in unlocked phones.

Time

Eastern Standard Time (GMT/UTC minus five hours)..

When to Go



High Season

(mid-Dec–mid-April)

- ➔ Corresponds with the Pacific-side dry season.
- ➔ Little rain in Panama City and elsewhere south of the continental divide.

High Season Peak (holidays)

- ➔ Includes November festivals, Christmas and New Years plus Easter holidays.
- ➔ Hotel rates may be up to double that of normal rates.
- ➔ Resorts, festival towns and beaches are crowded with Panamanian vacationers.

Low Season

(mid-April–early Dec)

- ➔ Corresponds with rainy season in most of the country.
- ➔ Rain is sporadic: check regional climate guides, many destinations can still be enjoyed.
- ➔ Lodging rates and resorts are better priced.

Useful Websites

ATP (www.atp.gob.pa) Official national tourism website.

Visit Panama (www.visitpanama.com) The more-limited English-language version of the ATP site.

The Panama News (www.thepanamanews.com) English newspaper useful for culture and local politics.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com/panama) The popular Thorn Tree forum, travel news and links to other useful sites.

Panama Info (www.panamainfo.com) Good travel resource.

Casco Viejo (www.cascoviejo.org) Panama City information.

Lanic (<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/panama>) Academic links from the University of Texas Latin American Information Center.

Important Numbers

Panama has no regional dialing codes.

Panama country code ☑ 507

International access code ☑ 106

Directory assistance ☑ 102

National tourist information ☑ 526-7000

Police ☑ 104

Exchange Rates

Australia A\$1 US\$1.03

Canada C\$1 US\$0.98

Euro €1 US\$1.29

Japan ¥100 US\$1.01

New Zealand NZ\$1 US\$0.84

UK UK£1 US\$1.53

For current exchange rates see www.xe.com

Daily Costs

Budget: Less than US\$65

- ➔ Dorm bed: from US\$7
- ➔ Dine on *comida corriente* (set meals), visit markets and street stalls
- ➔ Plan sightseeing via bus. DIY visits to beaches and waterfall hikes

Midrange: US\$65–US\$180

- ➔ Double room at a midrange hotel: US\$45–US\$120
- ➔ Some fine dining, activities (snorkel rental or surf lessons) and regional flights

Top End: More than US\$180

- ➔ Double room at a high-end hotel, resort or lodge: from US\$120
- ➔ Guided trips with bilingual naturalist guides
- ➔ Internal flights and car rental

Opening Hours

Opening hours vary throughout the year. Throughout the book we list high-season hours, which are usually reduced in low-season.

Banks 8:30am–1pm or 3pm

Restaurants 7am–10am, noon–3pm and 6–10pm; closed Sunday

Offices 8am–noon, 1:30–5pm weekdays

Government offices 8am–4pm

Bars & clubs 9pm or 11pm–3am

Malls & shops 10am–9pm or 10pm

Supermarkets 8am–9pm

Arriving in Panama

Tocumen International Airport (Panama City) Most international flights arrive here. Hire taxis at the transport desk in the airport (from US\$27). It's a 40-minute ride to downtown. In daylight hours local buses (US\$1.25) depart every 15 minutes for Albrook Bus Terminal, near the regional airport (one hour), and other destinations.

Aeropuerto Enrique Malek (David) Located 5km southeast of the Costa Rican border, David's airport frequently handles flights to and from San José. It's about 5km from town. Take a taxi (US\$5) or a shared taxi (US\$2).

Getting Around

As most Panamanians use public transportation, it's reasonably priced and connections are frequent.

Bus Most cities have a bus terminal with frequent regional departures and connections to Panama City and Costa Rica.

Car Rentals are not cheap but roads are generally in good condition. Some areas, including Panama City and many rural areas, are very poorly signposted.

Train Mostly a novelty, goes between Panama City and Colón.

Air Domestic flights depart Panama City from Aeropuerto Albrook and arrive in destinations throughout the country.

For much more on getting around, see p293



First Time Panama

For more information, see **Survival Guide (p281)**

Checklist

- ➔ Check the validity of your passport.
- ➔ Check the visa situation and government travel advisories.
- ➔ Organize travel insurance.
- ➔ Check flight restrictions on luggage and camping or outdoors equipment.
- ➔ Check your immunization history.
- ➔ Contact your credit card provider to see if it includes car rental insurance.

What to Pack

- ➔ Passport
- ➔ Phrasebook
- ➔ Swimsuit
- ➔ Digital camera and charger
- ➔ Flip-flops
- ➔ Sun protection
- ➔ Poncho or rain jacket
- ➔ Binoculars
- ➔ Strong insect repellent (30%–50% DEET)
- ➔ Refillable water bottle
- ➔ Drivers license, if you plan to rent a car
- ➔ Field guide

Top Tips for Your Trip

- ➔ Don't flag a taxi in front of a high-end hotel if you don't want to be charged tourist rates off the bat; taxis aren't metered so walk a block – it pays!
- ➔ Outside the cities, many perfectly good lodgings don't have a handle on email and websites. Don't get frustrated if no one sees your reservation – the hotel email might have been created by a precocious nephew who never checks it. If you have even basic Spanish, call ahead.
- ➔ Panamanians are used to foreigners dising local idiosyncrasies – such as drivers not using signals or crowds that can't form lines. Instead, ask *why* it is the way it is and you'll have a lively conversation.

What to Wear

Locals rarely wear shorts if not at the beach. Bring lightweight pants or skirts and short sleeves. Dining and night-life can be formal in the capital. Bring proper dress shoes or sandals, a skirt or dress for women, and pants and a dress shirt for men. Pack a light sweater for over air-conditioned restaurants and bus rides. A fleece and lightweight shell are necessary for highlands. For hiking, long sleeves and quick-drying pants help keep the bugs away.

Sleeping

Book lodgings two to six months ahead during high peak times such as the week preceding Easter, the November festivals and the weeks surrounding Christmas and New Year. See p282 for more accommodation information.

- ➔ **Hotels** Abound in midrange and high-end categories; for a cheap option check out private doubles in hostels.
- ➔ **B&Bs** A recent midrange phenomenon; most common in the capital, Boquete and Bocas.
- ➔ **Hostels** Cheap and spreading in Panama; range from quiet digs to party central.
- ➔ **Lodges** Running the gamut from rustic to high-end; good places to commune with nature, mostly in the highlands.

Money

Prices in Panama tend to be slightly higher than in other parts of Central America, such as Guatemala and Nicaragua, though they are about on par with Costa Rica.

ATMs are widespread except for in the Darién, on Isla Contadora and the Archipiélago de San Blas.

Some midrange and high-end hotels will take credit cards, as will most adventure tour outfitters. Nicer restaurants will also take credit. The cards most commonly accepted are Visa and Mastercard. If you are planning on charging a big-ticket item, it's best to check in advance. Most cards charge a fee (between 3% and 10%) for international use.

For more information, see p287.

Bargaining

It's OK to bargain at markets and street stalls, but educate yourself first by asking around to get an idea of the pricing of different items and the specific factors that contribute to the quality.

Tipping

- ➔ **Restaurants** Tipping should be 10%; check to see if it's included in the bill.
- ➔ **Taxis** Tipping is optional, but you can round up a dollar or two, especially at night.
- ➔ **Guides** It is customary to tip US\$1 to US\$2 per person for day tours, with more substantial tips (from US\$10 per day) for naturalist guides.



Panama hats (p104)

Etiquette

- ➔ **Asking for help** Say *disculpe* to get someone's attention; *perdón* to say excuse me.
- ➔ **Personal space** Don't be surprised if locals have fewer boundaries about personal space than what's customary in North America and Europe.
- ➔ **Visiting indigenous communities** Ask permission to take photos, particularly of children, and dress more modestly than beachwear. Bargaining may be appropriate for buying crafts but not for lodging and food. The best gifts for children are those that are useful (pens, paper, creative games or books).
- ➔ **Surfing** Novice surfers should be aware of 'dropping in'.
- ➔ **Hitchhiking** Picking up hitchhikers in rural areas is common. If you get a ride from a local, offer a small tip.

Language

Spanish is the national language of Panama, and knowing some very basic phrases (p299) is not only courteous but also essential. That said, English speakers are easier to find here than in other parts of Latin America. Some restaurants feature English-speaking menus and it's certainly the standard for guides. If you visit Kuna Yala, learning a few words of Kuna beforehand (p227) is a great way to warm relations.

If You Like...

Beaches

Kuna Yala Known for perfect and plentiful postage-stamp-sized islets with turquoise waters. (p221)

Isla Contadora Vacation like a high-roller on this island of mansions and gorgeous beaches with a good dose of privacy. (p83)

Golfo de Chiriquí The national marine park boasts islands of monkeys, nesting turtles and plenty of patches of sand just for you. (p159)

Farallón Within reach of the capital, this wide, brilliantly white resort beach is a natural beauty perfect for long strolls. (p101)

Nightlife

Casco Viejo Dart across the cobblestones between underground bars, brew pubs, wine bars and live music venues. (p64)

Bocas del Toro With Aqua Lounge's aquatic trampoline

and the strange shots at Mondo, it's the scene of the young and the brave. (p189)

Tántalo Bar The best exotic cocktails and rooftop bar rolled into one – you could only do better by booking its dominatrix-themed suite. (p64)

Boquete Focusing on expats, places like Mike's Global Grill, with its games and Cheers-style counter, offer comfort and *cerveza* for the homesick. (p171)

Romantic Getaways

Los Quetzales Cabins Cabins tucked into the rainforest canopy, with fireplaces and the mountain air buzzing with hummingbirds. (p176)

Casco B&Bs A hefty dose of pampering with this vibrant old-world neighborhood right out the door. (p53)

Archipiélago de Bocas del Toro From secluded ecolodges to thatched beach huts, these resorts can erase the world beyond. (p179)

Playa Los Destiladeros This tiny cove seduces with achingly blue skies, a secluded beach of pounding surf and candlelit dinners for two. (p129)

Outdoor Adventures

Nivida Bat Cave Trek to this massive Caribbean cavern rife with nectar bats; perfect for a subterranean swim. (p196)

Parque Internacional La Amistad True wilderness hiking without the drama of the Darién; access via the highlands or Caribbean coast. (p201)

Sportfishing Azuero While Chiriquí and Bahía Piña hog the glory, organize guided fishing trips here for quite reasonable rates. (p110)

Volcán Barú Terribly steep, hard and invariably foggy and muddy, but how else can you view both oceans at once? (p172)

Surfing

Santa Catalina It's all about world-class waves here, and hostels boast front-row seats. (p141)

Eco Venao This lush ecoresort fits all budgets and serves as the best base camp for Azuero surfers. (p131)

IF YOU LIKE... WATER SPORTS

Azure, turquoise or crystal clear: the waters of Panama beckon you to join in the fun. Whether it's snorkeling coral reefs or rafting through verdant canyons, options abound.

SERGIO PIRAMITZ/ROBERT HANSON'S WORLD IMAGERY/CONRIBS ©



Playa Bluff Powerful barrels rush this wilderness beach; avoid May to September when turtles nest. (p192)

Playa El Palmar A Panama City weekend break with two surf schools and a white-sand beach as your playground. (p90)

Off-the-Beaten-Track Destinations

Soposo Rainforest Adventures Step off the gringo trail to sleep in stilted huts and explore remote Naso villages. (p202)

Santa Fé Dancing butterflies, swimming holes and giant waterfalls grace this humble mountain town. (p137)

The Darién Steeped in indigenous culture and exotic wildlife; with permits required, checkpoints and delays, the real trouble is arriving. (p235)

THOMAS WARENTE/VISUALS UNLIMITED, INC./GETTY IMAGES ©



Wildlife

Isla Barro Colorado Nature geeks shouldn't miss this rainforest, the most intensely studied area in the Neotropics. (p79)

Parque Nacional Coiba Dive with a whale shark, spy scarlet macaws or search for endemic howlers. Wildlife is epic here. (p145)

San-San Pond Sak Sloths, river otters and the occasional manatee inhabit this little-known Caribbean wetland near Changuinola. (p201)

Isla Bastimentos From July to August, loggerheads, hawksbills, greens and leatherbacks hatch on the north shore. (p195)

Parque Natural Metropolitan A patch of rainforest amid Panama City. Don't mind the titi monkeys on the trail! (p48)

Top: Snorkeling, Archipiélago de Las Perlas (p83)

Bottom: Strawberry poison-dart frog (p196)

Month by Month

TOP EVENTS

Festival de Diablos y Congos.
February–March

Carnaval.
February–March

Feria de Azuero. April
or May

Panama Jazz Festival. January

Festival of Nogagope.
October

January

With dry season and tourist season at their peaks, this is a big month for travel in Panama.

It's prime time for kitesurfing and swimming, since Pacific Ocean temperatures are at their warmest and the wind is up.

Panama Jazz Festival

The weeklong jazz festival (www.panamajazzfestival.com) is one of the biggest musical events in Panama, drawing top-caliber international musicians from jazz, blues, salsa and other genres. Held all over the city, the open-air events are usually free. (p53)

Fiesta del Mar

Held at the end of the month on tiny Isla Taboga, a boat ride away from Panama City, this new tradition seeks to revive island culture with a weekend festival (www.fiestadelmarpanama.com) of Calypso music, dancing and food events. (p81)

March

It's prime time for surfing on both Pacific and Caribbean swells. High season is winding down. Events related to the religious calendar may take place in February or March.

Carnaval

On the four days preceding Ash Wednesday, general merriment prevails in Panama City and on the Peninsula de Azuero. This anything-goes, multi-event period features street parades, water fights, costumes and live music til the wee hours. (p53)

Festival de Diablos y Congos

Held every other year, this Congo festival celebrates rebellious slave ancestors with spirited public dancing

featuring beautiful masks and costumes. Participants assume the role of escaped slaves and take captives on the street. (p216)

Semana Santa

During Holy Week (the week before Easter), the country hosts many special events, including a re-enactment of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. On Good Friday, religious processions are held across the country.

May

With sporadic, refreshing rain showers, the weather is generally pleasant throughout the country. May begins a five- to six-month nesting season for both loggerhead and green sea turtles on the Caribbean coast.

Feria de Azuero

Held late April or early May, this rural festival in the historic colonial town of Villa de los Santos features singing competitions, folk dancing and the quaint attractions of a rural agricultural fair.

Fiesta de Corpus Christi

Forty days after Easter, this religious holiday features colorful celebrations in Villa de Los Santos. Masked and costumed dancers representing angels, devils, imps and other mythological figures perform dances, acrobatics and dramas. (p120)

July

Though it's the middle of the rainy season, the weather is relatively dry on the Caribbean side. It's also off-peak for visitors and hotels offer better rates.

Nuestra Señora del Carmen

Celebrating the patron saint of Isla Taboga, this event held on July 16 starts with a procession parading the virgin statue, followed by fire breathing, games and dance.

Festival de Santa Librada

Celebrating the patron saint of Las Tablas, this July 21 event has huge street celebrations, music and dance, in addition to solemn religious services and processions. Held in the festival-happy Península de Azuero.

Festival de la Pollera

Hundreds of young beauties parade through Las Tablas wearing traditional *polleras*, handmade lace dresses that can be worth tens of thousands of dollars. Beyond that, it's a raucous street festival with music, food and dance. Held July 21.

August

Breeding humpback whales can be observed in the Archipiélago de Las Perlas. Mid-month Panama City celebrates its founding in 1519 with a stream of events. Rainy season continues.

Festival del Manito Ocuéño

Among the country's best folkloric events, this three-day bash features traditional music and dancing, and culminates in a country wedding. Held the third week of August in the rural village of Ocué.

September

The rain usually lets up a little, particularly around Panama City. Still low season, it's a good time to travel around the country with no need of reservations.

Feria de la Mejorana

In late September, Panama's largest folkloric festival draws musicians and traditional dancers from all over the country to tiny Guararé on the Península de Azuero. With oxcart parades and *seco* cocktails, it's a fun time to soak up tradition. (p122)

October

October 12 is Día de la Raza (Columbus Day), a dubious legacy nonetheless celebrated by every high school

brass band letting loose. Throughout Panama, some very different yet excellent festivals are well worth attending.

Festival of Nogogope

Kunas converge on Isla Tigre for three days of tireless traditional dancing. It's visually engaging and fully authentic. Held from October 10 to 12, it's followed by a three-day fair with art shows and canoe races. (p224)

Festival of the Black Christ

On October 21, thousands honor the black Christ in Portobelo. Many make the pilgrimage on foot from the capital. Miracles aplenty have been attributed to the black Christ. After a nighttime procession there's dancing and drinking til the wee hours.

November

Don't come to Panama for business between November and December as the whole country takes off to celebrate multiple independence-related holidays in November, followed by the Christmas holiday. Panama City empties out and beaches are full.

Día de Independencia

On November 28 Panama celebrates its independence from Spain with parties and revelry throughout the country. Most locals head to the beach and enjoy a drink or 10. Book any travel well ahead.

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* (sea-food) 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





Casco Viejo (p45), Panama City

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.



2
WEEKS

Pacific Coast & Highlands

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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ALFREDO MANRIQUEZ/GETTY IMAGES ©

Top: Highlands, Coclé Province (p92)
Bottom: David (p153), Chiriquí Province

12
DAYS

Bicoastal Explorer

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).

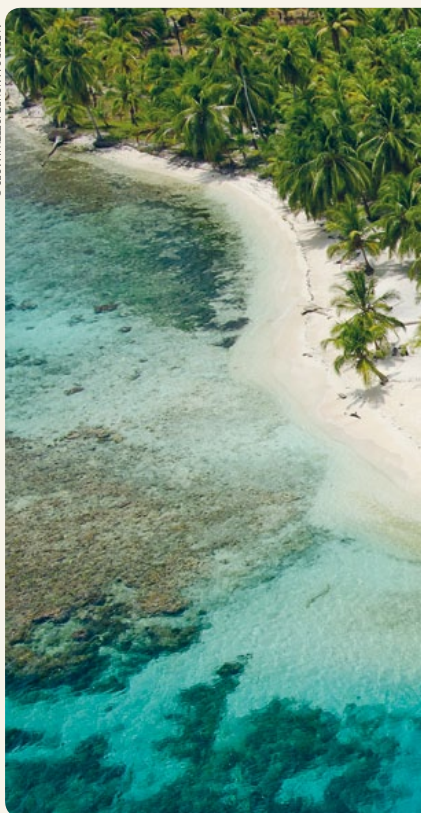
Start in the capital of **Panama City**. From there, take a ride in the luxury train along the historic Panama Railroad through the Canal Zone to **Colón** to admire the Unesco World Heritage Site of **Fuerte San Lorenzo**. While in the area, check out the Panama Canal expansion at the nearby **Gatun 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 **Pedasí** 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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TIERUND NATUREFOTOGRAFIE UND C. SPAIN/GETTY IMAGES ©



Top: Kuna Yala (p221)
Bottom: Scarlet macaw



Off the Beaten Track: Panama

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 off-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)

Plan Your Trip

Panama Outdoors

With a cosmopolitan capital full of sparkly casinos, it's easy to overlook the appeal of Panama's outdoors. But it's worth making it your top priority. Start with the astounding wildlife: primates swing from trees, whales breach offshore and butterflies dart across the forest floor. Ride a dugout canoe through jungle waterways, snorkel around jewel-toned reefs, trek to misty heights or surf huge Pacific tubes. Refuel with fresh coffee from the highlands, and then repeat.

Best of Panama Outdoors

Best Surf Beach

Laid-back vibes, access to Parque Nacional Coiba and world-class waves: it's all at Santa Catalina.

Best Hike

Sendero Los Quetzales is a beautiful 8km route, running between Cerro Punta and Boquete in Chiriquí Province.

Best Sportfishing

If you want to break a sportfishing world record, your chances are high at Bahía Piña.

Best Dive Site

Parque Nacional Coiba has extraordinary marine wildlife; you might spot hammerheads or a whale shark.

Best Accessible Wildlife-Watching

More than 500 bird species have been sighted along Pipeline Rd in Parque Nacional Soberanía – hit the trail and start counting!

Best White-Water Rafting

Tackle the white water of Río Chiriquí from May through to December.

Boat Trips

River Trips

Partial canal transits through the Miraflores Locks are the best way to appreciate the canal, and one of the highlights of any trip to Panama. Another great option is to watch wildlife from a kayak on Lago Gatún. In the Darién, tours cruise up Río Mogueú to an Emberá village. In the Wekso sector of the Parque Internacional La Amistad, travelers can explore indigenous villages heading upriver on motorized dugouts.

Ocean Trips

The 226km-long Archipiélago de San Blas is a thrill for ocean explorers. Run as an autonomous region by the Kuna, it has hundreds of coconut-fringed islands and islets surrounded by turquoise waters. Independent travelers can travel by small boat between the islands, or charter sailboats through the area and even continue on to Colombia.

Hiking

Panama offers everything from dry tropical rainforests and highland cloud forests to humid jungles and blistering mountain peaks.

THE TRANSPANAMA TRAIL

This **cross-country circuit** (www.transpanama.org) runs from the border of Costa Rica toward Panama City, but you can take on hiking any three-day stretch for a good taste of Panama's rugged backcountry. More information is available on the website, where you can also download GPS tracks for free.

Starting near the capital on the shores of the canal, Parque Nacional Soberanía contains a section of the historic Sendero Las Cruces. Closer to Panama City, Parque Natural Metropolitano boasts a number of short but rewarding hikes in plush rain-forest that literally skirts the edge of the capital.

Popular highland retreats include Boquete, El Valle (nestled into the extinct volcano now known as Valle de Antón), and Santa Fé, surrounded by rivers, waterfalls and cloud forests. All feature hikes in a pristine mountain setting.

Chiriquí is home to two of Panama's most famous hikes, namely Volcán Barú and Sendero Los Quetzales in Parque Nacional Volcán Barú. While Los Quetzales is more scenic in poor weather, ascents up Barú, which is Panama's highest peak, can offer views of both oceans on a clear day.

Recommended remote destinations include the Las Nubes sector of the Parque Internacional La Amistad. With trails only accessible with a guide, it is as rugged and unchartered as Central America gets.

Diving & Snorkeling

Panama's underwater world spans two great oceans, and abounds with colorful coral gardens, towering rock shelves, sunken wrecks and a rich diversity of marine life. Fans of multicolored reef fish and bathtub-warm water should head for the Caribbean, while more advanced divers in search of enormous pelagic animals and remote dive sites should head to the Pacific. Three major spots in Panama that have a deserved reputation for fine scuba diving are the Archipiélago de Bocas del

Toro, the Caribbean town of Portobelo and the Pacific coast Isla de Coiba.

The Caribbean islands of Bocas del Toro have a thriving dive community. During the rainy season (mid-April to mid-December) underwater visibility is extremely poor – nearly 40 rivers deposit silt into the seas around the islands, which turns the water a murky green.

Near historic Portobelo, 16 major dive sites feature underwater attractions including a 110ft cargo ship, a C-45 twin-engine plane, soft-coral-laden walls, off-shore reefs and rock gardens.

The best diving in Panama is around Isla de Coiba, the centerpiece of a national marine park accessed via Santa Catalina. Divers here scout for enormous sharks, including schools of hammerheads, black-tips and white-tips as well as the occasional tiger or whale shark.

The Kuna prohibit dive operators from working in the Comarca de Kuna Yala, but the snorkeling is some of the best in Panama.

Surfing

Although the joy of Panama is riding some of the lesser known surf breaks – or even discovering your own – the country has two world-class spots in Santa Catalina and the Archipiélago de Bocas del Toro. Even these are significantly less crowded than similar spots in neighboring Costa Rica.

The face of a typical wave at Santa Catalina is 2m, though during February and March 4m waves are fairly common. Waves are at their best during medium to high tide when rides approaching 150m are possible. On the Caribbean side, the islands of Bocas del Toro offer some of the best and most varied surfing in Panama, especially from December to March.

Surfing spots are also found in the provinces of Panamá, Los Santos, Colón and Chiriquí.

Fishing

Panamá means 'abundance of fish,' and with 2988km of coastline, there's no problem finding a fishing spot. Freshwater

DIVING RESPONSIBLY

- Never anchor on the reef and take care not to ground boats on coral.
- Avoid touching or standing on living marine organisms. Polyps can be damaged by even the most gentle contact. If you must hold on, only touch exposed rock or dead coral.
- Watch your fins. The surge from fin strokes can damage delicate reef organisms and clouds of sand can smother organisms.
- Make visits quick to underwater caves, as trapped air bubbles damage organisms.
- Resist the temptation to collect or buy corals or shells or to loot marine archaeological sites.
- Do not feed fish and never ride on the backs of turtles.

anglers usually set their sights on trout and bass, while serious sportfishers ply the seas for trophy fish including tarpon, sailfish and marlin. Freshwater angling can be pursued independently, especially in the highland rivers of Chiriquí and Veraguas. In the Canal Zone you can fish for peacock bass in Lago Gatún and the Río Chagres.

For deep-sea fishing, Panama offers three world-class areas – Bahía Piña, the Pearl Islands and Isla de Coiba – all served by extremely professional fishing outfits. In the Darién's Bahía Piña, more International Game Fish Association world records have been broken than anywhere else on the planet. This top spot is served exclusively by Tropic Star Lodge. The seas around Isla de Coiba are home to several species of sport fish including yellow-fin tuna, wahoo, dolphin, Spanish mackerel, jacks and rooster fish.

virtually year-round. Beyond the capital, you're essentially on your own, but never underestimate the prowess of the village mechanic.

Wildlife-Watching

Unlike the savannahs of Africa, wildlife-watching in the Neotropical rainforest is an exercise in patience and stealth – a little luck doesn't hurt either. Although it's unlikely you'll come across top predators such as jaguars and pumas, primates and lesser mammals are commonly sighted. Top national parks for watching-wildlife include La Amistad, Volcán Barú and the Darién. Closer to the capital, Parque Natural Metropolitano and Parque Nacional Soberanía are easily accessible and quite good.

Highlights

Nowhere else in the world are rainforests as easily accessible as they are in this tiny sliver of a country. To make the most of your wildlife-watching experience, pick up a good field guide. Some highlights include:

- **Two- and three-toed sloths** Found only in Neotropical rainforests, these ancient mammals came into being when South America was isolated. Curled up high on a branch, they are hard to spot. They spend 16 hours a day asleep or inactive but are busy with digestion.
- **Mantled howlers** Greeting sunrise and sunset with booming calls that resonate for kilometers, howlers are incredibly vocal. Their antics are also good storm indicators.

Cycling

Owing to its compact size and modern infrastructure, Panama is the perfect country to unleash a little pedal power. As with all long-distance cycling, you need to prepare yourself both physically and mentally for the rigors of the road. The major factor when considering a lengthy bike ride is the weather. With heat a serious factor, riding in the early morning and resting in the heat of the day is a good strategy. Also, it's not entirely safe to ride in the rain. Throughout much of the country, the rains come from mid-April to mid-December, though the Caribbean has rain

➔ **Jaguars** The largest cat in the Americas, jaguars are incredibly rare and elusive, though their evidence is all around, from dried spoor to fresh tracks.

➔ **Parrots and macaws** Panama has more than 20 species, including five macaws. Big macaws can be identified by their huge bills, bare facial patch and long, tapered tails.

➔ **Toucans** The spectacular multicolored bill is a giveaway. This powerful tool is full of air cavities and quite lightweight. A serrated upper mandible helps grip slippery fruits and intimidate other birds.

Bird-Watching

With more than 900 bird species in Panama, all you need to do to spot feathered friends is to get a good pair of binoculars and hit the trails. Two popular spots

include Pipeline Rd in Parque Nacional Soberanía and Burbayar Lodge in Panamá Province. Panama Audubon Society (p52), located in Panama City, organizes the annual Christmas bird count on Pipeline Rd, and runs bird-watching expeditions throughout the country.

White-Water Rafting & Kayaking

Whether you take to the water by raft or kayak, Panama boasts some excellent opportunities for river running. The most famous white-water runs are the Ríos Chiriquí and Chiriquí Viejo. The unofficial river-running capital of Panama is the highland town of Boquete. Sea kayaking centers are Bocas del Toro and Chiriquí Provinces.

Regions at a Glance

Located at the heart of the Americas, Panama is the crucial link. The Panama Canal joins the Atlantic to the Pacific, wedding east to west in global commerce. In the last century, the canal defined Panama, but it's what lies just beyond which may define the next. Pristine beaches, lush rainforest and big city nightlife are major assets. English is widely spoken, yet the lost world of rainforests and dugout canoes is never too far off. The canal expansion will mean further growth and glitz. But for now, you can still pick an empty islet and play survivor for a day.



Panama City

History

Cuisine

Nightlife

Colonial Echoes

Wander the cobblestone streets of the Casco Viejo, admire the 16th century ruins of Panamá Viejo or peddle the brand new Cinta Costera for the long view. History's most notorious explorers, pirates and marauders have preceded you.

Tastes go Tropical

Panama chefs are reinventing traditional ingredients and refining tropical tastes, and the capital's lively dining scene is finally reflecting its cultural plurality, with more options than ever.

La Rumba

From rooftop cocktails with city views to live salsa bands and open-air graffiti bars, Panama City nightlife is dynamic, daring and ever hip.

p40



Panama Province

Man-Made Marvels

Rainforests

Island Getaways

Panama Canal

The expansion of this 80km cross-continental shortcut is even more reason to see the Panama Canal. Few know there's also fishing, kayaking and wildlife-watching off the shipping lanes.

Jungle Love

Rainforest adventure and some of the best wildlife-watching is just outside of Panama City. For nature on steroids, reserve ahead for the exclusive Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute tour.

Island Escapes

Isla Contadora makes a great city escape, with pristine beaches and deserted isles – for a price. On a budget? Flee to Isla Taboga for the day. Both now have frequent ferry service.

p72



Coclé Province

Highlands
Latin Tradition
Beaches

Mountain Time

Coclé's highland retreats are prime weekend getaways. El Valle is an established resort town with boutique hotels and charming waterfall walks. For something wilder, replenish yourself in the deep forests of Reserva Privada Távida or Parque Nacional Omar Torrijos.

Latin Tradition

Pick up a panama hat, the signature product of Coclé, at a street-side stand, or take an up-close look at the production of fine cigars and cane sugar on a factory tour.

Sun & Sand

Wide pearly beaches are signature Coclé. With an airport coming and resorts popping up, it's poised to boom. Stop in Farallón or Santa Clara to kick back for a couple days.

p92



Península de Azuero

Festivals
Deserted Beaches
Turtle Nesting

Take it to the Streets

If the peninsula is the heart and soul of Panama, then festivals are its pulse. Villa de Los Santos, Las Tablas and Guararé are the best places to get your groove on.

Deserted Beaches

With access improving, the rugged Azuero coast may not remain solitary for long. Its essence is still wild, especially the further you go down the coast.

The Moonlight Hatch

From late August through November, thousands of endangered olive ridley sea turtles reach remote Isla de Cañas in the wee hours to hatch their eggs.

p110



Veraguas Province

Surfing
Diving
Country Roads

Ride a Wave

With some of the biggest breaks in Central America, Santa Catalina surfing is delightously good. Big tubes and long rides attract the experts (especially December through April); beginners have their own sandy-bottom spot.

Underwater Wonders

Pure delight for divers and snorkelers, Parque Nacional Coiba hosts amazing biodiversity. It's out of the way, but well worth a visit.

Country Roads

Brave the winding lanes to the rugged and relatively undiscovered landscapes of the highlands. The village of Santa Fé makes an ideal base for waterfall hikes with swimming holes, river tubing and horseback riding.

p134



Chiriquí Province

White Water Hiking
Highland Lodges

Make a Splash

Adrenaline addicts head to Boquete, the highland town that's a major hub for rafting and kayaking. You can paddle year-round on the Río Chiriquí or Chiriquí Viejo.

Hit the Trail

The iconic Quetzal Trail weaves through gorgeous highland forest in search of its namesake. Brave Volcán Barú or set out expedition-style to Parque Internacional La Amistad.

Highland Lodges

A delicious treat in high country, cabin lodges in the coffee farms of Boquete and cloud forests of Cerro Punta and Buena Vista take the chill off with fireplaces, bottles of wine and hot tubs.

p152



Bocas del Toro Province

Beaches
Surfing
Community
Tourism

The Stunning Sandbox

Many an idyllic palm-fringed crescent is a bicycle ride or boat taxi away from Bocas town. Take care of the many starfish on its namesake beach as well as on Red Frog Beach.

Surf's Up

While second to Santa Catalina, Bocas offers the most varied waves in Panama, with plenty of options to get beginners on board. Then a cool Caribbean vibe reels you in to stay.

Go Local

Connect with local and indigenous cultures through the popular Oreba chocolate farm tour, visit a Ngöbe-Buglé community on Isla San Cristóbal, or have a real adventure in little-known Naso country.

p178



Colón Province

History
Diving
Caribbean
Culture

Steeped in History

Old Spanish fortresses, the Panama Railroad and the canal expansion: the tumultuous history of Colón is Panama's most compelling. Take a day tour from Panama City or spend a few days around Portobelo.

Underwater Treasures

While it does not rival the clear waters of the Pacific, there's enjoyable diving to soft coral walls, offshore reefs and wrecks. Keep an eye out for eagle rays, nurse sharks and reef sharks.

Caribbean Culture

Colón drums to its own beat. To get a sense of this vibrant Congo culture, it's worth checking out the artist workshop in Portobelo or attending a festival.

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Comarca de Kuna Yala

Islands
Indigenous
Culture
Arts

Islands

With hundreds of idyllic islands and waters of Technicolor turquoise, you could indeed do much worse. Resort islands comprise little more than thatched huts with sandy floors and a few hammocks, but what more do you need?

Kuna Culture

With the world of the strong, self-governing Kuna very different from mainland Panama, it's well worth engaging a local guide or host. Community islands will further your cultural understanding.

Molas

Beautiful and often exquisitely crafted, these colorful panels of intricate embroidery are the signature of Kuna culture and Panama's most beloved craft.

p221



Darién Province

Nature
Indigenous
Culture
Sportfishing

Nature

The lush rainforest of Parque Nacional Darién belies the most ecologically diverse park in Central America. Getting there's another story...

Indigenous Culture

Remote pockets of Emberá and Wounaan peoples have inhabited these forests for centuries. With a guided expedition up the Río Sambu, the most intrepid of travelers can learn about real jungle survival.

Reeling in the Big One

Bahía Piña is the granddaddy of sportfishing destinations; more world records have been made here than anywhere. An exclusive fishing lodge has all the trimmings.

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