

Panama

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

CAPITAL

Panama City

POPULATION

3.6 million

AREA

75,420 sq km

OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

Spanish

Consider Panama a place of discovery: explore the ruins of Spanish forts on the Caribbean coast or boat deep into indigenous territories in a dugout canoe. There are plenty of beaches to choose from, too, from relaxed Caribbean hang-outs to Pacific surf.

For an urban turn, Panama City – culturally diverse, driven, rough-edged yet sophisticated – is one of Latin America's most vibrant and outward-looking capitals. The dazzling blue coastline and shimmering skyscrapers say Miami, though many joke that you hear more English spoken in Panama. Pedal the coastal green space, explore the historic Casco or attend an avant-garde performance and you will realize this tropical city isn't just about salsa – that's just the backbeat.

In the last century, Panama was defined by the canal; what lies just beyond may define it for the next. The canal expansion spells growth and even more glitz, but for now you can still pick an empty islet, live out your castaway fantasies and play Survivor for a day. Panama is as urbane or as wild as you want it to be.

Panama's Top Experiences

1 Panama City

Panama City is elemental 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 far away. Beauty lives in the skewed rhythms, incongruous visions and fiery sunsets.

2 Panama Canal

One of the world's greatest shortcuts, the canal cuts right through the continental divide, linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. And it's worth marveling at. 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.

3 Santa Catalina

This surf village 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, an island journey that may be heavy in logistics but worth every dogged effort.

4 Península de Azuero

Sweet landscapes of sculpted hills, lonely beaches and crashing surf feed the growing buzz about this rural peninsula. 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 has emerged as a major surf destination, while the more remote Playa Cambutal is still the wild beach of your dreams.

5 Archipiélago de Bocas del Toro

No wonder this Caribbean island chain 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.

When to Go

HIGH SEASON

(mid-Dec–mid-Apr)

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 Year plus Easter holidays.

Hotel rates may be up to double that of normal rates.

LOW SEASON

(mid-Apr–mid-Dec)

Rainy season in most of the country.

Rain is sporadic: many destinations can still be enjoyed.

6 Parque Nacional Volcán Barú

Panama's only volcano dominates the misty Chiriquí highlands. At 3478m it's also the highest point in the country. Enthusiasts can make the steep and usually muddy predawn 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, a stunning trail that traverses the park, crosses over the Río Caldera and provides the chance to see exotic orchids, tapir and resplendent quetzals.

Obsession for Ocelots

Ocelots are nocturnal, elusive and native to Panama. When researchers and wildlife photographers had trouble capturing these cats in Panama's dense rainforest, they turned not to science but to Calvin Klein. Christian Ziegler, a photographer working on assignment for National Geographic, remembers, 'After hearing a claim from the San Diego Zoo, I bought Calvin Klein's Obsession when passing through duty-free.'

The scent, which contains pheromones that appeal to both humans and animals, was sprayed on a tree. The result? The ocelots rubbed up against bark doused in the scent. But, according to Ziegler, the attraction proved fleeting.

Food & Drink

Panama's national dish is sancocho (chicken-and-vegetable stew). Ropa vieja (literally 'old clothes'), a spicy shredded beef combination served over rice, is another common and tasty dish. Rice and beans are a staple in Panama and are usually served with patacones (fried green plantains), a small cabbage salad and meat. Seafood is inexpensive and abundant, including ceviche (marinated raw fish). More adventurous palates should try pulpo al carbon (grilled octopus). Fresh tropical juices and coconut water (known as pipa) are sold on the street. Don't miss regional specialties like tortilla de maíz (fried cornmeal cake), Caribbean coconut rice and bottled D'Elida's hot pepper sauce.

The national alcoholic drink is made of seco, milk and ice. Seco, like rum, is distilled from sugarcane, and popular in the countryside. Popular in the central provinces, vino de palma is fermented sap extracted from the trunk of a palm tree.

7 Boquete

Equal parts adventure hub and mountain retreat, Boquete 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.

8

Festivals

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 celebrations in Portobelo to the vibrant folkloric traditions of the Península de Azuero, the three-day Kuna stomp that is Nogagope or Panama City's open-air jazz festival, all of Panama loves a good rum-soaked time.

Getting Around

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

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, but goes between Panama City and Colón.

[1280 WORDS]