

# Panama City



The most cosmopolitan capital in Central America, Panama City is both a gateway to the country's natural riches and a vibrant destination in its own right. A hub of international banking and trade, the city sports a sultry skyline of shimmering glass and steel towers reminiscent of Miami.

The capital rides the rails of urban chaos, with no shortage of traffic jams, wayward taxis, and casinos stacked sideways between chic clubs and construction sites. A respite from all that buzz, the colonial neighborhood of Casco Viejo is a dilapidated peninsula with ruins and cobbled streets reminiscent of old Havana. After the city elite fled to live in skyscrapers, decades passed with Casco Viejo crumbling on the edge of the sea. Recently, artists and small businesses are moving back in and renovations are abundant. With luxury lofts, cafes and the hottest nightspots arriving, the Casco is approaching full-swing revival.

With arms open to the east and the west, Panama City developed as a hub of trade and immigration. As a result, urbanites hail from every corner of Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia. Increasing numbers of North Americans and Europeans are adding to the mix. The result is a cultural mix that marks this capital as more dynamic and fluid than its neighbors. An 'anything goes' attitude proves a breath of fresh air.

Within minutes of the city's center are tropical rainforests and verdant parks home to howler monkeys, toucans and sloths. You can also escape the bustle by hitting a broad sandy beach (Pacific or Caribbean) or by hopping a train to Colón.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Exploring history-filled **Casco Viejo** (p72), a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood of crumbling colonials, soaring churches and grand plazas
- Reconnecting with the past at the ruins of **Panamá Viejo** (p77), the original Panama City circa 1519
- Hiking through **Parque Natural Metropolitano** (p77), 265 hectares of rainforest just 10 minutes from downtown
- Feasting on tapas, pasta and Panamanian specialties at any of the capital's fine assortment of **restaurants** (p88)
- Partying like a rock star on **Calle Uruguay** (p93), home to the city's most sophisticated nightlife



■ POPULATION: 446,000

■ AREA: 2561 SQ KM

■ ELEVATION: SEA LEVEL

## HISTORY

Panama City was founded in 1519 by the Spanish governor Pedro Arias de Ávila (Pedrarias) not long after Balboa first saw the Pacific. Although the Spanish settlement quickly became an important center of government and church authority, the city was ransacked and destroyed in 1671 by the English pirate Sir Henry Morgan, leaving only the stone ruins of Panamá Viejo.

Three years later, the city was reestablished about 8km to the southwest in the area now known as Casco Viejo. Although the peninsular location made the city well-defended, the Spanish overland trade route faded upon the destruction of the Caribbean port at Portobelo in 1746. Panama gained independence in 1821 and became part of Gran Colombia, though a decade later the regional confederation dissolved and Panama belonged to Colombia. Panama City subsequently declined in importance, though it would return to prominence in the 1850s when the Panama Railroad was completed, and gold seekers on their way to California flooded across the isthmus by train.

Panama declared its independence from Colombia on November 3, 1903 in the Parque de la Independencia and Panama City was firmly established as the capital. Since the Panama Canal was completed in 1914, the city has emerged as a center for international business and trade.

The city's greatest setback in recent times occurred in 1989, when it was invaded by the USA to oust dictator Manuel Noriega from power. The capital suffered damage both from the invasion itself and from the subsequent looting, and several residential blocks of the El Chorrillo district were destroyed by combat-ignited fire.

Following the handover of the Panama Canal in 1999, and the subsequent closure of American military bases in the country, Panama City has finally taken charge of its own destiny. Today, Panama City is by far the wealthiest city in Central America, and residents are optimistic about the future. With a spate of foreign investment and the Panama Canal expansion, the city is poised to continue its constant transformation.

## ORIENTATION

Panama City stretches about 20km along the Pacific coast, from the Panama Canal at its

western end to the ruins of Panamá Viejo to the east.

Near the canal are Albrook airport, the Fort Amador Causeway (better known simply as 'the causeway') and the wealthy Balboa and Ancón suburbs first built for the US canal and military workers. The Puente de las Américas (Bridge of the Americas) arches gracefully over the canal.

The colonial part of the city, Casco Viejo (also called San Felipe and Casco Antiguo), juts into the sea on the southwestern side of town. From here, two major roads head east through the city.

The main drag is Av Central, which runs past the cathedral in Casco Viejo to Parque Santa Ana and Plaza Cinco de Mayo; between these two plazas, the avenue is a pedestrian-only shopping street. At a fork further east, the avenue becomes Av Central España; the section that traverses the El Cangrejo business and financial district is called Vía España. The other part of the fork becomes Av Simón Bolívar and finally Vía Transistmica as it heads out of town and across the isthmus toward Colón.

Av 6 Sur branches off Av Central not far out of Casco Viejo and undergoes several name changes. It is called Av Balboa as it curves around the edge of the bay to Punta Paitilla, on the bay's eastern point; it then continues under various names past the Centro Atlapa to the ruins of Panamá Viejo.

Generally, *avenidas* (avenues) run east-west, while *calles* (streets) run north-south. Av Central and Vía España form the boundary – *avenidas* south of Vía España are labeled *sur* (south) while *calles* east of Vía España are labeled *este*.

## INFORMATION

### Bookstores

**El Hombre de la Mancha** (Map p76; ☎ 263-6218; Calle 52; ☎ 10am-9pm Mon-Sat) A Spanish-language bookstore favored by Panamanians.

**Exedra Books** (Map p74; ☎ 264-4252; Vía España at Vía Brasil; ☎ 9:30am-9:30pm Mon-Sat, 11am-8:30pm Sun) Easily one of Central America's best bookstores.

**Librería Argosy** (Map p76; ☎ 223-5344; Vía Argentina near Vía España) A bookstore and cultural institution owned by a cheerful Greek immigrant.

## Emergency

**Ambulance** ☎ 228-2187, 229-1133

**Fire** ☎ 103

**Police** ☎ 104