



Panama



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HUMMINGBIRD, PARQUE
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Plan Your Trip

Itineraries



Essential Panama

For a taste of tropical Panama, start with hyper-charged capital. Explore the city and see colonial ruins and landmarks such as the famous Panama Canal while getting a dose of rainforest adventure. Top it off with a chilled Caribbean getaway.

Start by imbibing the rush of **Panama City**, the country's vibrant capital.

In Panamá Viejo, take time to visit Spain's first Pacific settlement, which was laid waste in a massive pirate raid

during the 17th century. After admiring the ruins, take a walk or pedal along the coastal beltway of the Cinta Costera to historic Casco Viejo, with its hip plaza restaurants, rooftop bars, galleries and 18th-century cathedrals.

Take a day trip to **Miraflores Locks**, to watch mammoth ships slip through the Panama Canal, followed by a visit to a nearby rainforest in the wildlife-rich **Parque Nacional Soberanía**, a favorite of birdwatchers. Alternatively paddle a kayak on **Lago Gatún** alongside howler monkeys and sunbathing crocodiles.



Above: Old Bank (p201), Isla Bastimentos, Bocas del Toro Province
Below: Beachside, Bocas del Toro Province

From Panama City, fly to **Bocas del Toro** for four days of Caribbean relaxation and snorkeling in colorful coral reefs. Explore Isla Colón by cruiser bike and enjoy a pub crawl in quirky Bocas Town.

From here, boat out to the thatched resorts at **Isla Bastimentos**, take a chocolate tour on the Bocas del Toro **mainland** or alternatively visit some of the indigenous groups on other islands with a community-tourism initiative.

Fly back to the capital for a final call in the city's many open-air restaurants, sleek bars and salsa clubs.

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WEEKS

Pacific Coast and Highlands

PLAN YOUR TRIP ITINERARIES

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 days exploring **Panama City**, then head west along the Interamericana where you can stop for a leisurely seafood lunch and explore the string of beaches along the Pacific coast. Overnight at **Mamallena Ec lodge** in the cool, sculpted foothills. The next stop is **El Valle**, a mountain retreat surrounded by lush cloud forests and green peaks. Returning to the Interamericana, visit Coclé's roadside attractions, then detour for **Santa Fé**, a highland town amid rivers and waterfalls. On your way out, browse gorgeous **Iglesia de San Francisco de la Montaña** outside Santa Fé.

For surf time, backtrack to the Interamericana and detour to **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. Go hiking or rafting or take a canopy tour and fill up on mountain-grown coffee. Birdwatchers can stalk the resplendent quetzal. Choose from among fine dining options and sleep soundly in clean mountain air.

If you have your own wheels, take the new road to **Volcán**, a very scenic shortcut. Those without wheels can 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.

To save time, you can fly back to Panama City from David.



RESER BERTRAND / HEMIS FR. / GETTY IMAGES ©



NANO NEHRING / GETTY IMAGES ©

Top: Finca Lérica (p170), Chiriquí Province

Bottom: Common black hawk, Parque Nacional Coiba (p145), Veraguas Province

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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, and on to the Afro-Caribbean heartland and the furthest reaches of **Guna Yala** (and possibly even Colombia).

Start in the capital of **Panama City**. From there, take a ride in the luxury train along the historical 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 **Agua Clara Visitor Center**. 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 Cañas**.

When you're ready, return to the capital and take a 4WD or flight to **Guna Yala**, a string of hundreds of pristine islands ruled by Guna. Thatched huts on dozens of islands run the gamut from bare bones to creature comforts, 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 the **Cayos Holandeses** and meeting the locals on the tiny community islands. If you are heading on to South America – and bent on adventure – consider a three- to four-day sailing or boat trip to Colombia.

Otherwise, end your trip by returning to Panama City, where you can check out the world-class BioMuseo and have a night out in Casco Viejo.

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Top: Panama Railroad (p302), Panama Canal
Bottom: Festival de Diablos y Congos,
Portobelo (p220), Colón Province



Off the Beaten Track: Panama

BOCAS DEL TORO MAINLAND

Tour a chocolate farm, search for endangered manatees or travel by dugout canoe to little-known Naso villages. Alternatively trek through the rugged but beautiful Parque Internacional La Amistad. (p205)

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 draws of this out-of-the-way Pacific island with community-art projects inspired by resident installation artists. (p149)

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 sparsely visited park offers excellent diving and wildlife watching. (p145)

SUNSET COAST

Experience remote beaches, great surfing and community-turtle tours on the Sunset Coast: the western side of Península de Azuero facing the Golfo de Montijo and the Pacific Ocean. (p149)



PUNTA CHAME

So close to the capital but oft overlooked, this rugged peninsula with rolling hills and mangroves is a wilderness beach retreat – with the added kick of high-adrenaline options like kitesurfing. (p89)

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. (p247)



JAQUÉ

On the little-known Pacific coast of the Darién, with pounding waves and empty beaches, this non-tourist destination has a vibrant community life and a worthwhile sea-turtle rescue program. (p253)

Map Legend

Sights

- Beach
- Bird Sanctuary
- Buddhist
- Castle/Palace
- Christian
- Confucian
- Hindu
- Islamic
- Jain
- Jewish
- Monument
- Museum/Gallery/Historic Building
- Ruin
- Shinto
- Sikh
- Taoist
- Winery/Vineyard
- Zoo/Wildlife Sanctuary
- Other Sight

Activities, Courses & Tours

- Bodysurfing
- Diving
- Canoeing/Kayaking
- Course/Tour
- Sento Hot Baths/Onsen
- Skiing
- Snorkeling
- Surfing
- Swimming/Pool
- Walking
- Windsurfing
- Other Activity

Sleeping

- Sleeping
- Camping

Eating

- Eating

Drinking & Nightlife

- Drinking & Nightlife
- Cafe

Entertainment

- Entertainment

Shopping

- Shopping

Information

- Bank
- Embassy/Consulate
- Hospital/Medical
- Internet
- Police
- Post Office
- Telephone
- Toilet
- Tourist Information
- Other Information

Geographic

- Beach
- Gate
- Hut/Shelter
- Lighthouse
- Lookout
- Mountain/Volcano
- Oasis
- Park
- Pass
- Picnic Area
- Waterfall

Population

- Capital (National)
- Capital (State/Province)
- City/Large Town
- Town/Village

Transport

- Airport
- Border crossing
- Bus
- Cable car/Funicular
- Cycling
- Ferry
- Metro station
- Monorail
- Parking
- Petrol station
- Subway/Subte station
- Taxi
- Train station/Railway
- Tram
- Underground station
- Other Transport

Routes

- Tollway
- Freeway
- Primary
- Secondary
- Tertiary
- Lane
- Unsealed road
- Road under construction
- Plaza/Mall
- Steps
- Tunnel
- Pedestrian overpass
- Walking Tour
- Walking Tour detour
- Path/Walking Trail

Boundaries

- International
- State/Province
- Disputed
- Regional/Suburb
- Marine Park
- Cliff
- Wall

Hydrography

- River, Creek
- Intermittent River
- Canal
- Water
- Dry/Salt/Intermittent Lake
- Reef

Areas

- Airport/Runway
- Beach/Desert
- Cemetery (Christian)
- Cemetery (Other)
- Glacier
- Mudflat
- Park/Forest
- Sight (Building)
- Sportsground
- Swamp/Mangrove

Note: Not all symbols displayed above appear on the maps in this book



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 Franklin, London, Melbourne, Oakland, Beijing and Delhi, 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

Author of more than 30 travel guides, Carolyn McCarthy has been writing about the Americas since 1998. For this visit she rode dugout canoes in lawn chairs, saw hundreds of marine turtles hatching and spent hours in Panama City traffic. She also drank the water. This is her third time writing the Panama guide. Her work has also appeared in *BBC Magazine*, *National Geographic*, *Boston Globe*, *Outside* and other publications.



Steve Fallon

Born in the USA, Steve traveled to Latin America as a youngster. Somehow the middle bit, especially Panama, remained *terra incognita* to him beyond hats and a canal until Lonely Planet sent him packing. And what discoveries he made: hummingbirds' nests, cobalt-blue and scarlet frogs, a spider that spins a golden web. Then there was the coffee, the chocolate, the orchids, the beaches, the corals... He's said it once and he'll say it again: Panama, who knew?

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