



# Chiriquí Province

POP 451,230 / AREA 6491 SQ KM / ELEV SEA LEVEL TO 3474M

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## Why Go?

Chiriquí claims to have it all: Panama's tallest mountains, longest rivers and most fertile valleys. The province is also home to spectacular highland rainforests and the most productive agricultural and cattle-ranching regions in the country. As a result, *los chiricanos* (natives of Chiriquí) take a particular pride in their province and wave the provincial flag – in every sense – at the slightest opportunity.

It's also a land of immense beauty. On the coast, the pristine Golfo de Chiriquí boasts long sandy beaches and a rich diversity of marine life. The mist-covered mountains near the town of Boquete, a favorite of North American and European retirees, is a good base for adventures such as white-water rafting and hiking the flanks of Panama's highest point, Volcán Barú (3474m). 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.

## Best Places to Eat

- Rock (p171)
- Cerro Brujo (p175)
- Boquete Fish House (p171)
- Cuatro (p158)
- Mike's Global Grill (p170)

## Best Places to Sleep

- Lost & Found Hostel (p179)
- Los Quetzales Cabins (p177)
- Coffee Estate Inn (p169)
- Bocas del Mar (p160)
- Haven (p169)

## When to Go

➤ **Apr–May** The best months to spot the resplendent quetzal nesting in highland destinations such as Parque Nacional Volcán Barú and Parque Internacional La Amistad. The annual Orchid Fair lights up Boquete in 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 the crowds in January. La Concepción celebrates its patron's feast day in early February, and David holds the huge Feria Internacional de San José de David over 10 days in early March.

## HISTORY

When the Spaniards arrived in what is now Panama in the early 16th century, 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 more than 600 indigenous people from across the region and began recording a glossary of the most common words. He was able to identify 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 10 distinct tribes, only the Ngöbe-Buglé survived. Today they 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 target 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.

In the 19th century, the climate and slopes of the Chiriquí highlands attracted farmers from North America and Europe who planted coffee and other crops as well as exploiting the forests for timber. 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 to offer beyond its famed highland rainforests. The region's lowlands are home to Panama's second-largest city, David, as well as large stretches of striking Pacific coastline, a marine park and some lovely islands.

### David

POP 144,860

Although it feels more like an overgrown country town, David is Panama's second-largest city and the capital of Chiriquí Province. It's more a center of agricultural industry than a cultural hub; you will be disappointed if you have museums, clubs and fine dining in mind. Yet with foreign capital flowing into Chiriquí, David is rapidly gaining wealth and importance, and is poised to boom.

For most travelers David is a pit stop on the way to surrounding destinations. Halfway between Panama City and San José (Costa

## THE GEISHA COFFEE BEAN

During the 19th century, farmers from North America and Europe discovered that the cool climate and rich volcanic soil of Chiriquí were perfectly suited for the cultivation of coffee. Since dried beans are relatively nonperishable and thus easy to ship, coffee quickly surpassed other cash crops and became an important source of revenue for the area. Although less well known than the Costa Rican competition, Panamanian coffee is praised for its high caffeine content and acidic, multidimensional flavor.

In the early 1990s the collapse in the world quota cartel system dealt the industry a severe blow. Growers could no longer rely on a stable price for their harvest. In turn, a few growers switched tactics, planting quality varieties in smaller amounts, aiming at the gourmet market instead of the usual high-yield crops.

Selectivity paid off. The biggest coup was the emergence of geisha coffee on the world scene. After winning first place in multiple international competitions, geisha became a rock-star bean. Originally from Ethiopia (the birthplace of coffee), geisha is coveted for its light body, citrus and honey notes and jasmine-like aroma.

Geisha has been auctioned for up to US\$260/kg and sold at Starbucks for US\$7 a cup. You can also find it for sale online, but because it is grown in small quantities, it often sells out. While Boquete's Finca Esmeralda was the first to make good on geisha, it's now found at Café Ruiz (p172), Finca Lérica (p170) and a growing number of local estates.