

Panama

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Bocas del Toro** Soak up the Caribbean charm of laid-back Isla Colón before exploring the untouched beaches and forests of the surrounding islands (p681)
- **Boquete** Fuel yourself with mountain-grown coffee before hiking through the cloud forests in search of the elusive quetzal (p674)
- **Panama City** Spend the day admiring the faded glory of the old city, then party till sunrise on Calle Uruguay (p648)
- **Panama Canal** Marvel as hulking freighter ships are raised and lowered through sets of enormous locks (p664)
- **Comarca de Kuna Yala** Explore the tiny palm-covered islands of the Archipiélago de San Blás, home to one of Central America's most independent groups, the Kuna (p700)
- **Off the beaten track** Head to the virgin jungles and isolated rivers of the Western hemisphere's wildest frontier at Darién Province (p703)

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 78,200 sq km (slightly smaller than South Carolina)
- **ATMs** Widely available
- **Budget** US\$20-30 per day
- **Capital** Panama City
- **Costs** Hostel in Bocas US\$7, bottle of beer US\$1, 3hr bus ride US\$6, set lunch US\$3
- **Country Code** ☎ 507
- **Electricity** 120V, 60Hz
- **Famous for** Panama Canal, panama hats, Manuel Noriega
- **Head of State** President Martin Torrijos
- **Languages** Spanish, Kuna & 14 others
- **Money** The Balboa – aka the US dollar
- **Phrases** *Panameños* (Panamanians), *chévere* (cool), *chau* (bye), *discúlpeme* (excuse me)
- **Population** 3.19 million
- **Time** GMT minus 5 hours
- **Traveler's Checks** Only accepted in US dollars; Amex checks accepted at most banks
- **Visas** Not necessary for most nationalities



TRAVEL HINTS

Take a light sweater and a poncho if you plan to hike and camp in the Chiriquí highlands. Get malaria tablets (anything but chloroquine) if you're heading to the Darién.

OVERLAND ROUTES

The principal Costa Rican crossing is on the Pan-American Hwy at Paso Canoas. Guabito on the Caribbean side and Río Sereno in the highlands are less chaotic border posts. For more information, see p669.

Unfettered by tourist crowds, Panama's natural gifts shine. Although most backpackers to Central America set their sights on tourist-soaked Costa Rica and Guatemala, it's hard to shake the feeling in Panama that you're in on a secret the rest of the traveling world has yet to discover. Although the 'gringo trail' has already swung south to the Caribbean archipelago of Bocas del Toro, the careless overdevelopment plaguing most Costa Rican beach towns is still refreshingly absent here. In fact, Panama's highlights are still very much off-the-beaten-path destinations, though it's likely that this will change in the years to come.

Panamanians have been eagerly anticipating the tourist boom, though the unexpected delay has allowed the country to plan ahead. With its high standard of living and recent growth in foreign investment, Panama will likely adopt a low-volume, high-profit model of tourism in the near future. In the meantime however, Panama remains accessible to backpackers on a budget, and there's no shortage of beaches, mountains and rain forests to explore. Panama is also home to one of Central America's most independent indigenous groups, the Kuna, as well as one of the last true frontiers in the Americas, the infamous Darién.

CURRENT AFFAIRS

On December 31, 1999, the US relinquished control of the Panama Canal and closed its military bases. Over 4000 Panamanians employed by the US military lost their jobs immediately, and the US took with them an economic impact of up to US\$350 million. Despite the desire to cast off this last vestige of American colonialism, polls taken before the withdrawal showed that a majority of Panamanians wanted the USA to undertake a phased pull out because of the economic consequences.

Although there was both international and national skepticism regarding Panama's ability to run the canal, Panama has defied expectations, racking up impressive safety records and decreasing transit time for ships passing through the canal. However, the canal has not been without its problems. Forests within the Panama Canal's 'protected' watershed, which are vital to prevent silt build-up, have been cleared, and the lethal garbage left by the USA still needs to be dealt with. Target practice by US planes has left an estimated 105,000 unexploded bombs scattered throughout 7800 acres of rain forest.

However, the canal remains the lifeline of the country's economy, and there are hopes that it will bring greater wealth in the future. In October 2006, Panamanian voters overwhelmingly endorsed President Martín Torrijos' ambitious US\$5 billion project to expand the canal by widening and deepening existing navigation channels in addition to creating a third set of locks. By enabling increased canal traffic and the passage of larger vessels, the Panamanian government is betting on a much needed boost into the country's economy.

Skeptics, though, note that plans for the expansion have been several years in the making. But with foreign investment at an all time high and tourism increasing in leaps and bounds, it's likely that Panama's economic growth and political stability will continue for years to come.

HISTORY Lost Panama

The coastlines and rain forests of Panama have been inhabited by humans for at least 11,000 years, and it's estimated that several dozen indigenous groups including the Kuna, the Ngöbe-Buglé, the Emberá, the Wounaan, the Bokatá, the Bribri and the Naso were living on the isthmus prior to the Spanish arrival. However, the historical tragedy of Panama is that despite its rich cultural history, there are virtually no physical remains of these great civilizations.

Unlike the massive pyramid complexes found throughout Latin America, the ancient towns and cities of Panama have vanished into the jungles. However, tales of lost cities still survive in the oral histories of Panama's indigenous communities, and there is hope among Panamanian archaeologists that a great discovery lies ahead.

What is known about pre-Columbian Panama is that early inhabitants were part of an extensive trading zone that extended as far south as Peru and as far north as Mexico. Archaeologists have uncovered exquisite gold ornaments and unusual life-size stone statues of human figures as well as distinctive types of pottery and *metates* (stone platforms that were used for grinding corn). Panama's first peoples also lived beside both oceans, and fished in mangrove swamps, estuaries and

coral reefs. Given the tremendous impact that fishing has had on the lives of Isthmians, it seems only fitting that the country's name is derived from an indigenous word meaning 'abundance of fish.'

New World Order

In 1501 the discovery of Panama by Spanish explorer Rodrigo de Bastidas marked the beginning of the age of conquest and colonization in the isthmus. However, it was his first mate Vasco Núñez de Balboa who was to be immortalized in the history books following his discovery of the Pacific Ocean 12 years later.

On his fourth and final voyage to the New World in 1502, Christopher Columbus went ashore in present-day Costa Rica, and returned from the encounter claiming to have seen 'more gold in two days than in four years in Spain.' Although his attempts to establish a colony at the mouth of the Río Belén failed in 1503 due to fierce local resistance, Columbus petitioned the Spanish Crown to have himself appointed as governor of Veragua, the stretch of shoreline from Honduras to Panama. However, with his primary benefactor, Queen Isabella, on her deathbed, the prize was awarded to Columbus' rival by King Ferdinand. In 1506 Columbus died in Spain a very rich man, though his colonial dreams were never realized.

Following Columbus' death, King Ferdinand appointed Diego de Nicuesa to settle the newly claimed land. In 1510 Nicuesa

followed Columbus's lead and tried to establish a Spanish colony at Río Belén. However, local resistance once again beat back Spanish occupation, and Nicuesa was forced to flee. Leading a small fleet with 280 starving men aboard, the weary explorer looked upon a protected bay 23km east of what is now Portobelo and exclaimed: '*¡Paremos aquí, en nombre de Dios!*' ('Let us stop here, in the name of God!'). Thus was named the town of Nombre de Dios, one of the first Spanish settlements in the New World.

Much to the disappointment of Columbus' conquistador heirs, Panama was not rich in gold. Add to the mix tropical diseases, inhospitable terrain and less than welcoming natives, and it's easy to see why Nombre de Dios failed several times during its early years as a Spanish colony. Later, in 1513, Balboa heard rumors about a large sea and a wealthy, gold-producing civilization across the mountains of the isthmus – almost certainly referring to the Inca Empire of Peru. Driven by ambition and greed, Balboa scaled the continental divide and on September 26, 1513, became the first European to set eyes on the Pacific Ocean. Keeping up with the European fashion of the day, Balboa immediately proceeded to claim the ocean and all the lands it touched for the king of Spain.

The Empire Expands

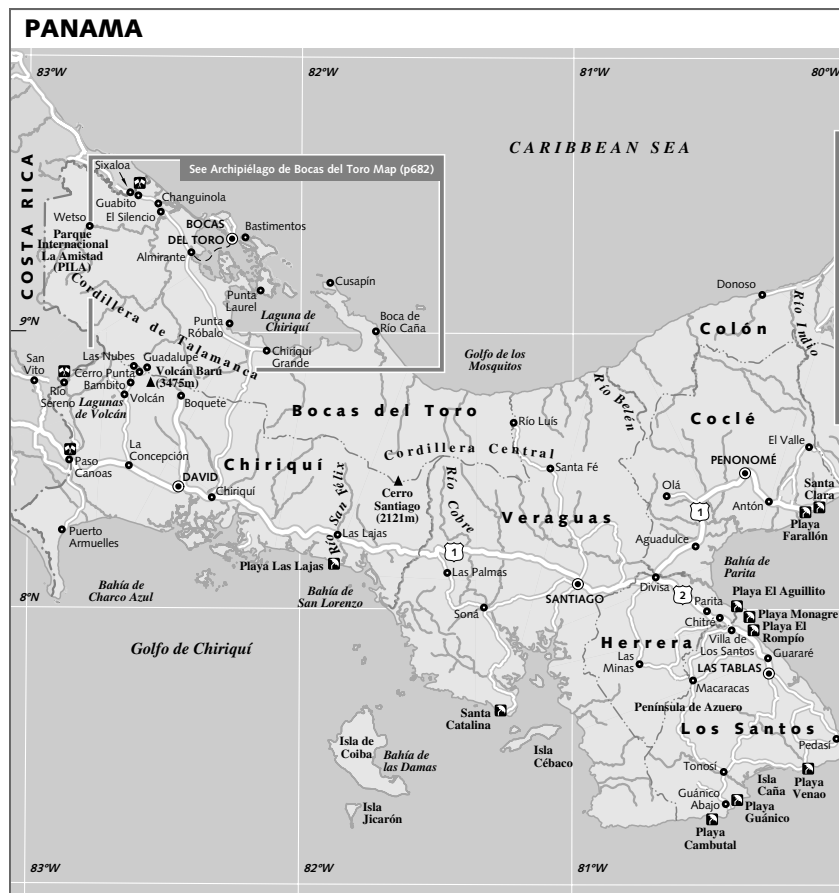
In 1519 a cruel and very vindictive Spaniard named Pedro Arias de Ávila (or Pedrarias, as many of his contemporaries called him)

BANANAS ARE OUR BUSINESS

Panama's banana industry dates from 1890, when three American brothers arrived in Bocas del Toro and founded the Snyder Brothers Banana Company. In the years that followed, the brothers planted banana trees all along the shores of the Laguna de Chiriquí. In 1899, however, the United Fruit Company planted itself in Bocas town, and took complete control of the Snyders' young company. In the century that followed, United Fruit established vast plantations that stretched across the entire peninsula. It also constructed elaborate networks of roads, bridges and canals, as well as entire towns and cities to house its workers.

Today United Fruit is part of the multinational Chiquita Brands International. Chiquita's workers in Bocas del Toro province grow and export three-quarters of a million tons of bananas annually. They also comprise the largest workforce in the province and the most diverse workforce in the country; on the payroll are West Indians, Latinos, Chinese and indigenous workers.

Unlike the oil-palm harvesting typical of Costa Rica, plantation fieldwork is unspecialized and requires a large, unskilled workforce. As a result, the main complaint from workers is that the industry does not pay adequate salaries. Though work is generally available year round, it is laborious as the banana pods are heavy and extremely unwieldy, and it can get brutally hot underneath the tropical sun.



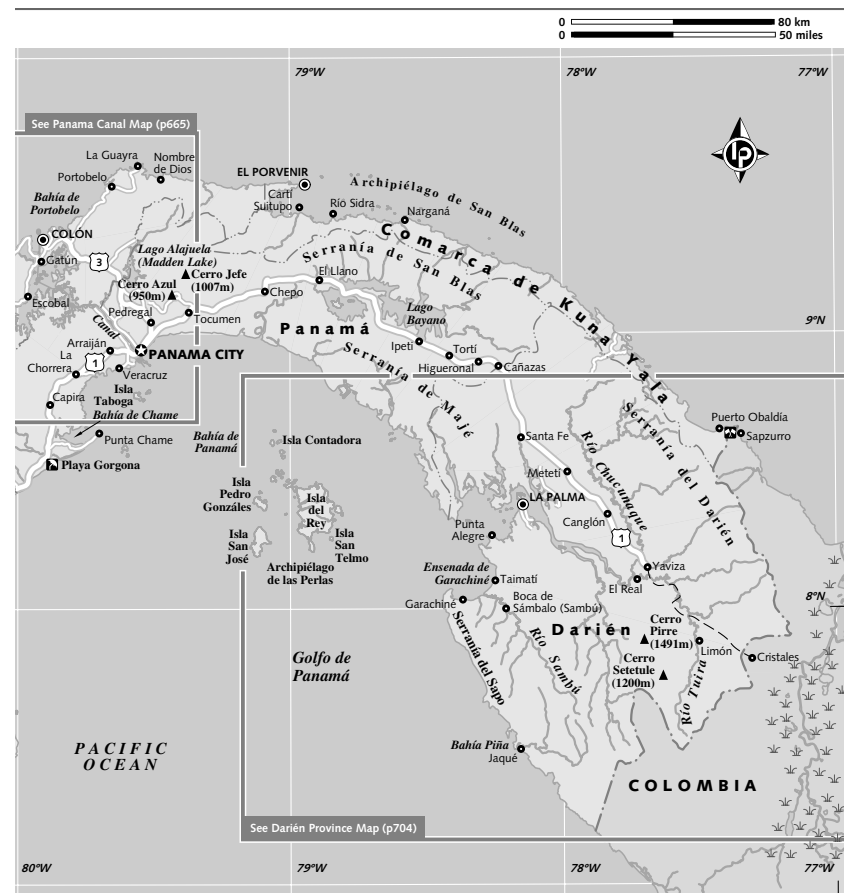
founded the city of Panamá on the Pacific side, near where Panama City stands today. The governor is best remembered for such benevolent acts as ordering the beheading of Balboa in 1517 on a trumped-up charge of treason, as well as ordering murderous attacks against the indigenous population, whom he roasted alive or fed to dogs when the opportunity permitted. Spanish swords and the introduction of European diseases soon decimated the indigenous population.

Despite his less than admirable humanitarian record, Pedrarias established Panamá as an important Spanish settlement, a commercial center and a base for further explorations, including the conquest of Peru. From Panamá, vast riches including Peruvian gold

and Oriental spices were transported across the isthmus by foot to the town of Venta de Cruces, and then by boat to Nombre de Dios via the Río Chagres. Vestiges of this famous trade route, which was known as the Sendero Las Cruces (Las Cruces Trail), can still be found throughout Panamá.

As the Spaniards grew fat and soft on the wealth of plundered civilizations, the world began to notice the prospering colony, especially the English privateers lurking in coastal waters. In 1573 Sir Francis Drake destroyed Nombre de Dios, and set sail for England with a galleon laden with Spanish gold.

Hoping to stave off further ransacking and pillaging, the Spanish built large stone fortresses; one at San Lorenzo and another



at Portobelo. However, these fortifications weren't enough to stop Welsh buccaneer Sir Henry Morgan from overpowering Fuerte San Lorenzo and sailing up the Río Chagres in 1671. After crossing the length of the isthmus, Morgan destroyed the city of Panamá, burning it to the ground, and he made off with its treasure and arrived back on the Caribbean coast with 200 mules loaded with Spanish loot.

The Spanish rebuilt the city of Panamá a few years later on a cape several kilometers west of its original site. The ruins of the old settlement, now known as Panamá Viejo, as well as the colonial city of Casco Viejo, are both located within the city limits of present-day metropolitan Panamá City.

Of course, British privateering didn't cease with the destruction of Panamá. The final nail in the coffin was hammered in when Admiral Edward Vernon destroyed the fortress of Portobelo in 1739. Humiliated by their defeat and robbed of one of their greatest defenses, the Spanish abandoned the Panamanian crossing in favor of sailing the long way around Cape Horn to the west coast of South America.

The Empire Ends

On October 27, 1807, the Treaty of Fontainebleau, which defined the occupation of Portugal, was signed between Spain and France. Under the guise of reinforcing the Franco-Spanish army occupying Portugal, Napoleon moved tens of thousands of troops

into Spain. In an act of treachery and military genius, Napoleon then ordered his troops to seize key Spanish fortifications.

The consequent Peninsular War crippled both countries. As a result of the conflict, as well as the subsequent power vacuum and decades of internal turmoil, Spain lost nearly all of its colonial possessions in the first third of the century.

Panama gained independence from Spanish rule in 1821 and immediately joined Gran Colombia, a confederation of current-day Colombia, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela, a united Latin American nation that had long been the dream of Simón Bolívar. However, internal disputes lead to the abolishment of Gran Colombia in 1831, though fledgling Panama remained a province of Colombia.

Birth of a Nation

Panama's future changed from the moment that the world's major powers learned that the isthmus of Panama was the narrowest point between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. In 1846 Colombia signed a treaty permitting the USA to construct a railway across the isthmus, though it also granted it free transit and the right to protect the railway with military force. At the height of the California gold rush in 1849, tens of thousands of people traveled from the east coast of the USA to the west coast via Panama in order to avoid hostile Native Americans living in the central states. Colombia and Panama grew wealthy from the railway, and the first talks of a canal across Central America began to surface.

The idea of a canal across the isthmus was first raised in 1524 when King Charles V of Spain ordered that a survey be undertaken to determine the feasibility of constructing such a waterway. Later, Emperor Napoleon III of France also considered the idea. Finally, in 1878, French builder Ferdinand de Lesseps, basking in the warm glory of the recently constructed Suez canal, was contracted by Colombia to build the canal, bringing his crew to Panama in 1881. Much like Napoleon, Lesseps severely underestimated the task, and over 22,000 workers died from yellow fever and malaria in less than a decade. In 1889 insurmountable construction problems and financial mismanagement drove the company bankrupt.

The USA saw the French failure as a lucrative business opportunity that was ripe for the

taking. Although they had previously been scouting locations for a canal in Nicaragua, the USA pressured the French to sell them their concessions. In 1903 Philippe Bunau-Varilla, one of Lesseps' chief engineers, agreed to the sale, though the Colombian government promptly refused. Bunau-Varilla approached the US government to back Panama if it declared its independence from Colombia. On November 3, 1903, a revolutionary junta declared Panama independent, and the US government immediately recognized the sovereignty of the country – what would be the first of a series of American interventions in Panama. Although Colombia sent troops by sea to try to regain control of the province, US battleships prevented them from reaching land. In fact, Colombia did not recognize Panama as a legitimately separate nation until 1921, when the USA paid Colombia US\$25 million in 'compensation.'

Growing Pains

Following independence, Bunau-Varilla was appointed Panamanian ambassador to the USA, with his first act of office paving the way for future American interventions in the region. Hoping to profit from the sale of canal concessions to the USA, Bunau-Varilla arrived in Washington, DC before Panama could assemble a delegation. On November 18, Bunau-Varilla and US Secretary of State John Hay signed the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty, which gave the USA far more than had been offered in the original treaty. In addition to owning concessions to the canal, the USA was also granted 'sovereign rights in perpetuity over the Canal Zone,' an area extending 8km on either side of the canal, and a broad right of intervention in Panamanian affairs.

Despite opposition from the tardy Panamanian delegation as well as lingering questions about its legality, the treaty was ratified, ushering in an era of friction between the USA and Panama. Construction began again on the canal in 1904 and despite disease, landslides and harsh weather, the world's greatest engineering marvel was finally completed in only a decade. The first ship sailed through the canal on August 15, 1914.

In the years following the completion of the canal, the US military repeatedly intervened in the country's political affairs. In response to growing Panamanian disenchantment with frequent US interventions, the Hay-Bunau-

Varilla Treaty was replaced in 1936 by the Hull-Alfaro Treaty. The USA relinquished its rights to use its troops outside the Canal Zone and to seize land for canal purposes, and the annual sum paid to Panama for use of the Canal Zone was raised. However, this was not enough to stem the growing wave of Panamanian opposition to US occupation. Anti-US sentiments reached boiling point in 1964 during a student protest that left 27 Panamanians dead and 500 injured. Today, the event is commemorated as Día de Los Mártires, or National Martyrs Day.

As US influence waned, the Panamanian army grew more powerful. In 1968 the Guardia Nacional deposed the elected president and took control of the government. Soon after, the constitution was suspended, the national assembly was dissolved, the press censored and the Guardia's General Omar Torrijos Herrera emerged as the new leader. Despite plunging the country into debt as a result of a massive public works program, Torrijos was successful in pressuring US president Jimmy Carter into ceding control of the canal to Panama. While the resultant Torrijos-Carter Treaty was less than popular in the USA, it guaranteed full Panamanian control of the canal as of December 31, 1999, as well as a complete withdrawal of US military forces.

The Rise of Noriega

Still basking in the glory of the recently signed treaty, Panama was unprepared for the sudden death of Torrijos in a plane crash in 1981. Rumors of foul play swept across the country, and in 1983 Colonel Manuel Antonio Noriega seized the Guardia Nacional, promoted himself to general and made himself the de facto ruler of Panama. Noriega, a former head of Panama's secret police, a former CIA operative and a graduate of the School of the Americas, quickly began to consolidate his power. He enlarged the Guardia Nacional, significantly expanded its authority and renamed it the Panama Defense Forces. He also created a paramilitary 'Dignity Battalion' in every city, town and village, its members armed and ready to inform on any of their neighbors showing less than complete loyalty to the Noriega regime.

Things went from bad to worse in early 1987 when Noriega was publicly accused of involvement in drug trafficking with Colom-

bian drug cartels, murdering his opponents and rigging elections. Many Panamanians demanded Noriega's dismissal, protesting with general strikes and street demonstrations that resulted in violent clashes with the Panama Defense Forces. In February 1988, Panamanian President Eric Arturo Delvalle attempted to dismiss Noriega, but the stalwart general held on to the reins of power, deposed Delvalle and forced him to flee Panama. Noriega subsequently appointed a substitute president who was more sympathetic to his cause.

Noriega's regime became an international embarrassment. In March 1988, the USA imposed economic sanctions against Panama, ending a preferential trade agreement, freezing Panamanian assets in US banks and refusing to pay canal fees. A few days after the sanctions were imposed, an unsuccessful military coup prompted Noriega to step up violent repression of his critics. After Noriega's candidate failed to win the presidential election in May 1989, the general declared the election null and void. Meanwhile, Guillermo Endara, the winning candidate, and his two vice-presidential running mates, were badly beaten by some of Noriega's thugs, and the entire bloody scene was captured by a TV crew and broadcasted internationally. A second failed coup in October 1989 was followed by even more repressive measures.

On December 15, 1989, Noriega's legislature declared him president, and his first official act of office was to declare war on the USA. The following day, an unarmed US marine dressed in civilian clothes was killed by Panamanian soldiers while leaving a restaurant in Panama City.

The Fall of Noriega

The US reaction was swift and unrelenting. In the first hour of December 20, 1989, Panama City was attacked by aircraft, tanks and 26,000 US troops. The invasion, intended to bring Noriega to justice and create a democracy better suited to US interests, left more than 2000 civilians dead, tens of thousands homeless and destroyed entire tracts of Panama City.

On Christmas Day, Noriega claimed asylum in the Vatican embassy. US forces surrounded the embassy and pressured the Vatican to release him. They memorably used that psychological tactic loved by disgruntled teenagers, namely bombarding the embassy with blaring rock music (Van Halen and

Metallica were among the selections). The embassy was also surrounded by mobs of angry Panamanians calling for Noriega to be ousted.

After 10 days of psychological warfare, the chief of the Vatican embassy persuaded Noriega to give himself up by threatening to cancel his asylum. Noriega surrendered to US forces on January 3, and was flown to Miami where he was convicted of conspiracy to manufacture and distribute cocaine. Although he was sentenced in 1992 to 40 years in a Florida prison, he was scheduled to be released on good behavior in September 2007.

Modern Woes

After Noriega's forced removal, Guillermo Endara, the legitimate winner of the 1989 election, was sworn in as president, and Panama attempted to put itself back together. The country's image and economy were in shambles, and its capital had suffered damage not only from the invasion itself, but from the widespread looting that followed. Unfortunately, Endara proved to be an ineffective leader whose policies cut jobs and cost his administration the popularity it initially enjoyed. By the time he was voted out of office in 1994, he was suffering from single-digit approval ratings.

In the 1994 elections, the fairest in recent Panamanian history, Ernesto Pérez Balladares came into office. Under his direction, the Panamanian government implemented a program of privatization that focused on infrastructure improvements, health care and education. Although Pérez Balladares allocated unprecedented levels of funding to Panama's development, he was viewed as corrupt. In the spring of 1999, voters rejected his attempt to change constitutional limits barring a president from serving two consecutive terms.

In 1999 Mireya Moscoso, the widow of popular former president Arnulfo Arias, and Panama's first female leader and head of the conservative Arnulfista Party (PA), took office. Moscoso had ambitious plans for the country, and promised to improve education, health care and housing for the two-thirds of Panamanians below the poverty line. She also promised to generate much-needed jobs and to reduce the staggering unemployment rate.

As Panama celebrated its centenary in 2003, unemployment rose to 18% while underem-

ployment reached 30%. Moscoso also angered many with her wasteful spending – as parts of the country went without food, she paid US\$10 million to bring the Miss Universe pageant to Panama. Moscoso was also accused of looking the other way during Colombian military incursions into the Darién, implying indifference to the terrorism occurring inside the country's borders. When she left office in 2004, Moscoso left behind a legacy of gross incompetence.

Panama is currently under the leadership of Martín Torrijos, a member of the Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) and the son of former leader Omar Torrijos. Although there is still much debate regarding the successes and failures of his administration, he has already implemented a number of much-needed fiscal reforms, including an overhaul of the nation's social security system. Furthermore, his proposal to expand the Panama Canal was overwhelmingly approved in a national referendum on October 22, 2006.

THE CULTURE

The National Psyche

At the crossroads of the Americas, the narrow isthmus of Panama bridges not only two continents but two vastly different paradigms of Panamanian culture and society. While one sphere of Panama clings to the traditions of the past, the other looks to the modernizing influences of a growing economy.

In some ways, these opposing forces are only natural given the many years that Panama has been the object of another country's meddling. From the US-backed independence of 1903 to the strong-armed removal of Noriega in 1989, with half-a-dozen other interventions in between, the USA left a strong legacy in the country. Nearly every Panamanian has a relative or at least an acquaintance living in the USA. Parts of the country seem swept up in mall-fervor, with architectural inspiration straight out of North America.

Others, however, are not so ready to embrace gringo culture. Indigenous groups such as the Emberá and Kuna are struggling to keep their traditions alive, as more and more of their youth are lured into the Westernized lifestyle of the city.

Given the clash between old and new, it's surprising the country isn't suffering from a serious case of cognitive dissonance. Somehow, the exceptionally tolerant Panamanian

character weathers many contradictions – the old and the new, the grave disparity between rich and poor, and the gorgeous natural environment and its rapid destruction.

Lifestyle

In spite of the skyscrapers and gleaming restaurants lining the wealthier districts of Panama City, nearly a third of the country's population lives in poverty. Furthermore, almost a quarter of a million Panamanians struggle just to satisfy their basic dietary needs. Those hardest hit by poverty tend to be in the least populated provinces: Darién, Bocas del Toro, Veraguas, Los Santos and Colón. There are also a substantial number of very poor people living in the slums of Panama City, where an estimated 20% of the urban population lives. Countrywide, 9% of the population lives in *barriados* (squatter settlements).

For *campesinos* (farmers), life is hard. A subsistence farmer in the interior might earn as little as a few hundred dollars a year, far below the national average of US\$7400 annually per capita. The dwelling might consist of a simple cinderblock building, with a roof and four walls and perhaps a porch. Families have few possessions, and every member assists with working the land or contributing to the household.

The middle and upper class largely reside in Panama City environs, enjoying a level of comfort similar to their economic brethren in Europe and the USA. They live in large homes or apartments, have a maid, a car or two, and for the lucky few a second home on the beach or in the mountains. Cell phones are de-

rigueur. Vacations are often enjoyed outside of the country in Europe or the USA. Most middle-class adults can speak some English, and their children usually attend English-speaking schools.

In the Emberá villages of the Darién, traditional subsistence life continues as it has for hundreds of years. The majority of these people lack clean water and basic sanitation.

People

Of Panama's three million souls, 57% live in urban areas. The majority of the population (65%) is mestizo, which is generally a mix of indigenous and Spanish descent. Many non-black immigrants are also thrown into this category, including a sizable Chinese population: some estimate that as much as 10% of the population is of Chinese ancestry. There are also a number of other sizable groups. About 14% of Panamanians are of African descent, 10% of Spanish descent, 5% of mixed African and Spanish descent, and 6% are indigenous.

Black Panamanians are mostly descendants of English-speaking West Indians such as Jamaicans and Trinidadians, who were brought to Panama as laborers. Of the several dozen native tribes that inhabited Panama when the Spanish arrived, only seven remain. Most famous is the Kuna tribe, which lives along the Caribbean coast between Colón Province and Colombia. The Emberá and Wounaan inhabit the jungle of the eastern Panamá province and the Darién, while the Ngöbe-Buglé can be found in Chiriquí, Veraguas and Bocas del Toro. The Teribe and Bokotá inhabit Bocas province, while the Bribri are found both in

PANAMA HATS

A panama hat or simply a panama is a traditional brimmed hat made from a panama-hat palm (*Carludovica palmata*). Although originally from Ecuador, the hat became popular in Panama during the construction of the canal when thousands of hats were imported for use by the workers. After USA president Theodore Roosevelt donned a panama during his historic visit to the canal, the hats became the height of fashion.

Unlike the better-known panamas from Ecuador, which are woven from crown to brim in one piece, this kind is made by a braiding process using a half-inch braid of palm fiber, usually of alternating or mixed white and black. The finished braid is wound around a wooden form and sewn together at the edges, producing a round-crowned, black-striped hat. It's a common sight in the rural parts of Panama, and it's not unusual for political contenders to don hats periodically to appear as 'one of the people.'

There's no one place to buy panama hats, though the highest quality panamas typically come from the interior. Prices range from US\$10 to US\$150.

Costa Rica and in Panama along the Talamanca reserve.

Despite modernizing influences, each of Panama's indigenous groups maintains its own language and culture. The Ngöbe-Buglé is Panama's largest tribe, and numbers about 125,000. The Kuna, who govern their ancestral territory as the autonomous region of the Comarca de Kuna Yala, are the most politically organized, and regularly send representatives to the national legislature.

ARTS

Panama's music scene reflects its ethnic mix. A slow spin on the radio dial or a hard look at Panamanian nightclubs will reveal salsa, Latin and American jazz, traditional music from the central provinces, reggae, reggaeton and Latin, British and American rock 'n' roll. The country's most renowned salsa singer, Harvard-educated Rubén Blades, has had several international hits and appeared in several movies – he even ran for president in 1994, finishing third. The jazz composer and pianist Danilo Pérez is widely acclaimed by critics, while Los Rabanes is the most well-known rock group in the country. Heavy on the accordion, Panamanian folk music (called *típico*), is well represented by Víctor Vergara and Samy and Sandra Sandoval.

Several of Panama's best novelists wrote around the mid-20th century. *El Ahogado* (The Drowned Man), a 1937 novel by Tristán Solarte (pen name for Guillermo Sánchez Borbón, a well-known poet, novelist and journalist), ingeniously blends elements of the detective, gothic and psychological genres, with a famous local myth. *El Desván* (In the Garret), a 1954 novel by Ramón H Jurado, explores the emotional limits of the human condition. *Gamboa Road Gang*, by Joaquín Beleño, is the best work of fiction about the political and social events surrounding the Panama Canal.

Trained in France, Roberto Lewis (1874–1949) became the first prominent figure on Panama's art scene. He painted portraits of the nation's leaders and allegorical images to decorate public buildings; among his most notable works are those in the Palacio de las Garzas in Panama City. In 1913 Lewis became the director of Panama's first art academy, where he and his successor, Humberto Ivaldi (1909–47), educated a generation of artists. Among the school's students were

Juan Manuel Cedeño and Isaac Benítez, as well as the painters who would come to the fore in the 1950s and '60s, including Alfredo Sinclair, Guillermo Trujillo, Eudoro Silvera and others.

SPORT

Owing to the legacy of US military occupation, baseball is the national pastime in Panama. Although there are no professional teams in Panama, the amateur leagues host games in stadiums throughout the country. Panamanians have their favorite teams, but are usually more interested in their favorite players in the US major leagues. Mariano Rivera, the record-setting Panamanian pitcher for the New York Yankees, is a household name. The batting champ Rod Carew is another (former) Panamanian star – inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1991. Roberto Kelly, who played for the Yankees for many years, is also fondly remembered.

Boxing is another popular spectator sport, and it's been a source of pride to Panamanians ever since Roberto Durán, a Panama City native and international boxing legend, won the world championship lightweight title in 1972. He subsequently went on to further great deeds, becoming the world champion in each of the welterweight (1980), light middleweight (1983) and super middleweight (1989) categories.

RELIGION

The many religions of Panama can best be observed by walking the streets of the capital. Among the scores of Catholic churches you'll find breezy Anglican churches filled with worshippers from the West Indies, as well as synagogues, mosques, a shiny Greek Orthodox church, an impressive Hindu temple and a surreal Baha'i house of worship (the headquarters for Latin America).

Freedom of religion is constitutionally guaranteed in Panama, although the pre-eminence of Roman Catholicism is officially recognized, with 77% of the country filling its ranks. Schoolchildren in Panama are given the opportunity to study theology, although it's not compulsory. Protestant denominations account for 12%, Muslims 4.4% and Baha'i 1.2%. Additionally, the country has several thousand Jews, many of whom are recent immigrants from Israel, as well as nearly 25,000 Buddhists and 10,000 Hindus.

The various indigenous groups in Panama also have their own belief systems, although these are fading quickly due to the influence of Christian missionaries. As in other parts of Latin America, the evangelical movement is spreading like wildfire.

Although Catholicism holds the majority, only about 20% of Catholics attend church regularly. The religious orders aren't particularly strong in Panama either – only about 25% of Catholic clergy are Panamanian, while the rest are foreign missionaries.

ENVIRONMENT The Land

Panama is both the narrowest and the southernmost country in Central America. The long S-shaped isthmus borders Costa Rica in the west and Colombia in the east. Its northern Caribbean coastline measures 1160km, compared to a 1690km Pacific coastline in the south, and its total land area is 78,056km. By comparison, Panama is slightly bigger than Ireland or Austria, and roughly the same size as South Carolina.

Panama is just 50km wide at its leanest point, an impressive statistic given that it separates two great oceans. The Panama Canal, which is about 80km long, effectively divides the country into eastern and western regions. Panama is also home to two great mountain ranges, which run along Panama's spine in both the east and the west. The highest point in the country, Volcán Barú, is located in Chiriquí Province, and is also the country's only volcano.

Like all of the Central American countries, Panama has large, flat coastal lowlands, covered in places by huge banana plantations. There are about 480 rivers in Panama and 1518 islands near its shores. The two main island groups are the San Blas and Bocas del Toro Archipelagos on the Caribbean side, but most of the islands are on the Pacific side. Even the Panama Canal has islands, including Isla Barro Colorado, which has a world-famous tropical rain forest research station.

Wildlife

Panama's position as a narrow land bridge between two huge continents has given it a remarkable variety of plant and animal life. Species migrating between the continents have gathered in Panama, which means that it's possible to see South American armadillos, anteaters and sloths alongside North American tapirs, jaguars and deer. With its wide variety of native and migratory species, Panama is one of the world's best places for bird-watchers.

Panama has more than 940 recorded bird species and more than 10,000 plant species, in addition to 125 animal species found nowhere else in the world. The country also has 105 rare and endangered species, including scarlet macaws, harpy eagles (the national bird of Panama), golden frogs, jaguars and various species of sea turtle. Panama has some of the best places to see the quezal.

Lovers of sea turtles and primates are also drawn to the country. Five species of sea turtle can be seen here, while among the primates

STRIKING A DELICATE BALANCE

As little as 50 years ago, over 70% of Panama's total land mass was covered by forest. This sobering statistic gives a quick indication of the country's gravest environmental problem, deforestation. Today, trees continue to be felled at a frightening pace, with the Darién serving as the ecological ground zero.

Unfortunately, much of the population of Panama seems unconcerned with the rain forest's ongoing destruction. For much of the population, hunting and logging have been a way of life for generations, and many communities maintain the belief that their economic welfare depends on these practices. Furthermore, Panama's national parks are staffed by a handful of rangers, though their areas of coverage are colossal; in the Parque Nacional Darién there are never more than 20 rangers assigned to protect 576,000 hectares, an area larger than some countries.

The destruction of the rain forest wipes out native fauna as well as migratory animals, and causes regional water shortages, pollution and erosion. It also threatens the traditional cultures of the Emberá and the Wounaan, who still rely on the rain forest for survival.

The home page of **Ancon** (Asociación Nacional para la Conservación de la Naturaleza; Map pp648-9; ☎ 314 0060; www.ancon.org in Spanish), a private conservation group that has lobbied strongly for the preservation of Panama's forests, has more information.



are capuchins, tamarins and squirrel, spider and howler monkeys.

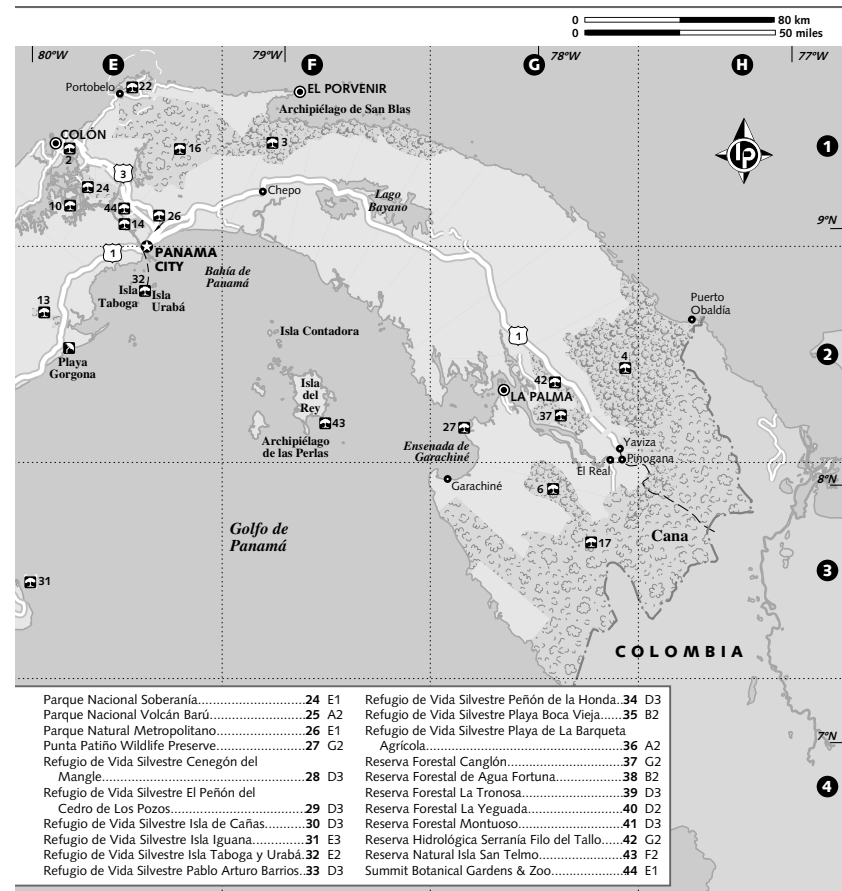
Tropical rain forest is the dominant vegetation in the canal area, along the Caribbean coast and in most of the eastern half of the country. The Parque Nacional Darién protects much of Panama's largest tropical rain-forest region. Other vegetation zones include grasslands on the Pacific coast, mountain forest in the highlands, cloud forest on the highest peaks and mangrove forest on both coasts.

National Parks & Reserves

Panama has 11 national parks and more than two dozen officially protected areas. About one-quarter of Panama is set aside

for conservation, while about 45% of land remains covered by forest. Panama also has more land set aside for habitat protection than any other Central America country, and Panama's forests contain the greatest number of species of all New World countries north of Colombia.

In many of the national parks and protected areas, you'll find mestizo and indigenous villages scattered about. In the most successful scenarios, the communities help protect and maintain the park and its wildlife. However, in regions such as the Darién, trees are being felled at an alarming rate. A 2003 study showed that in the previous 10 years 80,000 hectares of rain forest was hacked down in Darién Province alone.



Water pollution is most evident around Panama City and Colón, where 90% of Panamanians live. Most of the sewage from these cities is untreated and discharged directly into coastal waters and canals. Mangroves, which are important for maintaining the balance of delicate marine ecosystems, are being destroyed at an unsustainable pace. Coral reefs throughout the Caribbean are also endangered. Given the destruction to the environment, it shouldn't come as a surprise that there are over 100 animal species threatened with extinction in Panama.

The country's national environmental authority is **ANAM** (Autoridad Nacional del Ambiente; Map pp652-3; ☎ 315 0855; Panama City; ☹ 8am-4pm), which manages the national-park system. To enter a

national park, visitors must pay US\$3 (US\$10 if it is a marine park) at either the ANAM headquarters in Panama City, a regional ANAM office or at an ANAM ranger station within a national park. Permits to camp or stay at an ANAM ranger station (US\$5 to US\$10) can be obtained at the same places as well.

The chief private environmental group, however, is the **Asociación Nacional para la Conservación de la Naturaleza** (National Association for the Conservation of Nature; Ancon; Map pp648-9; ☎ 314 0060; www.ancon.org in Spanish). Ancon has played a major role in the creation of national parks and on many occasions has spurred ANAM into action. Ancon also provides nature guides and access to its lodges through its subsidiary, Ancon Expeditions (p658).

TRANSPORTATION

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Panama has two international airports. Panama City's **Tocumen International Airport** (☎ 238 4322; airport code PTY) lies about 35km from downtown, and it's where most international flights arrive. **Aeropuerto Enrique Malek** (☎ 721 1072; airport code DAV), in David, which is 75km southeast of the Costa Rican border, frequently handles flights to and from San José, Costa Rica.

COPA (www.copaair.com) is Panama's national airline, offering flights to and from the USA, numerous Latin and South American countries, and the Caribbean. The US Federal Aviation Administration recently assessed COPA Airlines as Category 1, which means it is compliant with international aviation standards.

Panama City is a common destination for travelers flying to/from the region on an open-jaw ticket.

Boat

For information on sailing to Colombia, see p707.

Bus

At all three border crossings with Costa Rica (see p669); you can approach the border via local buses on either side, cross over, board another local bus and continue on your way. Be aware that the last buses leave the border crossings at Guabito and Río Sereno at 7pm and 5pm, respectively; the last bus leaves Paso Canoas for Panama City at 10pm.

Two companies, **Panaline** (☎ 227 8648) and **Tica Bus** (☎ 262 2084), operate direct buses daily between San José in Costa Rica, and Panama City, departing from the Albrook bus terminal (Map pp652–3). It's recommended that you make reservations a few days in advance.

Car & Motorcycle

You can drive your own car from North America to Panama, but the costs of insurance, fuel, border permits, food and accommodations will be much higher than the cost of an airline ticket. As a result, most people opt to fly down and rent cars when they arrive in Panama City.

DEPARTURE TAX & ENTRY FEES

Upon entering Panama, you are required to purchase a tourist card for US\$5. Note that this tourist card is only good for a single entry into Panama.

Unless merely in transit, passengers on outbound international flights must pay a US\$20 departure tax, though this is usually included in the price of your ticket.

If you decide to drive to Panama, get insurance, have your papers in order and never leave your car unattended. US license plates are attractive to some thieves, so you should display these from inside the car.

If you are bringing a car into Panama, you must pay US\$5 for a vehicle control certificate (*tarjeta de circulación*) and another US\$1 to have the car fumigated. You will also need to show a driver's license, proof of ownership and insurance papers. Your passport will be stamped to show that you paid the US\$6 and followed procedures when you brought the vehicle into the country.

GETTING AROUND

Air

Panama has two major domestic carriers: **Air Panama** (☎ 316 9000; www.flyairpanama.com/tickets) and **Aeroperlas** (☎ 315 7500; www.aeroperlas.com). Domestic flights depart Panama City from **Aeropuerto Albrook** (Albrook airport, also Marcos A Gelabert airport; Map pp648–9; ☎ 315 0403) and arrive in destinations throughout the country. For most flights it's wise to book as far in advance as possible – this is particularly true of flights to Comarca de Kuna Yala.

Even if you're on a tight budget, one-way domestic flights are never more than US\$75, and you can sometimes turn a one- or two-day bus/boat journey into a 45-minute flight.

Bicycle

You can bicycle through Panama easily enough, but using a bicycle to travel within larger Panamanian cities – particularly Panama City – is not wise. The roads tend to be narrow, there are no bike lanes, bus drivers and motorists drive aggressively and it rains a lot, reducing motorists' visibility and your tires' ability to grip the road.

Outside the cities, roads tend to be in fine shape, although parts of the Pan-American

Hwy are narrow, leaving little room to move aside should a car pass by. Lodging is rarely more than a day's bike ride away.

Boat

Boats are the chief means of transportation in several areas of Panama, particularly in Darién Province, the Archipiélago de las Perlas, and the San Blas and Bocas del Toro island chains. While at least one eccentric soul has swum the entire length of the Panama Canal, most people find that a boat simplifies the transit enormously.

The backpacker mecca of Bocas del Toro on Isla Colón is accessible from Changuinola by speedy and inexpensive water taxis – see p692 for details.

Colombian and Kuna merchant boats carry cargo and passengers along the San Blas coast between Colón and Puerto Obaldía, stopping at up to 48 of the islands to load and unload passengers and cargo. However, these boats are occasionally used to traffic narcotics, and they're often dangerously overloaded. Hiring a local boatman is a wiser option – see Comarca de Kuna Yala, p707, for more details.

Since there aren't many roads in eastern Darién Province, boat travel is often the most feasible way to get from one town to another, especially during the rainy season. The boat of choice here is a *piragua* (long canoe), carved from the trunk of a giant ceiba tree. *Piraguas'* shallow hulls allow them to ride the many rivers of eastern Panama. Many such boats – including the ones travelers usually hire – are motorized. See the Darién Province (p706) for more details.

Bus

You can take a bus to just about any community in Panama that is reachable by road. Some of the buses are huge, new Mercedes Benzes equipped with air-con, movie screens and reclining seats. These top-of-the-line buses generally cruise long stretches of highway.

More frequently used – and often seen on the Carretera Interamericana – are Toyota Coaster buses that can seat 28 people. These are affectionately called *chivas*, and although they're not as comfortable as the Mercedes Benzes, they're certainly not expensive. They are an excellent way to visit towns in the interior and along the Interamericana.

Panama does have its share of school buses – colorfully painted machines nicknamed

diablos rojos (red devils) – but these operate only in urban areas. In Panama City, they're a cheap (US\$0.25) and easy way to get around, though not always the fastest.

Car & Motorcycle

Due to the low cost and ready availability of buses and taxis, it isn't necessary to rent a vehicle in Panama unless you intend to go to places far off the beaten track. Should you choose to rent, however, you'll find car-rental agencies in Panama City, David and Chitré. Several agencies also have offices at Tocumen International Airport in the capital. To rent a vehicle in Panama, you must be 25 years of age or older and present a passport and driver's license, though some places will rent vehicles to 21-year-olds if you ask politely, pay higher insurance costs, and supply them with a major credit card.

Prices for rentals in Panama run from US\$45 per day for a tiny car to US\$100 per day for a 4WD vehicle (*cuatro por cuatro*). When you rent, carefully inspect the car for minor dents and scratches, missing radio antennae, hubcaps and the spare tire. These damages *must* be noted on your rental agreement; otherwise you may be charged for them when you return the car.

There have been many reports of theft from rental cars so don't leave valuable or luggage unattended. Many hotels provide parking areas for cars.

Hitchhiking

Hitchhiking is not as widespread in Panama as elsewhere in Central America. Most Panamanians travel by bus, and travelers would do best to follow suit. The exception is holiday weekends, when buses are full to overflowing, and hitchhiking may be the only way out of a place. If you get a ride, offer to pay for it when you arrive – '*¿Cuánto le debo?*' ('How much do I owe you?') is the standard way of doing this.

Hitchhiking is never entirely safe in any country, but it's not uncommon in rural areas of the country.

Taxi

Panamanian taxis don't have meters, but there are some set fares. Taxis are cheap, and most of the time plentiful. However, they can be difficult to hail late at night and just before and during holidays. During these times, it's

best to call for a radio taxi. Listings for reliable radio taxis can be found in the Yellow Pages of phone directories throughout Panama, under the heading Taxis.

There is one group of taxis that does charge more than others, and you'd do best to avoid them if possible. These 'sedan' taxis generally mill about the front doors of hotels, restaurants and malls, and ask every exiting individual if he or she would like a cab. Sedan drivers charge at least twice the normal price, so try to avoid them and hail a normal taxi instead.

Train

For details on the scenic train trip between Panama City and Colón, see p663.

PANAMA CITY

pop 446,000

Undoubtedly 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. As a thriving center for international banking and trade, Panama City sports a skyline of shimmering glass-and-steel towers that's reminiscent of Miami. Not surprisingly, the city residents often joke that Panama City is the 'Miami of the South,' except that more English is spoken.

Although there's no shortage of sophisticated dining and chic dance clubs, visitors

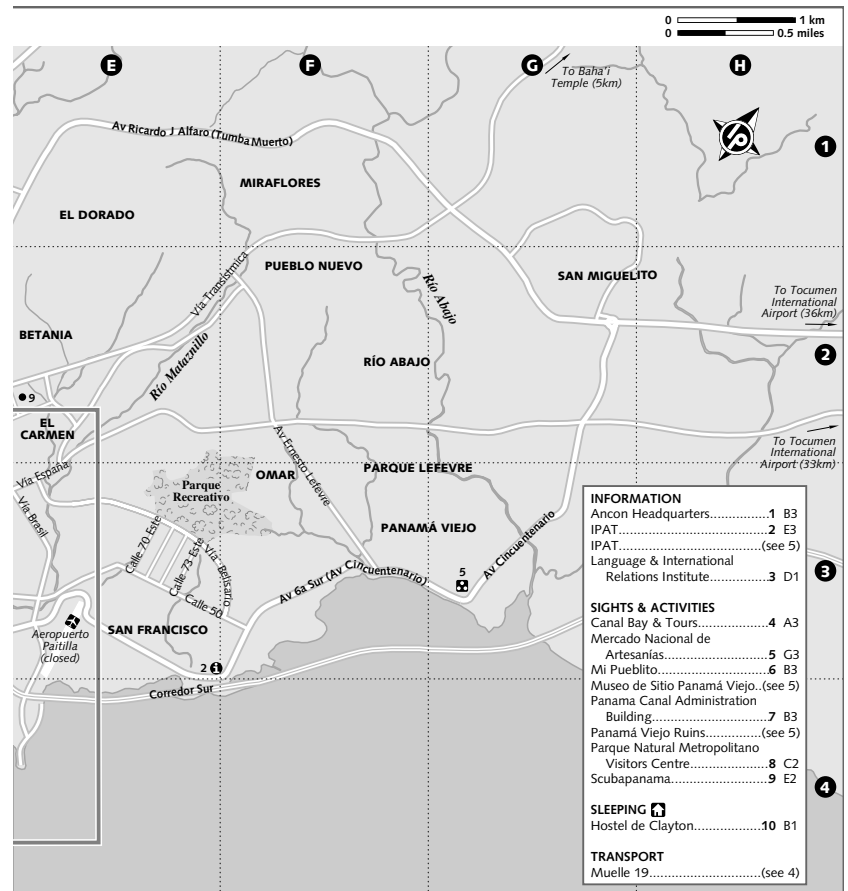
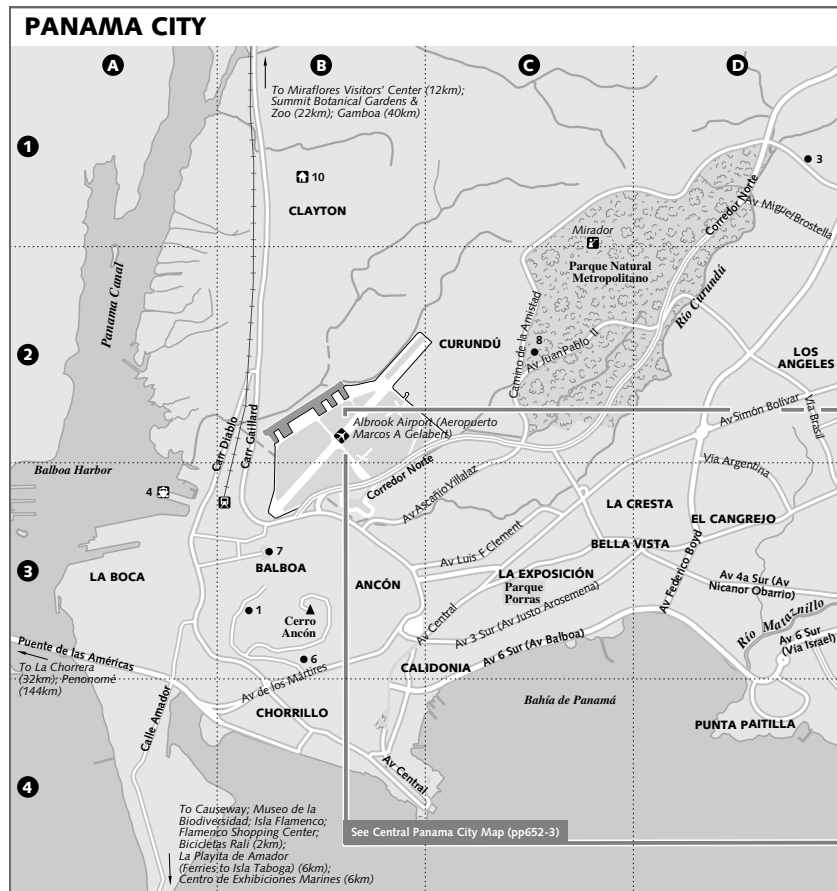
to Panama City are often awestruck by the colonial district of Casco Viejo, a dilapidated neighborhood with cobblestones, old churches and scenic plazas that is reminiscent of old Havana. Abandoned by the city's elite in favor of more stylish neighborhoods, Casco Viejo lay crumbling on the edge of the sea for decades. Following an ambitious reclamation of the old city in recent years, Casco Viejo is priming itself to charm and enchant visitors once more.

Whether you measure the pulse of the city by the beat of the salsa clubs along Calle Uruguay, or by the staccato of the street vendors' voices in Casco Viejo, the chances are you'll slip into the rhythm of this Latin playground.

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 authorities, the city was ransacked and destroyed in 1671 by the Welsh pirate Sir Henry Morgan, leaving only the stone ruins of Panamá Viejo.

Three years later, the city was re-established about 8km to the southwest in the area now known as Casco Viejo. Although the city's peninsular location meant that it was well defended, the destruction of the Caribbean port at Portobelo in 1746 dealt a heavy blow to the Spanish overland trade route. Panama



INFORMATION	
Ancon Headquarters.....	1 B3
IPAT.....	2 E3
IPAT.....	(see 5)
Language & International Relations Institute.....	
.....	3 D1
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	
Canal Bay & Tours.....	4 A3
Mercedo Nacional de Artesanías.....	5 G3
Mi Puebloito.....	6 B3
Museo de Sitio Panamá Viejo.....	(see 5)
Panama Canal Administration Building.....	7 B3
Panamá Viejo Ruins.....	(see 5)
Parque Natural Metropolitano Visitors Centre.....	8 C2
Scubapanama.....	9 E2
SLEEPING	
Hostel de Clayton.....	10 B1
TRANSPORT	
Muelle 19.....	(see 4)

City subsequently declined in importance, though it returned to prominence in the 1850s when the Panama Railroad was completed, and gold seekers on the way to California flooded across the isthmus by train.

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

Today, Panama City is by far the wealthiest city in Central America, and residents are wholly optimistic about the future – and with good reason. Following the handover of the Canal in 1999 and the subsequent closure of American military bases in the country, Panama City is finally in charge of its own destiny. A spate of foreign investment and the likely expansion of the Panama Canal means that the capital is likely to continue its remarkable boom.

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 and the wealthy Balboa and Ancón suburbs built for the American 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 El Cangrejo business and financial district is called Vía España. The other part of the fork becomes Av 1 Norte (José D Espinar), 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*.

Maps

The **Instituto Geográfico Nacional** (Tommy Guardia; Map pp652-3; ☎ 236 2444; 🕒 8am-4pm Mon-Fri), just off

GETTING INTO TOWN

From the Airports

Tocumen International Airport is 35km northeast of the city center. The cheapest way to get into the city is to exit the terminal, cross the street (to the bus shelter) and catch a bus to the city. Buses are marked 'España-Tocumen' (US\$0.25, two hours). Much faster and costlier, taxis can be hired at the Transportes Turísticos desk at the airport exit. Beside it is a taxi stand, with posted prices. Unlicensed taxi drivers will assail you, offering rides at ridiculously high prices, but you can take a *colectivo* (shared taxi) for US\$10 per person (for three or more passengers) or US\$12 per person (for two passengers).

Albrook airport north of Cerro Ancón handles domestic flights. However, the easiest way to get to/from the airport is by taxi, and the ride should cost between US\$2 to US\$4.

From the Bus Terminal

All long-distance buses arrive at the Albrook bus terminal, where there are connections throughout the city. Routes (Vía España, Panamá Viejo) are displayed in the front window and cost US\$0.25. If you arrive after dark, it is recommended that you take a taxi (US\$2 to US\$4) to your destination.

Av Simón Bolívar opposite the Universidad de Panamá, has an excellent map collection for sale.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Exedra Books (Map pp652-3; ☎ 264 4252; cnr Vías España & Brasil; 🕒 9:30am-9:30pm Mon-Sat, 11am-8:30pm Sun) Easily one of Central America's best bookstores.

Earl S Tupper Tropical Sciences Library/ Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI; Map pp652-3; ☎ 212 8000; 🕒 10am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) Stocks books on wildlife and the environment.

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 228 2187, 229 1133)

Fire (☎ 103)

Police (☎ 104)

Immigration

Immigration office (Migración y Naturalización; Map pp652-3; ☎ 225 1373; cnr Av Cuba & Calle 29 Este; 🕒 8am-3pm Mon-Fri) In La Exposición.

Internet Access

Internet cafés are plentiful in Panama City, especially in the El Cangrejo district.

Evolution Planet (Map pp652-3; Av 1a A Norte; per hr US\$1; 🕒 9am-4am)

La Red (Map pp652-3; per hr US\$1; 🕒 10am-midnight) In Casco Antiguo, facing Parque Santa Ana.

Libraries

Earl S Tupper Tropical Sciences Library (Map pp652-3; ☎ 212 8113) A world-class resource for information on tropical biology and conservation.

Medical Services

Medicine in Panama, especially in Panama City, is of a high standard.

Centro Medico Paitilla (Map pp652-3; ☎ 265 8800, 265 8883; Calle 53 Este & Av Balboa) Has well-trained physicians who speak both Spanish and English.

Money

There are plenty of 24-hour ATMs throughout the city.

Banco Nacional de Panamá This counter at Tocumen International Airport is one of the few places in Panama City that exchanges foreign currency.

Panacambios (Map pp652-3; ☎ 223 1800; ground fl, Plaza Regency Bldg, Vía España; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Buys and sells international currencies.

Post

Many hotels sell stamps and some will mail guests' letters.

Main post office (Map pp652-3; Av Balboa btwn Calles 30 & 31; 🕒 7am-5:45pm Mon-Fri, 7am-4:45pm Sat) Holds post restante items for 30 days.

Telephone

Tarjetas (phonecards) in denominations of US\$3, US\$5 and US\$10 can be purchased at pharmacies for local and regional calls, which can be made from any card phone.

Tourist Information

All the IPAT offices give out free maps. The usefulness of a given office depends on the individual employees; note that few IPAT employees speak English. In addition to the listings here there are also IPAT offices at Tocumen International Airport, Albrook airport and a counter at Panamá Viejo.

ANAM (Autoridad Nacional del Ambiente; Map pp652-3; ☎ 315 0855; 🕒 8am-4pm) ANAM can occasionally provide maps and information on national parks. However, they are not organized to provide much assistance to tourists. Located inside Building 804 of the Albrook district – best reached by taxi.

IPAT (Map pp648-9; www.panamainfo.com; ☎ 226 7000; fax 226 3483; Centro Atlapa, Vía Israel; 🕒 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) The entrance is at the rear of the large building.

IPAT branch (Map pp652-3) The pedestrian mall north of Casco Antiguo near Av Balboa.

IPAT kiosk (Map pp652-3; Vía España) Near Calle Ricardo Arias.

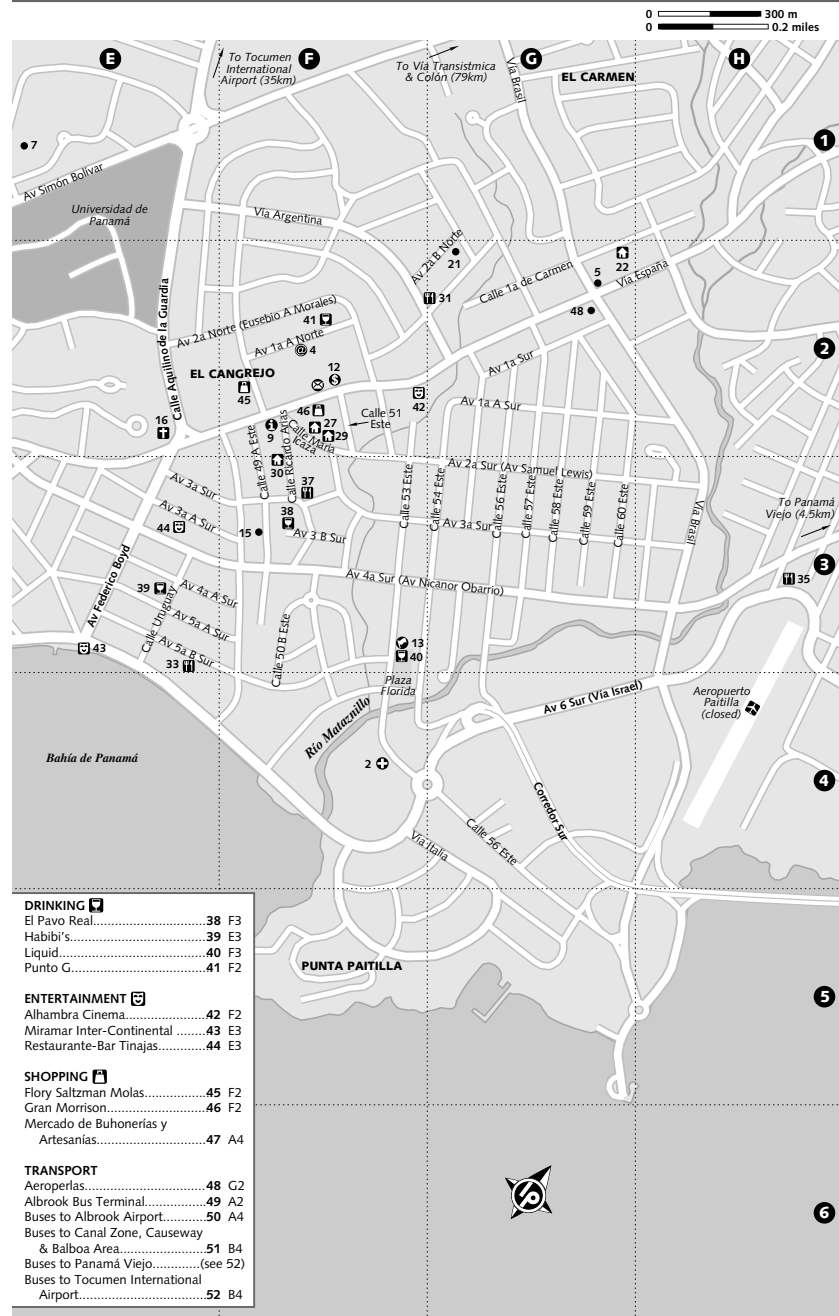
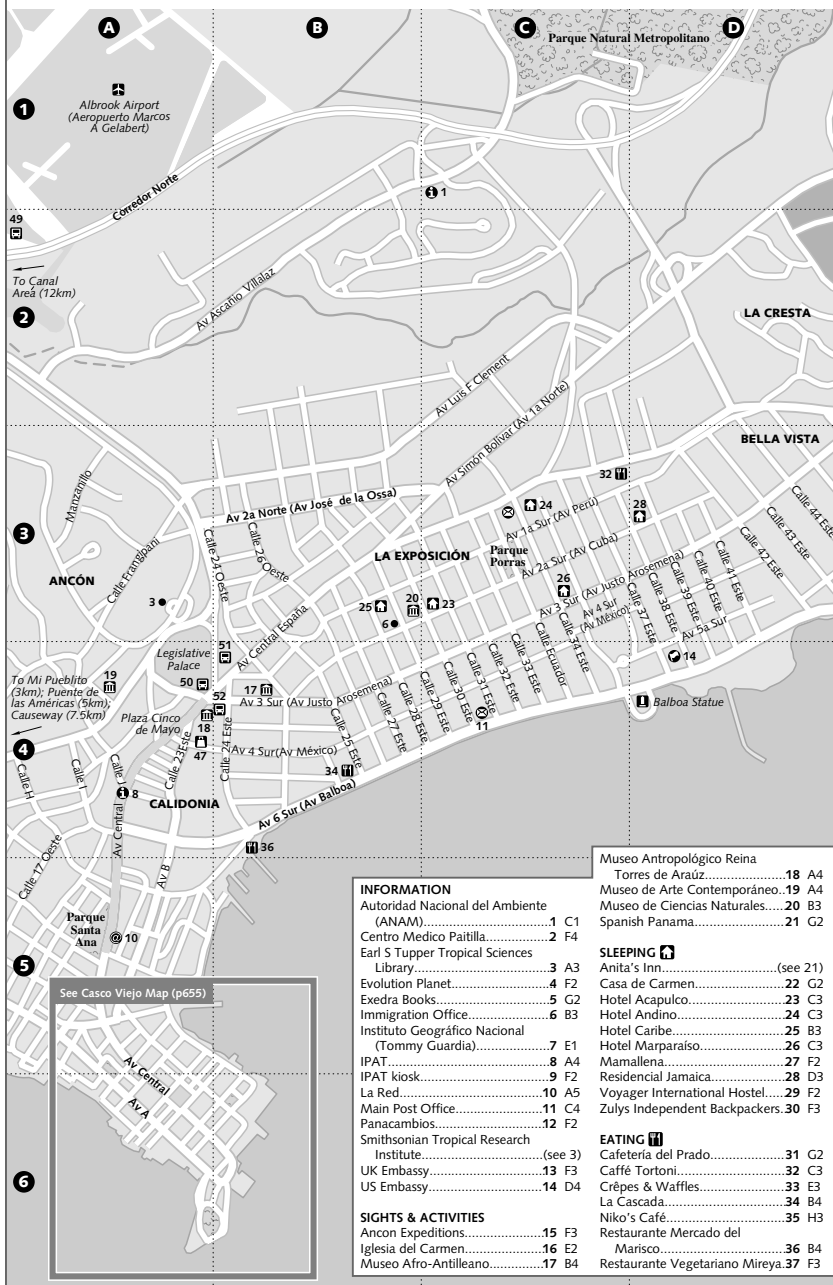
DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Casco Viejo is currently the focus of an ambitious urban renewal program, though it's still a work in progress. Generally speaking, the tip of the peninsula southeast of the Iglesia de la Merced is safe for tourists, especially since the area is heavily patrolled by police officers on bicycles. But exercise caution, stay where it's well lit and where there are plenty of people around, and take taxis at night.

Moving from the tip of the peninsula, you will enter high-density slums where many tourists have been the target of criminals. Other high-crime areas include Curundú, El Chorillo, Santa Ana, San Miguelito and Río Abajo.

When walking the city streets, be aware that drivers do not yield to pedestrians. Also, be on the lookout for missing storm and sewer covers as well as high curbs.

CENTRAL PANAMA CITY



LOCAL VOICES: MAYOR NAVARRO & THE FUTURE OF TOURISM IN PANAMA

Juan Carlos Navarro is the founding director of Ancon, the country's most prominent conservation organization, and is currently serving his second term as the mayor of Panama City.

- **What is your vision for the future of tourism in Panama?** There is a lot of interest and pressure for us to develop tourism in Panama. The good side is that tourism is an opportunity to generate income and jobs in a short period of time. The difficult part is that sustainable tourism needs to take into account the culture and the environment. As an example, you can build massive hotels to promote beach tourism almost anywhere in the world, but if you want to create long-term value, there must be more.
- **What model of tourism would work well in Panama?** It is important to develop Panama as a destination for people who seek extraordinary landscapes. But, I am also interested in developing Panama as a destination for people who want to learn about our culture and history. In my opinion, quality tourism in Panama would be low-volume and high-income so that we can receive the greatest possible economic impact and the least possible environmental and cultural shock. However, how do you achieve this model in a climate of tremendous capital investment? That's our challenge!

As told to Matthew D Firestone

SIGHTS

For information on possible day trips from the city, see p664.

Casco Viejo

Following the destruction of the old city by Henry Morgan in 1671, the Spanish moved their city 8km southwest to a rocky peninsula on the foot of Cerro Ancón. The new location was easier to defend as the reefs prevented ships from approaching the city except at high tide. The new city was also easy to defend as it was surrounded by a massive wall, which is how Casco Viejo (Old Compound; Map p655) got its name.

In 1904, at the time construction began on the Panama Canal, all of Panama City existed where Casco Viejo stands today. However, as population growth and urban expansion pushed the urban boundaries further east, the city's elite abandoned Casco Viejo, and the neighborhood rapidly deteriorated into an urban slum.

Today, Casco Viejo is gradually being gentrified, and the buildings that have already been restored give a sense of how magnificent the area must have looked in past years. International recognition of these efforts resulted in the area being declared a Unesco World Heritage Site in 2003. However, part of the allure of strolling along Casco Viejo's cobbled streets is the dilapidated charm of the crumbling buildings, abandoned houses and boarded-up ruins.

The restoration of Casco Viejo is still happening, so please be aware of your surround-

ings, and exercise caution (see p651) while exploring this fascinating neighborhood.

PLAZA DE LA INDEPENDENCIA

This **plaza** (Map p655) is the heart of Casco Antiguo, and was the site where Panama declared its independence from Colombia on November 3, 1903.

IGLESIA DE SAN JOSÉ

This **church** (Map p655; Av A) protects the famous Altar de Oro (Golden Altar), which was about the only thing of value salvaged after Henry Morgan sacked Panamá Viejo. According to local legend, when word came of the pirate's impending attack, a priest painted the altar black to disguise it. The priest told Morgan that the famous altar had been stolen by another pirate, and convinced Morgan to donate handsomely for its replacement. Morgan is said to have told the priest, 'I don't know why, but I think you are more of a pirate than I am.' Whatever the truth, the baroque altar was later moved from the old city to the present site.

TEATRO NACIONAL

Built in 1907, the interior of this ornate **theater** (Map p655; ☎ 262 3525; Av B) has been completely restored, and boasts red and gold decorations, a once-magnificent ceiling mural by Roberto Lewis (one of Panama's finest painters) and an impressive crystal chandelier. Performances are still held here; to find out about them, or

just to have a look at the theater, go around to the office door at the side of the building.

PLAZA DE FRANCIA

At the tip of the point is this **plaza** (Map p655), which displays large stone tablets and statues dictating the story (in Spanish) of the French role in the construction of the canal. The plaza is dedicated to the memory of the 22,000 workers, most of them from France, Guadeloupe and Martinique, who died trying to create a canal. Most were killed by yellow fever and malaria, and among the busts is a monument to the Cuban doctor Carlos J Finlay, who discovered how mosquitoes transmit yellow fever. His work led to the eradication of the disease in Panama.

PASEO LAS BÓVEDAS

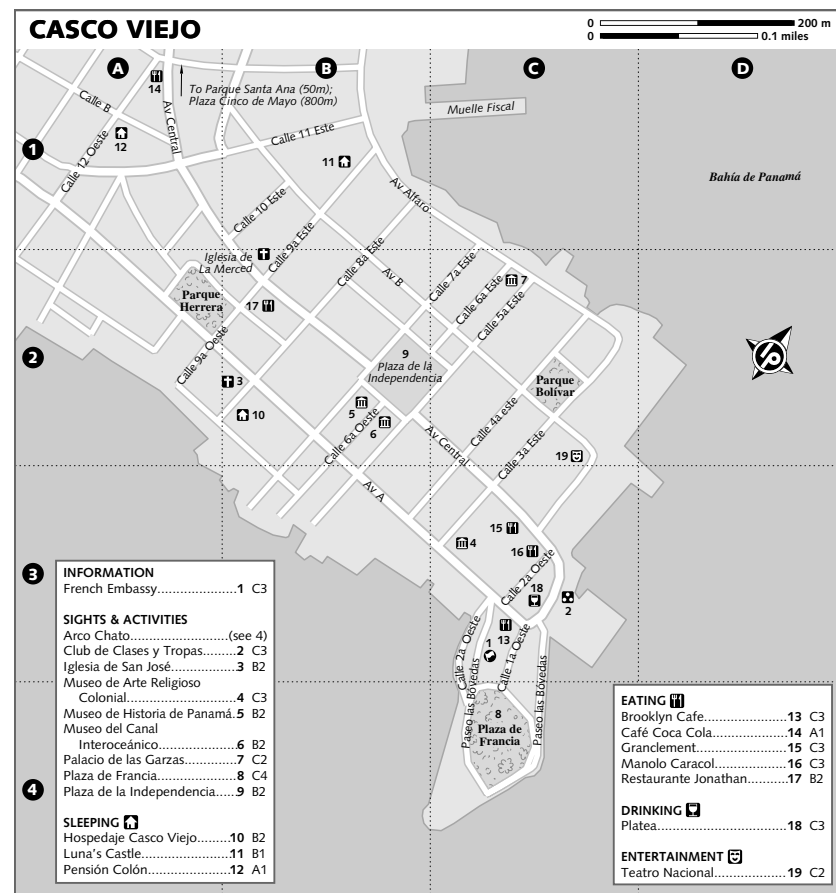
This **esplanade** (Map p655) runs along the top of the sea wall built by the Spanish to protect the city. From here, you can see the Bridge of the Americas arching over the waterway and the ships lining up to enter the canal.

PALACIO DE LAS GARZAS

The **presidential palace** (Map p655; Av Alfaro) is named after the great white herons that reside here. The president of Panama lives on the upper floor.

CLUB DE CLASES Y TROPAS

This abandoned **ruin** (Map p655; Calle 1a Oeste) was once the favorite hang-out of General Noriega, though it was virtually destroyed



during the 1989 invasion. Some fresh paint was selectively applied in early 2000, when scenes from the movie *The Tailor of Panama* were filmed here.

MUSEO DE ARTE RELIGIOSO COLONIAL

Housed beside the ruins of the Iglesia y Convento de Santo Domingo, this **art museum** (Map p655; ☎ 228 2897; cnr Av A & Calle 3 Este; admission US\$1; 🕒 8am-4pm Tue-Sat) has a collection of colonial-era religious artifacts, some dating from the 16th century. Just inside the doorway of the ruins is the **Arco Chato**, a long arch that has stood here, unsupported, for centuries. It reportedly played a part in the selection of Panama over Nicaragua as the site for the canal: its survival was taken as proof that the area was not subject to earthquakes. It suddenly collapsed in 2003.

MUSEO DEL CANAL INTEROCÉANICO

This impressive **museum** (Map p655; ☎ 211 1995; cnr Av Central & Calle 6a Oeste; admission US\$2; 🕒 9:30am-5:30pm Tue-Sun) is housed in the beautifully restored building that once served as the headquarters for the original French canal company. The Panama Canal Museum (as it's more commonly known) presents excellent exhibits on the famous waterway, framed in its historical and political context. Signs are in Spanish, but English-speaking guides and audio tours (US\$5) are available.

MUSEO ANTROPOLÓGICO REINA TORRES DE ARAÚZ

Opposite the Plaza Cinco de Mayo, this excellent **museum** (Map pp652-3; ☎ 212 3079; Av Central; admission US\$2; 🕒 10am-4pm Tue-Sun) displays works of Panamanian anthropology and archaeology, including pre-Columbian artifacts.

MUSEO DE HISTORIA DE PANAMÁ

This modest **museum** (Map p655; ☎ 228 6231; Calle 6a Oeste; admission free; 🕒 8:30am-3:30pm Mon-Fri) has a small selection of exhibits covering Panamanian history from the colonial period to the modern era.

Panamá Viejo

For over 150 years, the city of Panamá was the metropolis of the Pacific. In addition to being a gateway for the bullion of Peru, it was also a major trading post for silks and spices that were imported from the Orient. The city's riches were the envy of pirates the world over.

When Panamá fell to Henry Morgan in 1671, the city contained a magnificent cathedral, several beautiful churches, thousands of colonial homes and hundreds of warehouses stocked with foreign goods. However, after the plundering had ceased, Panamá Viejo was reduced to mere beams and stone blocks.

Although the ruins were left intact as recently as 1950, the expansion of the capital resulted in the transformation of Panamá into a squatter camp. Although the government declared the ruins a protected site in 1976 (Unesco followed suit in 1997), most of the old city had already been dismantled and overrun.

Today much of Panamá Viejo lies buried under a poor residential neighborhood, though the ruins are definitely worth visiting, even if only to stand on the hallowed grounds of one of North America's important colonial cities.

PANAMÁ VIEJO RUINS

The **ruins** (Map pp648-9) of Panamá Viejo, founded in 1519, are not fenced in, so you can visit them anytime, though it's probably best to explore the area during the daylight hours. The ruins cover a large area, and you can still see the cathedral with its stone tower, the plaza beside it, the convent of Santo Domingo, the Iglesia de San José, the hospital of San Juan de Dios and the city hall.

MERCADO NACIONAL DE ARTESANÍAS

Panamá Viejo buses (US\$0.25) coming from Plaza Cinco de Mayo will drop you off at this **artisans market** (National Artisans Market; Map pp648-9; 🕒 9am-6pm), which lies beside the bulk of the ruins.

MUSEO DE SITIO PANAMÁ VIEJO

Adjacent to the artisans market is this **museum** (Map pp648-9; admission US\$2; 🕒 9am-5pm), which contains a rather impressive scale model of Panamá Viejo prior to 1671, as well as a few surviving colonial artifacts. All signs are in Spanish, though a brochure and tape recording recount the site's history in English.

Causeway

At the Pacific entrance to the Panama Canal, a 2km palm tree-lined *calzada* (causeway) connects the four small islands of Naos, Culobra, Perico and Flamenco to the mainland. The causeway is the popular place to be in

the early morning and late afternoon when residents head here to walk, jog, skate, cycle or simply escape the noise and pollution of the city. The causeway also offers sweeping views of the skyline and the old city, and you can see flocks of brown pelicans diving into the sea here most times of the year.

At the causeway entrance, **Bicicletas Rali** (🕒 8am-6pm Sat & Sun) operates a booth where you can rent a bicycle for US\$3 per hour or in-line skates for US\$1 per hour.

The interesting **Centro de Exhibiciones Marines** (☎ 212 8000 ext 2366; admission US\$1; 🕒 1-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun), operated by the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI), includes an informative marine museum with signs in English and Spanish, two small aquariums and a nature trail through a patch of dry forest containing sloths and iguanas.

Isla Flamenco is home to an enormous shopping center that is chock full of open-air restaurants as well as number of high-class bars and clubs.

The easiest way to reach the causeway is by taxi (US\$4 to US\$6).

Parque Natural Metropolitano

Up on a hill, north of downtown, this 265-hectare national park (Map pp648-9) protects a wild area of tropical forest within the city limits. It has two main walking trails, the **Nature Trail** and the **Titi Monkey Trail**, which join to form one long loop. The 150m-high **mirador** (lookout) offers views of Panamá City, the bay and the canal all the way to the Miraflores Locks.

Mammals in the park include *titi* monkeys, anteaters, sloths and white-tailed deer; reptiles include iguanas, turtles and tortoises. More than 250 bird species have been spotted here.

EL DONALDO

As an old city with European airs and a nightlife to rival Miami, Panamá City has it all, not to mention the fact it's less than an hour away from mountains, beaches and rain forests. Not surprisingly, some seriously swish high-rise apartments are going up by the dozen.

In 2005 the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) ranked Panamá as the No 4 place in the world to retire, dubbing Panamá City the 'Dubai of the Western hemisphere,' due in part to the Panamanian government's generous pension program. The real-estate boom is so lucrative that 'the Donald' himself is getting in on the action. Invigorated by the success of his absurd reality-TV show, Donald Trump has already begun constructing the Trump Ocean Club, a US\$220 million project that will boast a 65-story condominium tower, an international casino and also a private beach club. Just how the Donald can be stopped is anyone's guess.

The park was the site of an important battle during the US invasion to oust Noriega. Also of historical significance are the concrete structures just past the park entrance, which were used during WWII as a testing and assembly plant for aircraft engines.

The park is bordered on the west and north by Camino de la Amistad; Av Juan Pablo II runs right through the park. For a self-guided tour, pick up a pamphlet in Spanish and English at the **visitors center** (Map pp648-9; ☎ 232 5516; admission US\$1; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat), about 40m north of the park entrance. Rangers offer one-hour tours to groups of five or more (per person US\$6), but you need to call in advance.

Museums

The strength of Panamá City's museums lies not in a single institution or two, but in their tremendous variety. In addition to those listed in Casco Viejo, Panamá City is home to several other interesting museums.

Note that at the time of writing, construction on the **Museo de la Biodiversidad** (Museum of Biodiversity; www.biomuseopanama.org), designed by world-renowned architect Frank Gehry, was nearing completion. It's by the Causeway.

Museo Afro-Antilleano (Map pp652-3; ☎ 262 5348; cnr Av Justo Arosemena & Calle 24 Este; admission US\$1; 🕒 8:30am-3:30pm Tue-Sat) has exhibits on the history of Panamá's West Indian community.

Near Av de los Mártires in the Ancón district, **Museo de Arte Contemporáneo** (Map pp652-3; ☎ 262 8012; admission free; 🕒 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat & 9am-3pm Sun) hosts permanent and changing contemporary art exhibits by prominent Latin-American artists.

Museo de Ciencias Naturales (Map pp652-3; ☎ 225 0645; Av Cuba btwn Calles 29 Este & 30 Este; admission US\$1; 🕒 9am-3:45pm Tue-Sat) features works on the

natural sciences, flora, fauna, geology and paleontology of Panama.

The **Panama Canal Administration Building** (Map pp648-9; ☎ 225 0345; Balboa Heights; admission free; 🕒 7:30am-4:15pm Mon-Fri) has an impressive display of murals in its rotunda room, which depict the story of the canal's construction.

Mi Pueblito

At the foot of Cerro Ancón, on the western side of town, **Mi Pueblito** (My Little Village; Map pp648-9; Av de Los Mártires; admission US\$1; 🕒 9am-9pm Tue-Sun) features life-size replicas of rural villages found on the Península de Azuero, in Bocas del Toro and in the Darién. It also features extensive shops that sell handicrafts from throughout the country, as well as a handful of decent restaurants. Folk dances accompanied by live music are staged on Friday and Saturday at around 6pm – they're touristy but still worth a look.

Baha'i House of Worship

On the outskirts of Panama City, 11km from the city center on the Transisthmian Hwy, the white-domed **Baha'i temple** (☎ 231 1137; 🕒 10am-6pm) looms like a giant egg atop the crest of a hill. The inside is surprisingly beautiful, with a fresh breeze always present. The Baha'i House of Worship serves all of Latin America.

Information about the faith is available in English and Spanish at the temple; readings from the Baha'i writings (also in English and Spanish) are held Sunday mornings at 10am. Any bus to Colón can let you off on the highway, but it's a long walk up the hill. A taxi from Panama City costs around US\$10.

COURSES

Language & International Relations Institute

(Ileri; Map pp648-9; ☎ /fax 260 4424; isls.com/panama/schools/ileri.html; Camino de la Amistad) Located in the El Dorado neighborhood, Ileri offers four hours of one-on-one Spanish instruction per day, five days a week. Costs start at US\$300 for the first week (with lodging, meals, trips and activities), and then go down with each subsequent week. The weekly rate without lodging starts at US\$200.

Spanish Panama (Map pp652-3; ☎ 213 3121; www.spanishpanama.com; Av 2a B Norte) This immensely popular language school gets rave reviews from travelers. It has a similar structure to Ileri: four hours of one-on-one classes daily and homestays with meals for US\$375 per week (long-term discounts are available). It also offers a 'backpacker special,' which includes classes with dorm stay for US\$275 per week.

TOURS

Ancon Expeditions (Map pp652-3; ☎ 269 9415; www.anconexpeditions.com; El Dorado Bldg, Calle 49 Este near Av 3 Sur) Highly recommended by travelers the world over, Ancon was created by Panama's top conservation organization, and employs some of the country's finest nature guides. Ancon offers a number of unique trips including forays into the Darién jungle (see p706) and overnight stays at private lodges.

Scubapanama (Map pp648-9; ☎ 261 3841; www.scubapanama.com) Located in the El Carmen area of Panama City, Scubapanama is the country's oldest and most respected dive operator, and offers a variety of dive trips throughout Panama.

VOLUNTEERING

SOS Children's Villages (☎ in Austria 43 368 6678; www.sos-childrensvillages.org) is a nongovernmental organization that is active in the field of children's needs, concerns and rights. Its activities focus on neglected and abandoned children and orphans, as well as disadvantaged families. A variety of volunteer placements are available, though it's essential that you contact SOS in advance.

For more on volunteering see also p717.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Although not as famous as the celebrations in Rio de Janeiro or New Orleans, **Carnaval** in Panama City is celebrated with the same level of merriment and wild abandon during the days preceding Ash Wednesday. From Saturday until the following Tuesday, work is put away, and masks, costumes and confetti are brought forth. For a period of 96 hours, almost anything goes.

For a list of events, check out the arts section in the Sunday edition of *La Prensa* as well as the back pages of the *Panama News*.

SLEEPING

In comparison to other major cities in Central America (especially San José), the backpacker scene in Panama City is still in its infancy. Don't expect to find upmarket backpacker hotels complete with swimming pools, hot showers and rooftop bars. However, there are still a number of cheap and comfortable spots worth checking out.

Casco Viejo

In the past, accommodations in Casco Viejo (Map p655) were best avoided, unless you were looking to rent by the hour. Today this

rapidly changing neighborhood is home to a handful of recommended places; bedding down in Casco Viejo is a great away to soak up its old-world charm.

Pensión Colón (☎ 228 8506; cnr Calles 12 Oeste & B; s/d US\$9/10, with bathroom US\$10/11) Originally built to house Panama Canal workers, this handsome hotel has an impressive lobby complete with the original ornate Spanish tile work. Unfortunately, the place has seen many years of neglect, so it's best to check out a few rooms first, though a sagging mattress and a leaky sink are offset by incredible views from the balcony.

Hospedaje Casco Viejo (☎ 211 2027; www.hospedajecascoviejo.com; Calles 8a Este; dm US\$7; s with/without bathroom US\$12/10; 📺 📺) A welcome addition to the Casco Viejo scene, this warm and inviting colonial mansion turned *hospedaje* (guest-house) is arguably the best deal in town. Whether you bed down in the dorm or splurge on a private bathroom, it's hard to beat these prices, especially since guests can take advantage of the communal kitchen, free wi-fi and the open-air courtyard.

Luna's Castle (☎ 262 1540; www.lunacastle.com; Calle 9; dm US\$9, d incl breakfast US\$22; 📺 📺) From the same crazy, twisted minds that brought you Mondo Taitu and Hostel Heike in Bocas del Toro, Luna's Castle is, bar-none, the best backpacker spot in Panama City. Housed in a creaky, colonial mansion near the water's edge, it masterfully blends historic Spanish colonial architecture with funky, laid-back backpacker vibes. In the evenings, the attached 9th Avenue Bar is the best joint in the city for anyone smitten with an incurable case of wanderlust.

La Exposición & Bella Vista

The neighborhoods of La Exposición and Bella Vista (Map pp652-3) are home to a number of fairly standard budget and mid-range hotels.

Residencial Jamaica (☎ 225 9870; Av Cuba & Calle 38 Este; d US\$20; 📺) This coral pink palace offers secure, clean rooms in a mellow corner location. The light-filled rooms are a good deal at this price, especially since they come with air-con, cable TV and private hot-water bathrooms.

Hotel Acapulco (☎ 225 3832; Calle 30 Este; s/d US\$20/22; 📺) A discernible step up from the standard hotel fare in this part of town, the Acapulco combines professionalism with a

certain no-nonsense style. This is reflected in the spotless rooms complete with air-con, private hot-water bathroom, cable TV and balconies with French doors.

Hotel Andino (☎ 225 1162; Calle 35; s/d US\$22/25; 📺 📺) Rooms at the Hotel Andino lack charm (almost to the point of dowdiness), but they're clean, big and breezy and equipped like a start-up apartment. If you don't feel like leaving the hotel at all, there's a bar and restaurant here, making it a convenient choice if you just have to crash overnight between bus departures.

Hotel Marparaíso (☎ 227 6767; Calle 34 Este; s/d US\$22/28; 📺 📺) Travelers in the know choose Hotel Marparaíso simply because staff pick you up at the airport for free, which saves you some serious cash. The rooms themselves are fairly unremarkable, though at least you can take a hot shower, watch some satellite TV and blast the air-con while recuperating from a long flight.

Hotel Caribe (☎ 225 0404; cnr Calle 28 Este & Av Perú; s/d US\$28/34; 📺 📺) Psychedelic and slightly retro (by default rather than design), this 250-room hotel has an intrigue that grows on you. Lurid orange and brown dominate the color scheme and the lighting is terrible, but there's something surreal about the rooftop pool overlooking the city.

El Cangrejo

The modern banking district, El Cangrejo (Map pp652-3) is new and shiny. Most of the hotels here are pricey affairs, though there are a handful of recommended hostels and budget hotels.

Zulus Independent Backpackers (☎ 6605 4742; www.geocities.com/zulus_independent_backpacker; Calle Ricardo Arias 8; s-/d-bed dm US\$6.90/11; 📺 📺) The cheapest dorm bed in the city can be yours at this relaxed spot, which was designed with the backpacker in mind. It's still working out the kinks, but the warm atmosphere is likely to make Zulus a popular stop on the gringo trail.

Voyager International Hostel (☎ 260 5913; www.geocities.com/voyagerih/english.html; Calle Maria Icaza; dm/d US\$8/17; 📺 📺) Panama City's first hostel still boasts incredible wraparound views of the city, though its reputation amongst backpackers has plummeted in recent years. Ragged dorms, poor facilities and surly staff are reason enough to look elsewhere.

Mamallena (☎ 6538 9745; www.mamallena.com; Calle Maria Icaza; dm US\$10; 📺 📺) Literally next door

to Voyager, Mamallena is one of the newest hostels in Panama City, and offers clean and comfortable air-conditioned dorm rooms and basic shared facilities. The atmosphere is as sterile as a hospital waiting room, which means the quality of your time at Mamallena depends on the company.

Anita's Inn (☎ 213 3121; www.hostelspanama.com; Av 2a B Norte; dm US\$10, s from US\$15; 🏠 📺) Affiliated with Spanish Panama (p658), this cozy guesthouse is conveniently located in the same building as the language school. Even if you're not brushing up on your Spanish, the communal atmosphere, comfortable rooms and relaxing location make Anita's an excellent choice.

Casa de Carmen (☎ 263 4366; serviturisa@cableonda.net; Calle 1a de Carmen 32 near Vía Brasil; dm/d US\$14/30; 🏠 📺) Although slightly more expensive than other budget accommodations, repeat customers agree that Casa de Carmen is Panama City's loveliest budget accommodation. Located in a festive colonial house, it features a variety of individually decorated rooms, each painted a different shade, with matching furniture. Guests can also relax in the lush backyard patio, or hit up the friendly owners for their wealth of knowledge about the city. Reservations recommended.

Clayton

The former US-occupied neighborhood of Clayton is adjacent to the Miraflores Locks of the Panama Canal. You're a taxicab away from downtown, but staying out here is a welcome respite from the noise and congestion of Panama City.

Hostel de Clayton (Map pp648-9; ☎ 317 1634; www.hosteldecayton.com; Calle Guanabana edificio 605B; dm US\$11.50, tw with/without bathroom US\$15/13.50; 🏠 📺) Reminiscent of an army barracks (well, it was one!), this unique hostel is located on the site of the former US Army base of Clayton, though today it's one of the city's up-and-coming residential areas. The rooms and amenities are perfectly suited to the budget traveler, though the real reason you're staying here is to explore the area's quiet, suburban setting and attractive gardens.

EATING

Panama City has hundreds of places to eat, from the gritty working-class hole in the wall to the garden bistro, with everything in between.

Casco Viejo

Casco Viejo (Map p655) is unique in that it's home to some of the city's most exclusive eateries, as well as its cheapest dives.

Café Coca Cola (cnr Av Central & Plaza Santa Ana; set meals under US\$2; 🕒 7:30am-11:30pm) A neighborhood institution, Café Coca Cola is an old-school diner, complete with chess-playing señores and no-nonsense staff. The set meals are excellent.

Restaurante Jonathan (Av Central; meals under US\$2; 🕒 7:30am-11:30pm) A hearty plate of chicken and lentils, or a heavy helping of pork fried rice – you'd be hard-pressed to spend more than a couple of dollars at this local cafeteria-style haunt.

Brooklyn Café (Calle 1a Oeste; coffee & pastry US\$2-3; 🕒 7:30am-7pm) Owned by a Panamanian who fondly recalls her time in the States, this NYC-style café is the perfect spot to linger over a frothy cappuccino and buttery muffin.

Grandement (Av Central; gelato US\$2.50-3.50) Nothing beats the tropical heat like a cool scoop of mango gelato, and there's no better gourmet spot in the city than this French-owned parlor.

Manolo Caracol (Av Central; set lunch US\$10) It's arguably the finest restaurant in the city. Stop by this legendary spot for the affordable set lunch where you indulge in a five-course tapas feast that changes daily.

La Exposición & Bella Vista

Unfortunately, the neighborhoods of La Exposición and Bella Vista (Map pp652-3) lack quality eateries.

Café Tortoní (Av Central España btwn Calles 37 & 43 Este; dishes US\$2-4; 🏠 📺) This small eatery is popular with lunching locals who come for the air-conditioning, though the traditional Panamanian dishes on offer are perfect for filling the gut and not breaking the bank.

Restaurante Mercado del Marisco (cnr Av Balboa & Calle 15 Este; dishes US\$5-12; 🕒 10am-5pm) This casual spot above the fish market serves some of the freshest catch in town, and there's usually an extensive variety of shrimp, lobster and squid on offer.

La Cascada (cnr Av Balboa & Calle 25 Este; dishes US\$3-6) La Cascada has a large garden dining patio and a bilingual menu larger than Noriega's dossier, though you can stick to your budget and still feast on anything from roasted chicken to the catch of the day.

El Cangrejo

El Cangrejo (Map pp652-3) is restaurant-rich.

Restaurante Vegetariano Mireya (cnr Calle Ricardo Arias & Av 3a Sur; most items under US\$1.25; 🕒 6am-10pm Mon-Sat) Mireya is a budget traveler's delight, especially if you're tempted by tasty vegetarian offerings including eggplant Parmesan, soy burgers and freshly squeezed juices.

Niko's Café (Calle 51 Este; meals US\$1-3; 🕒 24hr) This Panama City staple is famous among locals, and serves everything from authentic Greek gyros to the local *sancocho* (a spicy meat-and-vegetable stew).

Cafetería del Prado (Vía Argentina; dishes US\$2-6; 🕒 24hr) If you've been hitting the clubs on Calle Uruguay, this is the perfect spot to go for pancakes at five in the morning.

Crêpes & Waffles (Av 5a B Sur; crêpes US\$3-6) Crêpe and waffle lovers rejoice at this popular spot – favorite items include spinach, ricotta and tomato crepes, though carnivores can opt for the *lomito á la pimienta* (strips of roast beef with pepper sauce).

DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

Bars and clubs open and close with alarming frequency in Panama City, though generally speaking, nightlife is stylish, sophisticated and fairly pricey (US\$5 to US\$30 for cover charge and US\$3 to US\$10 for drinks). With that said, the well-to-do denizens of Panama City love a good scene, so it's worth scrubbing up, donning some nice threads and parting with some dough. You might regret blowing your budget in the morning, but that's the price you pay to party with the beautiful people.

Big areas for nightlife are Casco Viejo, Marbella and the causeway. Bars in Casco Viejo are generally subdued and cater to an older crowd, though there's nothing quite like sipping a perfectly crafted cocktail in a crumbling colonial mansion.

The district of Marbella is home to the always fashionable Calle Uruguay, a strip of trendy bars and clubs that's reminiscent of Miami's South Beach. Although you have to pay to play here, there's nothing quite like a night in Panama City's playground of the rich and sexy.

At the Isla Flamenco shopping center on the causeway you'll find a number of nightlife spots, ranging from packed dance clubs to more low-key watering holes. However, the vibe here is not unlike what you might find

in Las Vegas, so shop around and pick the theme that you like, be it a pirate bar or an Egyptian club.

Pick up a copy of *La Prensa* with the weekend listings, available Thursday and Friday; look for the 'De Noche' section.

Although Panama City is far from being a liberal, or even tolerant, city when it comes to gay rights, there are some excellent gay clubs here. For more information on the gay scene, check out www.farraurbana.com (in Spanish).

Although half the fun of partying it up in Panama City is finding a hidden gem, here's a few of our favorite spots to get you started.

Platea (Map p655; Calle 1a Oeste) With exposed brick walls and a small, intimate stage, this jazz club near Av A wouldn't be out of place in Greenwich Village – minus the Spanish of course.

Habibi's (Map pp652-3; Calle Uruguay) The upstairs lounge at this pricey Middle Eastern restaurant is decked out to look like a sheikh's tent – if the spirit inspires, smoke from the hookah, sip a mojito and space out to the electronic music.

El Pavo Real (Map pp652-3; Av 3B Sur) This British pub attracts a more sedate expat crowd with its pool tables, live music on weekends and, of course, completely authentic fish and chips.

Punto G (Map pp652-3; Calle D) Guests at this stylish gay club are served by bare-chested bartenders (complete with cowboy hats and spandex), and the occasional transvestite show makes for an interlude between serious dancing.

Liquid (Map pp652-3; Plaza Florida, Calle 53 Este) With lots of polished metal and tubular lighting, this sleek club pounds heavy beats to a sharply dressed crowd looking to have a good time.

ENTERTAINMENT

If you're not looking to get blotto, there are numerous ways to spend moonlit (or maybe rainy) evening in the city. A good place to start is the arts section in the Sunday edition of *La Prensa*, or the back pages of the *Panama News*.

Panamanians have a love affair with Hollywood, and there is no shortage of air-conditioned cinemas in and around the city. One of the best places in the city for a little escapism is the **MultiCentro** (Av Balboa), where you can catch the latest Hollywood releases in English, with Spanish subtitles, for less than US\$4. If you're

more independently minded, the **Alhambra Cinema** (Map pp652-3; Vía España; admission US\$2) screens art-house films.

Panamanians love to gamble, and there are flashy casinos scattered around the city. Even if you're not a big card player, it's hard to pass up US\$5 blackjack, especially when the drinks are free – a good spot is the **Miramar Inter-Continental** (Map pp652-3; Av Balboa).

A good place to see traditional Panamanian folk dancing is the **Restaurante-Bar Tinajas** (Map pp652-3; ☎ 263 7890; Av 3a A Sur near Av Frederico Boyd; ☎ dlosed Sun) Sure, it's touristy, but nicely done just the same. Shows are staged here on Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday and Saturday nights at 9pm; there's a US\$5 entertainment fee, as well as a US\$5.50 minimum per person for drinks and food. Make a reservation before dining.

If you're looking for a little culture in your life, the **Teatro Nacional** (Map p655; ☎ 262 3525; Av B) offers dance, music and live performances, though just sitting in this historic theater is enjoyable enough.

SHOPPING

Merchandise from around the world is sold very cheaply in Panama. Clothes, radios, shoes and textiles (including fabrics the Kuna purchase to make clothes) spill onto the pedestrian walkway along Av Central.

Authentic handicrafts can be found at the following:

Flory Saltzman Molas (Map pp652-3; Calle 49 B Oeste near Vía España) Flory Saltzman has a large selection and perhaps the best quality *molos* (colorful hand-stitched appliqué textiles made by the Kuna) you'll find outside the islands.

Gran Morrison (Map pp652-3; Vía España near Calle 51 Este) This ubiquitous department store sells a small variety of Panamanian handicrafts.

Mercado de Buhonías y Artesanías (Map pp652-3) Behind the Museo Antropológico Reina Torres de Araúz.

Mercado Nacional de Artesanías (Map pp648-9) Beside the ruins of Panamá Viejo.

Mi Pueblito (Map pp648-9; Av de los Mártires) Good-quality items available at the many shops inside the replicated villages at the foot of Cerro Ancón.

Topper Center of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI; Map pp652-3) At STRI's bookstore near Av de los Mártires, opposite the Legislative Palace in the Ancón district, you'll find a nice selection of *tagua* nut carvings (from the egg-sized *tagua* nut).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

International flights arrive at **Tocumen International Airport** (☎ 238 4160), 35km northeast of the city center.

Panama's airlines are **Air Panama** (☎ 316 9000; www.flyairpanama.com/tickets) and **Aeroperlas** (Map pp652-3; ☎ 315 7500; www.aeroperlas.com).

Domestic flights depart from **Albrook airport** (☎ 315 0403), aka Aeropuerto Marcos A Gelabert, in the former Albrook Air Force Station near the canal.

For information on getting to town from the airports see p650.

All flights within Panama last under one hour and prices vary according to season and availability. Both Aeroperlas and Air Panama fly to the following destinations: Bocas del Toro and David (one-way US\$60), El Porvenir and Río Sidra for San Blas (US\$35), Isla Contadora (US\$30), La Palma for Darién (US\$40). In addition, Aeroperlas has one flight per week to Puerto Obaldía for Darién (US\$40).

Boat

For information on getting to Isla Taboga, see p669. For information on sailing to Colombia, see p707.

Bus

The new Albrook Bus Terminal (Map pp652-3), near Albrook airport, is a convenient one-stop location for most buses leaving Panama City. The terminal includes a food court, banks, shops, a sports bar, storage room, bathrooms and showers. There is a mall lies next door, complete with supermarket and a cinema.

Local buses from the city's major routes stop at the terminal, and in back of the station there are direct buses to and from Tocumen International Airport.

To get to the station from the city, take any of the frequent buses (US\$0.25) that pass in front of the Legislative Palace or along Vía España (look for the 'via Albrook' sign in the front window).

Major bus routes are as follows: Changui-nola (US\$25, 10 hours, at 8pm daily); Colón (US\$2.50, two hours, every 20 minutes, departures 5am to 11pm); David (US\$12.50; seven to eight hours, 13 per day; *expresos* US\$15, five to six hours, two per day at 10:45pm and midnight), El Valle (US\$4; 2½ hours, frequent;

departures 7am to 7pm), Soná (US\$7, six hours, six buses daily from 8:30am to 6pm) and Yaviza (US\$15; seven to 10 hours, eight per day, departures 5am to 3:45pm). Panaline buses to San José, Costa Rica depart at noon, while Tica Bus departs at 11am. Both cost US\$25.

Buses departing for the Canal Zone (Miraflores and Pedro Miguel Locks, Paraiso, Gamboa and other locales) depart from the bus stop on Av Roosevelt across from the Legislative Palace.

Car

Many of the car-rental agencies have offices throughout the city. A number of them lie clustered around Calle 49 B Oeste in the El Cangrejo area.

Daily rates run from US\$30 to US\$50 per day for the most economical cars, with insurance and unlimited kilometers.

Rental car companies in Panama City:

Avis (☎ 264 0722, airport 238 4056)

Barriga (☎ 269 0221, airport 238 4495)

Budget (☎ 263 8777, airport 238 4069)

Central (☎ 223 5745, airport 238 4936)

Dollar (☎ 270 0355, airport 238 4032)

Hertz (☎ 264 1111, airport 238 4081)

National (☎ 265 2222, airport 238 4144)

Thrifty (☎ 264 1402, airport 238 4955)

Train

The **Panama Railway Company** (☎ 317 6070; info@panarail.com; Carr Gaillard) operates a glass-domed luxury passenger train from Panama City to Colón (one-way/round-trip US\$22/38, one hour), leaving at 7:15am and returning at 5:15pm daily. It's a lovely ride that follows the canal, and at times the train is surrounded by nothing but thick vine-strewn jungle. If you want to pretend that you're a luxury traveler for an hour or two, this is definitely the way to do it.

A taxi to the station, located in the town of Corazal, from Panama City centre costs about US\$3.

GETTING AROUND

Bicycle
The best spot to rent bicycles in Panama City is at **Bicicletas Rali** (☎ 220 3844; ☎ 8am-6pm Sat & Sun), which operates a booth at the causeway entrance.

You can rent a bicycle for US\$2.50 per hour or in-line skates for US\$1 per hour.

Bus

Panama City has a good network of local buses (nicknamed *diablos rojos* or 'red devils'), which run daily from around 5am to 11pm. A ride costs US\$0.25, and we promise you've never seen anything quite like these tricked-out street rockets. Buses run along the three major west-to-east routes: Av Central-Vía España, Av Balboa-Vía Israel, and Av Simón Bolívar-Vía Transistmica. The Av Central-Vía España streets are one-way going west for much of the route; eastbound buses use Av Perú and Av 4 Sur; these buses will take you into the banking district of El Cangrejo. Buses also run along Av Ricardo J Alfaro (known as Tumba Muerto). There are plenty of bus stops along the street, but you can usually hail one from anywhere. Many of these buses stop at Albrook Bus Terminal, near Albrook airport.

The Plaza Cinco de Mayo area has three major bus stops. On the corner of Av Central and Av Justo Arosemena, buses depart for the Tocumen International Airport (US\$0.75, one hour, departs every 15 minutes) and Panama Viejo. Buses for the Albrook domestic airport (US\$0.25) depart in front of the Legislative Palace. Buses depart from the station on Av Roosevelt, opposite the Legislative Palace, for the Balboa and Ancón area (including the causeway) and other destinations. A ride usually costs no more than US\$1.

Taxi

Taxis are plentiful. They are not metered, but there is a list of standard fares that drivers are supposed to charge, measured by zones.

The fare for one zone is a minimum of US\$1; the maximum fare within the city is US\$4. An average ride, crossing a couple of zones, would cost US\$1.25 to US\$2, plus US\$0.25 for each additional passenger. Always agree on a fare before you get into the cab. A taxi from downtown to the airport should cost no more than US\$12 for one person, US\$15 for two or more. Taxis can also be rented for US\$8 an hour.

Watch out for unmarked large-model US cars serving hotels as cabs. Their prices are up to four times that of regular street taxis. You can phone for a taxi:

America (☎ 223 7694)

America Libre (☎ 223 7342)

Latino (☎ 224 0677)

Metro (☎ 264 6788)

Taxi Unico Cooperativa (☎ 221 3191)

AROUND PANAMA CITY

Panamá Province, which encompasses the area around Panama City, has a rich history of pirates, plunder, pearls and the world's most daring engineering marvel. Even before Henry Morgan's successful raid of Panamá, pirates such as Sir Francis Drake used Isla Taboga as a hideout and as a springboard for attacks on the mainland. Further off the coast, an even better hideout was the remote Islas de Perlas, which were named by Balboa upon learning of the abundance of pearls in the archipelago. Today Panamá Province is famous more for the canal than for anything else, though there are other fine attractions.

Panamá Province contains the largest population of Panamá's nine provinces – 1,349,000 people according to the 2000 census – and its attractions serve as popular day trips or mini-breaks for Panamá City's weekend warriors.

PANAMA CANAL

The canal is truly one of the world's greatest engineering marvels. Stretching for 80km from Panamá City on the Pacific side to Colón on the Atlantic side, the canal cuts right through the Continental Divide. Nearly 14,000 vessels pass through the canal each year, and ships worldwide are built with the dimensions of the Panama Canal's locks in mind: 305m long and 33.5m wide.

Ships pay according to their weight, with the average fee around US\$30,000. The highest amount, around US\$200,000, was paid in 2001 by the 90,000-ton French cruise ship *Infinity*; the lowest amount was US\$0.36, paid in 1928 by Richard Halliburton, who swam through.

The canal has three sets of double locks: Miraflores and Pedro Miguel Locks on the Pacific side and Gatún Locks on the Atlantic side. Between the locks, ships pass through a huge artificial lake, Lago Gatún, created by the Gatún Dam across the Río Chagres (when created they were the largest dam and largest artificial lake on Earth), and the Gaillard Cut, a 14km cut through the rock and shale of the isthmian mountains. With the passage of each ship, a staggering 52 million gallons of fresh water is released into the ocean.

In a referendum that took place in October 2006, Panamanian voters overwhelmingly endorsed an ambitious project to expand

the Panama Canal. The US\$5 billion plan, which calls for the largest expansion of the canal since it opened in 1914, will widen and deepen existing navigation channels as well as enable the construction of another set of locks.

At present, the canal can only handle ships carrying up to 4000 containers, though the new locks and larger channels will allow the passage of ships carrying up to 10,000 containers. Although supporters say that the cost of the upgrades will be met from increased tolls (supplemented by a \$2.3 billion loan), opponents claim that when the work is finished in 2014/15, the canal will still be unable to meet world shipping needs.

For more information on the history of the canal, see p638.

Sights

MIRAFLORES LOCKS

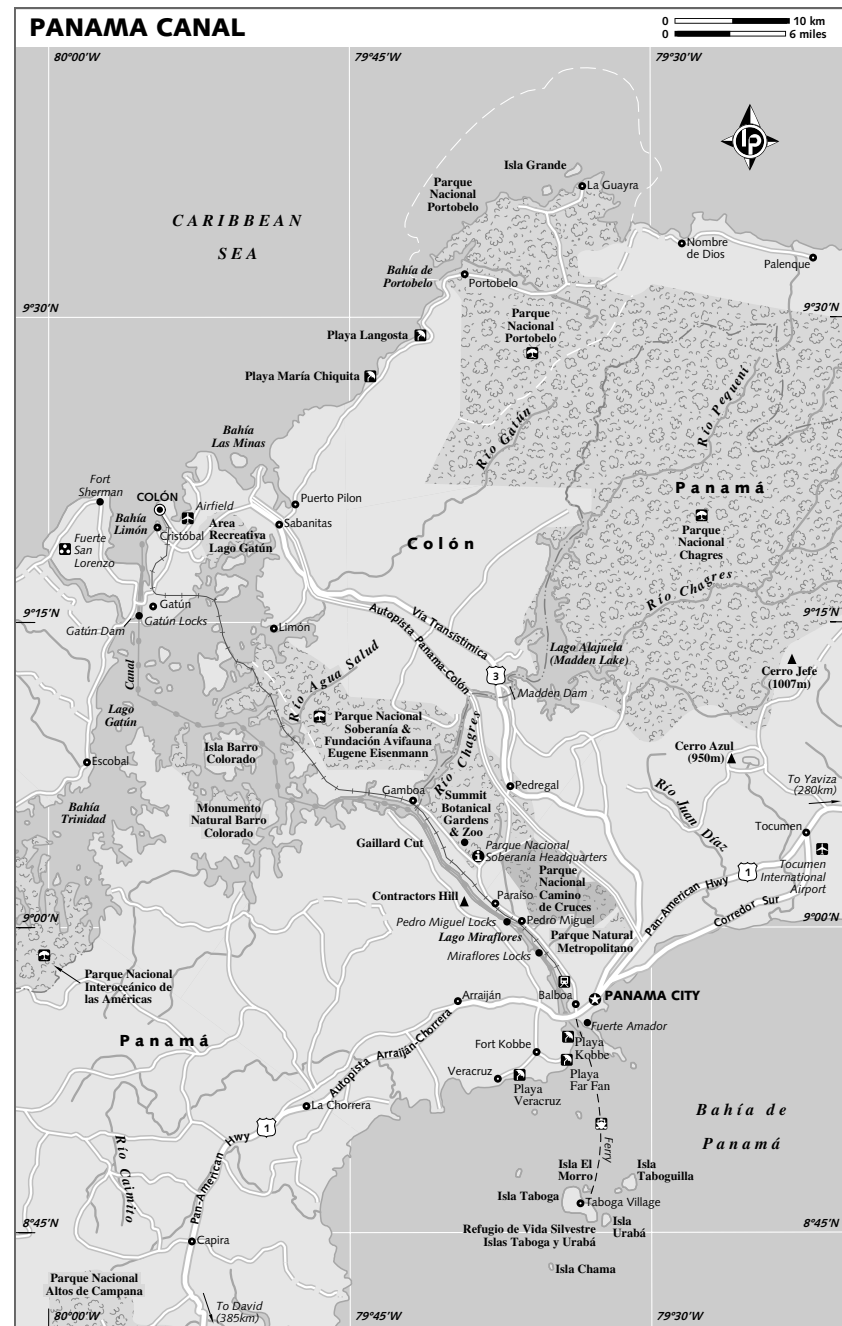
The easiest and best way to visit the canal is to go to the **Miraflores Visitors' Center** (☎ 276 8325; www.panacanal.com; admission to viewing deck/full access US\$5/8; ⌚ 9am-5pm), located just outside Panamá City. The recently inaugurated visitors' center features a large, four-floor museum, several viewing platforms and an excellent restaurant that overlooks the locks. A tip: the best time to view big liners passing through is from 9am to 11am and from 3pm to 5pm.

To get there, take any Paraiso or Gamboa bus from the bus stop on Av Roosevelt across from the Legislative Palace in Panamá City. These buses, passing along the canal-side highway to Gamboa, will let you off at the 'Miraflores Locks' sign on the highway, 12km from the city center. It's about a 15-minute walk to the locks from the sign. Or, you can take a taxi. Even with a 30-minute wait, expect to pay no more than US\$15 for the round-trip – agree on the price beforehand.

OTHER LOCKS

Further north, beyond the Miraflores Locks, are the **Pedro Miguel Locks**. You will pass them if you're taking the highway to Gamboa. The only facilities here are a parking lot, from where you can see the locks.

On the Atlantic side, the **Gatún Locks** have a viewing stand for visitors. You can also drive across the locks themselves; you will pass over them if you cross the canal to visit Fuerte San Lorenzo. For more details on these locks, see p697.



Activities

CANAL TRANSITS

Canal Bay & Tours (☎ 314 1339; www.canalandbaytours.com/about.htm) This reader-recommended operator offers partial canal transits every Saturday morning. Boats depart from Muelle (Pier) 19 (Map pp648–9) in Balboa, a western suburb of Panama City, travel through the Miraflores Locks to Lago Miraflores and back, and then cruise out into the bay for scenic views of the city. These tours last 4½ hours and cost US\$99 per person – it's a good idea to make reservations in advance.

One Saturday every month, the company also offers full transits from Balboa to Cristóbal on the Caribbean coast, passing all three sets of locks. The transit takes all day, from 7:30am to 5:30pm, and costs US\$149. Check the company's website for dates of upcoming transits.

A one-way taxi fare to Muelle (Pier) 19 should cost between US\$3 and US\$6.

AROUND THE CANAL

Although no visit to Panama would be complete without visiting the world-famous canal, the surrounding area is home to a number of impressive attractions, especially if you're into wildlife-watching and birding. On a day trip from Panama City, you could first visit the Miraflores Locks, then the Summit Botanical Gardens & Zoo, and finish at the Parque Nacional Soberanía and the Fundación Avifauna Eugene Eisenmann. The last two stops are only 25km from the center of Panama City, but they seem like a different world.

These attractions are located along the highway that runs from Panama City to Gamboa, the small town where the Río Chagres enters Lago Gatún. They can be reached by taking the Gamboa bus from the bus stop on Av Roosevelt, across from the Legislative Palace in Panama City.

Summit Botanical Gardens & Zoo

Ten kilometers past the Miraflores Locks is the **Summit Botanical Gardens & Zoo** (☎ 232 4854; admission US\$1; ☎ 8am–4pm), which was established in 1923 to introduce, propagate and disseminate tropical plants from around the world into Panama. Later, a small zoo was added to help American soldiers identify tropical animals while they were out in the field. Many of the plant species are marked along a trail.

Today, Summit is expertly managed by a young conservationist who has idealistic plans for the park's future. The star attractions at the zoo include an enormous harpy-eagle compound, a tapir area and a rapidly expanding jaguar enclosure. Since the aim of the park is to promote environmental education, strong attempts have been made to highlight the native flora and fauna of Panama through a series of natural enclosures that mimic rain forest habitats.

Parque Nacional Soberanía

A few kilometers past Summit, across the border into Colón Province, the 22,104-hectare **Parque Nacional Soberanía** (admission US\$3) is one of the most accessible tropical rain forest areas in Panama. It extends much of the way across the isthmus, from Limón on Lago Gatún to just north of Paraíso, and boasts hiking trails that brim with wildlife.

You can pay the entrance fee at the **park headquarters** (☎ 276 6370) at the turn-off to Summit. Maps, information about the park and camping permits are available here, including a brochure for self-guided walks along the nature trail.

Hiking trails in the park include a section of the old **Sendero Las Cruces** (Las Cruces Trail), used by the Spanish to transport gold by mule train between Panama City and Nombre de Dios, and the 17km **Camino del Oleoducto (Pipeline Rd)**, providing access to Río Agua Salud, where you can walk upriver for a swim under a waterfall. A shorter, very easy trail is the **Sendero El Charco** (the Puddle Trail), signposted from the highway, 3km past the Summit Botanical Gardens & Zoo.

Pipeline Rd is considered to be one of the world's **premier birding sites** – not surprisingly, it is intensely popular with bird-watchers, especially in the early morning hours. Over 500 different species of birds have been spotted on the trail, and it's fairly likely you will spot everything from toucans to trogons.

The Río Chagres, which flows through the park and supplies most of the water for the Panama Canal, is home to several **Emberá communities**. Although the Darién is the ancestral home of the Emberá, a wave of migration to the shores of the Río Chagres commenced in the 1950s. Following the establishment of the park in the 1980s, the government culled the Emberá practice of slash-and-burn agriculture, which has severely affected their liveli-

EXPLORE MORE OF THE CANAL ZONE

Tired of the tourist crowds? Looking for a bit of an adventure? Here's a list of LP-author-tested excursions to spice up your travels:

- Stare in awe at the **Gaillard Cut** from Contractors Hill. Hire a taxi and visit this remote 111m-high hill on the western side of the canal where you can see the extent of the Gaillard Cut.
- Explore the rain forest at the **Monumento Natural Barro Colorado**. Arrange a tour with **Ancon Expeditions** (Map pp652–3; ☎ 269 9415; www.anconexpeditions.com; El Dorado Bldg, Calle 49 Este near Av 3 Sur, Panama City) to this vast rain forest reserve, which borders the canal.
- Watch ships queue for the canal from **Playa Kobbé**. Get on a bus heading west from the Albrook terminal and jump off at this popular beach, located just across from the canal.
- Beach-hop along the Pacific in the **San Carlos area**. Grab a bus heading west from the Albrook terminal and get off at any of the beaches from Playa Gorgona to Playa Farallón.

hood. Today, several Emberá communities, most notably Parara Puru, are turning to tourism for survival. Although intrepid travelers can seek out local guides, tours of riverside communities are offered through **Aventuras Panama** (☎ 266 0044; www.aventuraspanama.com).

Fundación Avifauna Eugene Eisenmann

At the time of writing, the finishing touches were being applied to the **Fundación Avifauna Eugene Eisenmann** (☎ 264 6266; www.avifauna.org.pa), an ambitious project with the mission to protect Panama's bird fauna and the rain forest habitat. The first wave of this project is the construction of a visitors' center, hiking trails and a canopy tower near the entrance to Pipeline Rd (1.6km from the gate). Successive phases will aim to promote sustainable tourism in the area by using revenues to protect the surrounding environment. As there are currently no facilities for birders accessing Pipeline Rd, this project is likely to receive a lot of publicity following its launch.

ISLA BARRO COLORADO

This lush island in the middle of Lago Gatún was formed by the damming of the Río Chagres and the creation of the lake. In 1923, Isla Barro Colorado (BCI) became one of the first biological reserves in the New World. Since that time, the island has become one of the most intensively studied areas in the tropics. Home to 1316 recorded plant species, 381 bird species and 102 mammal species, the island also contains a 59km network of marked and protected trails. It is managed by the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI), which administers a world-renowned research facility here.

Although the 1500-hectare island was once restricted to scientists, a limited number of guided tourists are now allowed. The trip includes an STRI boat ride down an attractive part of the canal, from **Gamboa** across the lake to the island. Tour reservations are essential; book as far in advance as possible. Reservations can be made through the Panama City visitor services office of **STRI** (Map pp652–3; ☎ 212 8026; www.stri.org; Tupper Bldg, Av Roosevelt, Ancón district; foreign adult/student US\$70/40, Panamanian adult/student US\$25/12; ☎ 8:30am–4:30pm Mon–Fri).

The boat to BCI leaves the Gamboa pier at 7:15am on Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, and at 8am on Saturday and Sunday. There are no visits on Mondays, Thursdays and on certain holidays. The entire trip lasts four to six hours, depending on the size of the group and on the weather. A buffet lunch (with vegetarian options) is included.

ISLA TABOGA

A tropical island with only one road and no traffic, Isla Taboga is a pleasant place to escape the hustle and bustle of Panama City. Although it is only 20km offshore, the 'Island of Flowers' is covered with sweet-smelling blossoms at certain times of the year. First settled by the Spanish in 1515, the quaint village of Taboga is also home to the second-oldest church in the Western hemisphere. However, the main appeal of the island is its string of sandy beaches lapped by warm waters, which can quickly rejuvenate even the most hardened urbanite.

Isla Taboga is currently in the midst of an image makeover. Ferries for the island now depart from the most exclusive of berths – the causeway – p656. Also, rumors abound that the now defunct Hotel Taboga will be knocked

down to make way for a upmarket resort. In the meantime, Taboga is still a laid-back day trip from Panama City, for a little fun in the sun.

History

Taboga is part of a chain of islands that were inhabited by indigenous peoples who resided in thatch huts and lived off the bounty of the sea. In 1515, Spanish soldiers announced their arrival on Taboga by killing or enslaving the islanders and establishing a small colony. However, peace did not reign, especially since a number of pirates, including Henry Morgan and Francis Drake, frequented the island, and used it as a base from which to attack Spanish ships and towns. As late as 1819 Taboga was still sought after for its strategic location, a fact made abundantly clear when the pirate Captain Illingsworth and his crew of Chileans sacked the island. However, aside from a few live rounds fired at Taboga by the US Navy during a WWII session of target practice, recent years have been peaceful.

Orientation & Information

Ferries from the causeway in Panama City tie up at a pier near the north end of the island. As you exit the pier, you'll see the entrance to the abandoned Hotel Taboga to your right. To your left, you'll see a narrow street that is the island's main road. From this point, the street meanders for 5.2km before ending at the old US military installation atop the island's highest hill, Cerro El Vigia.

For more information on the island, check the excellent English-language site, www.taboga.panamanow.com.

Sights & Activities

There are fine **beaches** in Taboga, all free, in either direction from the ferry dock. Many visitors head straight for the Hotel Taboga, to the right as you walk off the ferry dock; the hotel faces onto the island's most popular beach, arcing between Taboga and tiny Isla El Morro.

On weekends, when the most people visit Taboga, you can find fishermen at the pier who will take you around the island, allowing you to see it from all sides and reach some good **snorkeling** spots. Caves on the island's western side are rumored to hold golden treasure left there by pirates. During the week, when the small boats aren't taking people around, you can still snorkel around Isla El Morro, which doesn't have coral but attracts some large fish.

Walk left from the pier along the island's only road for about 75m until you reach the fork. If you take the high road, after a few more paces you will come to a modest **church**, in front of which is a simple square. This unassuming church was founded in 1550 and is the second-oldest church in the western hemisphere; inside is a handsome altar and lovely artwork. Further down the road is a beautiful public garden, which bears the statue of the island's patroness, **Nuestra Señora del Carmen**.

For a fine view, you can walk up the hill on the east side of the island, **Cerro de la Cruz**, to the cross on the top. Another trail leads to a viewpoint atop **Cerro El Vigia**, on the western side of the island.

A wildlife refuge, the **Refugio de Vida Silvestre Isla Taboga y Urabá**, covers about a third of the island, as well as the island of Urabá just off Taboga's southeastern coast. This refuge is home to one of the largest breeding colonies of brown pelicans in the world. May is the height of nesting season, but pelicans can be seen from January to June.

On your way to and from the island, keep an eye on the ocean. On rare occasions during August, September and October, migrating humpback and sei whales can be seen leaping from the water near Taboga in spectacular displays.

Festivals & Events

Taboga's **annual festival** takes place on July 16, the day of its patron saint, Nuestra Señora del Carmen. The statue of the saint is carried upon the shoulders of followers to the shore, placed on a boat and ferried around the island. Upon her return, she is carried around the island while crowds follow.

Sleeping & Eating

Most people choose to visit Isla Taboga as a day trip from Panama City, though there are a few affordable places to stay on this island.

Kool Hostel (☎ 690 2545; luisveron@hotmail.com; dm US\$10, house US\$25) Perched on a hill overlooking the bay, this clean and comfortable family-run hostel is a good place to bed down if you want to extend your time on the island. Rooms are fairly standard and lacking in personality. There are shared bathrooms with hot water, as well as a communal kitchen. Guests can rent bikes, snorkel gear and fishing tackle. To reach the hostel, turn left as you exit the dock

and walk for a few minutes until you see a sign leading up the hill.

Vereda Tropical Hotel (☎ 250 2154; veredatropicalhotel@hotmail.com; d from US\$45; 🏠) Also perched on a hill overlooking the bay, this charming inn has colorful rooms with high ceilings, comfortable beds and shutters or balconies facing either the village or the sea. Vereda Tropical is located about 100m past the path leading up to Kool Hostel.

Aquario (mains US\$4-7; 🕒 7am-10pm) This simple eatery along the main road in the center of town is a good spot for traditional Panamanian food – peel a few more bucks out of your wallet and sample the catch of the day.

Getting There & Away

The scenic boat trip out to Isla Taboga is part of the island's attraction. **Barcos Calypso** (☎ 314 1730; round-trip US\$10) has departures from Panama City at 8:30am and 3pm on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 8:30am on Tuesday and Thursday and 8:30am, 10:30am and 4pm on Saturday and Sunday. Ferries depart Isla Taboga at 9:30am and 4pm Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 4:30pm on Tuesday and Thursday and 9am, 3pm and 5pm on Saturday and Sunday.

Ferries depart from La Playita de Amador, which is located behind the Centro de Exhibiciones Marinas on the causeway. The easiest way to reach the dock is by taxi (US\$4 to US\$6).

ARCHIPIÉLAGO DE LAS PERLAS

In January 1979, after the followers of the Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini had forced Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi to pack up his hundreds of millions of dollars and flee Iran, the shah looked the world over and moved to Isla Contadora, one of the islands in the Archipiélago de las Perlas, or Pearl Islands, any one of which is fit for a king – or a shah.

Named for the large pearls that were once found in its waters, the Pearl Islands are comprised of 90 named islands and over 100 unnamed islets, each surrounded by white-sand beaches and turquoise waters. Isla Contadora is the best-known island of the group, especially since the island is home to the palatial mansions of the rich and powerful. The Pearl Islands were also the site of the popular US TV show *Survivor*, which filmed its 2003 season on an unnamed island in the chain.

Orientation & Information

With few exceptions, tourists visit only four of Las Perlas: Isla Contadora, which is the most accessible, developed and visited island; Isla San José, the site of an pricey resort; Isla Casaya and neighboring Isla Casayeta, which are frequented by pearl shoppers. Less than a dozen of the Pearl Islands are inhabited, and there are ample opportunities here for independent exploration, especially if you have a sense of adventure and the help of a local guide.

GETTING TO COSTA RICA

The most heavily trafficked Panama-Costa Rica border crossing is at **Paso Canoas** (🕒 24hr), 53km west of David on the Pan-American Hwy. Allow at least one to two hours to get through the formalities on both sides. Buses depart frequently for the border from David (US\$1.50, 1½ hours, every 30 minutes from 4:30am to 9:30pm). On the Costa Rican side of the border, you can catch regular buses to San José or other parts of the country. See p623 for information on crossing the border from Costa Rica.

The less-traveled post northern border post at **Guaibito-Sixaola** (🕒 8am-noon & 2-6pm), north of Changuinola, is straightforward, and most travelers find it hassle free. Buses from Changuinola depart frequently for the border (US\$0.50, 30 minutes) every half-hour from 6am to 7pm. On the Costa Rican side, you can catch regular buses on to Puerto Limón and San José, as well as regional destinations. See p570 for more information on this crossing from Costa Rica.

The least trafficked crossing into Costa Rica is the border post at **Río Sereno** (🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-3pm Sun), 47km west of Volcán. Buses to the border depart from David and travel via La Concepción, Volcán and Santa Clara (US\$4, three hours, every 30 minutes). On the Costa Rican side of the border, you can take a 15-minute bus or taxi ride to San Vito, where you can catch buses to regional destinations.

Note that you can be asked for an onward ticket when entering Costa Rica. If you do not possess one, it is acceptable to buy a return bus ticket back to Panama. Also note that Costa Rica is one hour behind Panama – opening and closing times in this box are given in Panama time.

Sights & Activities

Isla Contadora is home to no less than 12 beaches, all of which are covered with tan sand, and virtually abandoned except during major holidays. Five beaches are particularly lovely: Playa Larga, Playa de las Suecas, Playa Cacique, Playa Ejecutiva and Playa Galeón. Although spread around three sides of the island, all can be visited in as little as 20 minutes in a rented 4WD.

Snorkeling around Contadora can be fantastic. There are five coral fields near the island where you can expect to see schools of angel-fish, damselfish, moray eels, parrotfish, puffer fish, butterfly fish, white-tip reef sharks and a whole lot more. In the waters off Playa Larga, you can often spot sea turtles and manta rays.

Sleeping & Eating

Budget accommodations in the Pearl Islands are limited to Isla Contadora.

Cabañas de Contadora (☎ 265 5691; d from US\$30) Located in a lush, upscale residential neighborhood, these bare-bones cabins are the most affordable option on the island, especially since they're equipped with hot plates, fridges and microwaves. To get to the Cabañas, take the road up the hill as you leave the airport runway. When the road forks, take the left fork and follow it for the next 200m. When the road ends, take the road to the left, and you'll soon reach the cabins on your left.

Casa del Sol (☎ 250 4212; www.panama-ista-contadora.com; s/d with breakfast US\$40/50) Located in a pleasant residential neighborhood full of hummingbirds, the Casa del Sol has just one guestroom, though it's cheerfully decorated and has a hot-water bathroom. The German owners are an excellent source of information on the Pearl Islands, and they can take you to unoccupied islands aboard their boat. Advanced reservations are necessary – call ahead to arrange for a pickup from the airstrip.

Punta Galeón (mains US\$8-15; ☎ noon-3pm & 6-10pm Mon-Sat) Restaurants are a pricey affair in Contadora, though this popular dinner spot in the Hotel Punta Galeón Resort is a good deal, especially if you can get a table on the beach.

Getting There & Away

Air Panama (☎ 316 9000; www.flyairpanama.com/tickets) and **Aeroperlas** (☎ 315 7500; www.aeroperlas.com) fly direct from Panama City to Isla Contadora (round-trip US\$60, 20 minutes). Each airline has two daily departures on weekdays and four daily departures on weekends.

CHIRIQUÍ PROVINCE

Chiricanos claim to have it all, and there's an element of truth in what they say: Panama's tallest mountains, longest rivers and most fertile valleys are in Chiriquí. The province is also home to spectacular highland rain forests as well as the country's most productive agricultural and cattle-ranching regions. Not surprisingly, many Chiricanos often dream about creating an independent República de Chiriquí.

Bordering Costa Rica to the west, Chiriquí is often the first province in Panama encountered by overland travelers. It also serves as a suitable introduction to the not-so-subtle beauty Panama has to offer. Although the mist-covered mountains near Boquete are slowly being colonized by waves of North American and European retirees, the town serves as a good base for exploring the flanks of towering Volcán Barú, Panama's only volcano and its highest point (3475m). The region is also home to the Parque Internacional La Amistad, a bi-national park that is shared by Costa Rica and Panama. The park offers excellent hiking through lush rain forests, largely unfettered by tourist crowds.

DAVID

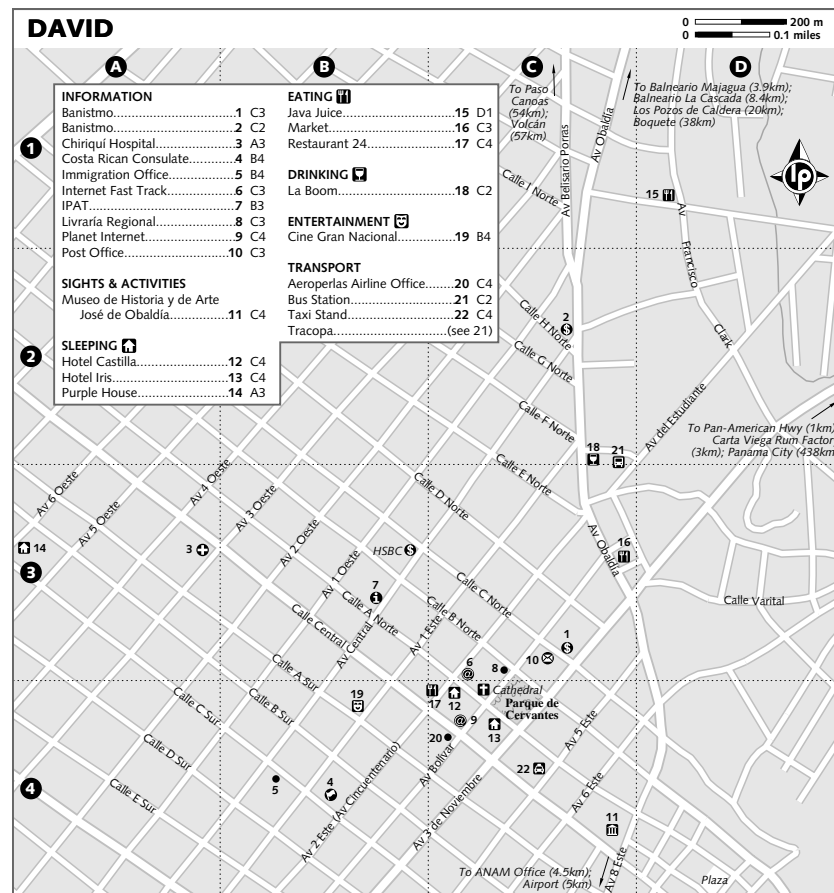
pop 124,000

Although it feels more like a country town, David is Panama's second-largest city, the capital of Chiriquí Province and a major agricultural center. However, David is rapidly growing in terms of wealth and importance as a result of the powerful wave of foreign capital flowing into Chiriquí. With tens of thousands of North American and European retirees likely to settle in the region in the years to come, David's economy is expected to boom.

For most travelers, David serves as an important transportation hub for anyone heading to/from Costa Rica, the Chiriquí highlands, Golfo de Chiriquí, Panama City and Bocas del Toro. Although the city has few attractions in its own right, David is a pleasant enough place to stay, and there's no shortage of interesting things to see and do in the surrounding area.

Orientation

David is halfway between San José in Costa Rica and Panama City – about seven hours



by road from either place. The Pan-American Hwy does not enter the town, but skirts around its northern and western sides. The city's heart is its fine central plaza, the Parque de Cervantes, about 1.5km southwest of the highway.

Information

BOOKSTORES

Livrería Regional (Av Bolívar) Modest bookstore with a handful of titles in English including coffee-table books on Panama.

CONSULTATES

Costa Rican consulate (☎ /fax 774 1923; cosurica@chiriqui.com; cnr Calle B Sur & Av 1 Este; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri)

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet Fast Track (Av 2 Este; per hr US\$1; ☎ 24hr)
Planet Internet (Calle Central; per hr US\$1; ☎ 9am-midnight)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Chiriquí Hospital (☎ 777 8814; Calle Central & Av 3 Oeste) One of the best hospitals in the country.

MONEY

Banistmo (Calle C Norte) Branches near the park and on Av Obaldía north of the bus station.

HSBC (Av Central)

POST

Post office (Calle C Norte; ☎ 7am-6pm Mon-Fri, 7am-4:30pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Autoridad Nacional de Ambiente (ANAM; ☎ 775 7840; fax 774 6671; 🕒 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) Provides tourist information and gives permits to camp in the national parks. It's near the airport.

IPAT (☎ 775 2839; Av Central; 🕒 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) Provides information on Chiriquí Province.

Sights & Activities

Despite its size and role as a provincial capital, most of David's attractions lie outside of the city. However, David serves as a great base for exploring the Chiriquí lowlands, and it's likely you'll pass through here a few times during your travels in Panama. For tips on how to explore the area, see the boxed text, below.

David's sole attraction is the modest **Museo de Historia y de Arte José de Obaldía** (Av 8 Este btwn Calles Central & A Norte; admission US\$1; 🕒 8:30am-noon & 12:45-4:30pm Mon-Sat), a two-story colonial home constructed in 1880, and still furnished with its original art and decor. Named after the founder of Chiriquí Province, the museum also houses local archaeological artifacts and old photos of the canal constructions.

If you're looking to get your adrenaline fix, consider spending the day **white-water rafting** on the Río Chiriquí or the Río Chiriquí Viejo. Tour operators in Boquete pass by David on their way to the launch point, and with advanced notice, they'll be happy to pick you up at your accommodation. For more information, see p676.

Festivals & Events

The **Feria de San José de David**, held for 10 days each March, is a big international fair. La Concepción, half an hour west of David, celebrates its **saint's day** on February 2.

Sleeping

Purple House (☎ 774-4059; www.purplehousehostel.com; cnr Calle C Sur & Av 6 Oeste; dm US\$8.80, r US\$18-23; 🏠 📺) Owned and managed by a warm and welcoming Peace Corp veteran named Andrea, the Purple House (yes, it's all purple!) is a popular spot to link up with other backpackers. Andrea provides guests with a communal kitchen, an outdoor patio, cable TV, DVD rentals and free internet access. She is an incredible source of information on the surrounding area. Located in a commercial area, the Purple House is close to lots of restaurants, supermarkets and pharmacies. If enough people are staying at the hostel, the owner can arrange transport to Isla Bocas Brava (four people about US\$50; see opposite). There's limited availability in October – call or email first. Wi-fi is available.

Hotel Iris (☎ 775 2251; Calle A Norte; r from US\$12; 🏠 📺) The faded three-story Iris has definitely seen better days, though any of its worn rooms are a good deal, especially if you're looking for a bit of privacy. It's conveniently located across from the park, so it's easy enough to flop down here for the night and get out early in the morning.

Hotel Castilla (☎ 774 5260; Calle A Norte; d from US\$30-40; 🏠 📺) Although rooms at the Castilla are more expensive than the Iris, this centrally located hotel is one of the best values in David. Every room at the Castilla is fairly cheap, cheerful and equipped with air-con, private hot-water bathrooms and cable TV.

Eating & Drinking

If you're looking for cheap produce, don't miss the bustling **market** (cnr Aves Bolívar & Obaldía).

Restaurant 24 (Av 2 Este; mains US\$2-3; 🕒 till late) Popular with locals for its grilled meats and

inexpensive lunch specials – this is the perfect spot to get your fill without breaking the budget.

Java Juice (Av Francisco Clark; mains US\$2.50-4; 🕒 11am-11pm Mon-Sat, 4-10pm Sun) Ice coffee, fresh-fruit smoothies, healthy salads and juicy grilled burgers are the fare at this charming outdoor café northeast of the bus terminal.

La Boom (Av Obaldía near Av 1 Este) David's largest bar and disco features a sleek dance floor that packs in young crowds on Friday and Saturday nights.

Entertainment

Cine Gran Nacional (Av 1 Este btwn Calles Central & A Sur) David's small cinema screens mostly American new releases.

Getting There & Away

AIR

David's airport, the Aeropuerto Enrique Malek, is about 5km from town. There are no buses to the airport; take a taxi (US\$2).

Air Panama (☎ 721 0841; www.flyairpanama.com/tickets) and **Aeroperlas** (☎ 721 1195; www.aeroperlas.com) fly direct from Panama City to David (US\$60, 45 minutes). Air Panama has two daily flights from Monday to Saturday and one flight on Sunday while Aeroperlas has two flights daily. Aeroperlas also has one daily flight from Monday to Friday to Bocas del Toro via Changuinola (US\$35, 35 minutes).

BUS

The David **bus station** (Av del Estudiante) is about 600m northeast of the central plaza.

Buses run to these destinations: Boquete (US\$1.50, one hour, every 30 minutes from 6am to 9:30pm), Caldera (US\$1.50, 45 minutes, hourly from 8:15am to 7:30pm), Cerro Punta (US\$3, 2½ hours, every 20 minutes from 5am to 8pm), Changuinola (US\$12.50, 4½hr; hourly from 5am to 6:30pm), Horconitos (US\$1.50, 45 minutes, 11am and 5pm), Panama City (US\$12.60, seven to eight hours, every 45 minutes from 6:45am to 8pm; express US\$15, six hours, 10:45pm and midnight), Paso Canoas (US\$1.50; 1½ hours, every 10 minutes from 4:30am to 9:30pm) and Río Sereno (US\$4, 2½ hours, every 30 minutes from 5am to 5pm).

Tracopa (☎ 775 0585) operates direct buses between David and San José, Costa Rica (US\$12.50, eight hours). Buses depart at 8:30am daily from the David bus station and

return at 7:30am. Bus tickets can be purchased up to two days in advance.

GOLFO DE CHIRIQUÍ

The undisputed gem of the Chiriquí lowlands is the Golfo de Chiriquí, which is home to the **Parque Nacional Marino Golfo de Chiriquí**, a national marine park with an area of 14,740 hectares protecting 25 islands, 19 coral reefs and abundant wildlife. The marine park also protects the 3000-hectare **Isla Boca Brava**, a lovely little island that is criss-crossed by hiking trails and home to monkeys, nesting sea turtles and 280 recorded bird species. Whether you want to lie on the beach, snorkel clear waters or go wildlife-watching underneath the rain forest canopy, there's something for everyone in this off-the-beaten-path destination.

A great place (and the only place) to stay on Boca Brava is at the **Restaurante y Cabañas Boca Brava** (☎ 676 3244; hammock per person US\$3, r US\$10, cabin US\$18-35), comprising four spacious cabins with private bathrooms and four rustic rooms with shared bathrooms. Owners Frank and Yadira Köhler speak English, German and Spanish. Reservations are not accepted, but they'll always find you a place to stay, if you're willing to sleep in a hammock. The breezy restaurant-bar (meals US\$4) features a large selection of seafood (such as red snapper).

Frank and Yadira can arrange any number of fine excursions around the islands: snorkeling, whale-watching or just lounging on a gorgeous uninhabited island (depending on the tour and the number of participants prices range from US\$12 to US\$70). From the restaurant, you're just a stone's throw from the boundary of the national marine park.

Getting There & Away

To reach the island, take a bus to the Horconitos turn-off, which is 39km east of David. You can also take any bus heading from David to Panama City that goes past the turn-off, as long as you tell the driver to drop you at the Horconitos turnoff.

From the turnoff, take a pickup-truck taxi 13km to the fishing village of Boca Chica (US\$15, one hour). If you see no taxis at the turn-off, walk into Horconitos and call either **Jovené** (☎ 653 1549) or **Roberto** (☎ 628 0651); both are taxi drivers in the area. At the Boca Chica dock, hire a water taxi (US\$1 per person) to take you the 200m to the island.

EXPLORE MORE OF THE CHIRIQUÍ LOWLANDS

The Chiriquí lowlands offer some good options for getting off the Gringo Trail:

- Rest those tired bones in the **Los Pozos de Caldera hot springs**. Take a bus to the town of Caldera, hike along the dirt road for 45 minutes and soak up the health-giving properties of the spring.
- Learn to appreciate rum before you down a tumbler or two. Contact **Mr García** (☎ 772 7073) to arrange a private tour of the nearby **Carta Vieja rum factory**.
- Swim with Chiricanos at **Balneario Majagua** and **Balneario La Cascada** by hopping on a Boquete-bound bus and jumping off at either of these local swimming spots.
- Beat the David heat; grab some friends and take a taxi to the lovely dark-sand beach of nearby **Playa Barqueta**.

If there are enough interested people, the Purple House in David (p672) can sometimes arrange all of your transportation.

PUNTA BURICA

This lush peninsula jutting into the Pacific is a lovely spot for absorbing the beauty of both the rain forest and the coastline. Four years in the making, **Mono Feliz** (☎ 595 0388; mono_feliz@hotmail.com; cabin 1st night/extra nights per person US\$20/15; camping per person US\$5; 🚽) offers visitors a chance to enjoy this untouched natural beauty. Wildlife is a key feature here, and the Mono Feliz (happy monkey) certainly has its share of its namesake.

Facilities include three stand-alone cabins – two in the garden and one on the beach. It also has a large pool (fed by cool spring water, and you may be surrounded by monkeys at times), fresh-water showers and an outdoor kitchen for guest use. Those who'd rather not cook can pay US\$20 per day extra for three home-cooked meals, ranging from fresh seasonal fish to conch or lobster when available (individual meals available: breakfast/lunch/dinner US\$6/8/10). Beds have mosquito nets. Camping on the beach is also available (bring your own gear), and you have access to the pool and bathrooms.

The friendly American and Canadian owners (Allegra and John or 'Juancho' as he's known to locals) offer a range of activities including nature walks (an excursion to **Isla Burica** at low tide is a highlight), fishing, bird-watching, surfing (several boards available) and horseback riding. Remedial massage and yoga is available for guests in need of deeper relaxation. All activities except horseback riding (US\$5) are free. The owners speak English, French and Spanish.

Getting There & Away

Owing to its isolation, reaching Mono Feliz requires a bit of work. You'll first need to go to the small coastal town of Puerto Armuelles. Departures from David to Puerto Armuelles leave every 15 minutes (US\$2.75, 2½ hours). Be sure to arrive in Puerto Armuelles no later than noon.

The bus drops you off in the *mercado municipal*, and from there take a truck to Bella Vista. It's approximately a one-hour walk down the hill from here to Mono Feliz. You can also exit at El Medio, the last stop before the trucks go inland to Bella Vista.

From El Medio it's an hour's walk along the beach. Mono Feliz is directly in front of Isla Burica.

PLAYA LAS LAJAS

Playa Las Lajas, 51km east of David and 26km south of the Pan-American Hwy, is one of several long, palm-lined beaches along this stretch of the Pacific coast. Playa Las Lajas gathers crowds on the weekends, but often lies empty during the week, when you can have serious stretches of sand all to yourself.

Several new accommodations are currently in the works; meanwhile you can stay at **Las Lajas Beach Cabins** (☎ 720 2430, 618 7723; dm/d US\$6.50/35, cabins US\$25). The cabins consist of nine small rustic *cabañas* right on the beach, a clam's toss from the surf, while the bathrooms are communal in a nearby concrete structure. There is also an additional concrete structure 50m back from the beach with six private rooms and two dorms.

Back where the road dead-ends at the beach sits **La Estrella del Pacífico** (dishes from US\$3), the only restaurant in the area. Simple fish dishes are especially good when the catch is fresh, and you can count on great ocean views anytime.

To reach Las Lajas, take any bus from David (US\$2, 1½ hours) that travels by the Las Lajas turn-off on the Interamericana. At the turnoff, take a taxi (US\$5) to where the road reaches the sea. Turn right and proceed 1.5km until you arrive at the cabins.

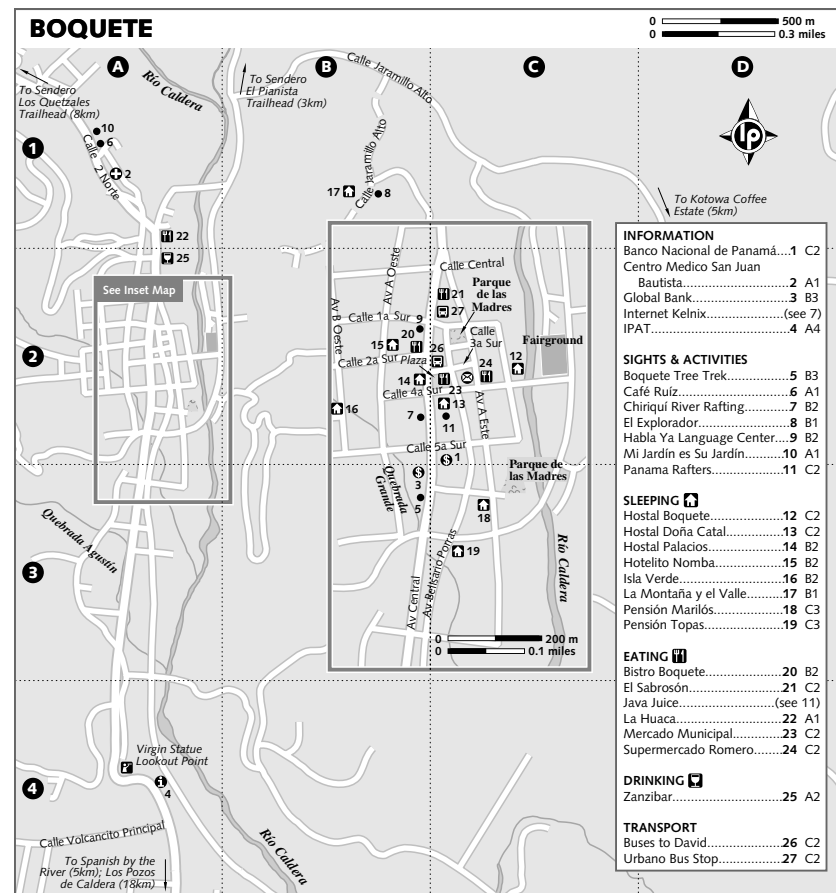
BOQUETE

pop 5000

The mountain-valley town of Boquete, with the sparkling Río Caldera running through it, is known throughout Panama for its cool, fresh climate and pristine natural setting. Flowers, coffee, vegetables and citrus fruits flourish in Boquete's rich soil, and the friendliness of the locals seems to rub off on everyone who passes through.

Boquete is one of the country's top destinations for outdoor lovers. You can hike, climb, raft, visit coffee plantations, soak in hot springs, study Spanish or go on a canopy tour. And of course, there's nothing quite like starting your day with a glass of freshly squeezed OJ, or perking up with a cup of locally grown coffee. It can get chilly here at night.

Although Boquete very much intended to remain as a small town, something happened



that was completely beyond anyone's control – baby boomers overseas started getting old. When *Modern Maturity* magazine of the American Association for Retired Persons chose Boquete in 2001 as one of the four top places in the world to retire, a flock of foreign retirees started snatching up mountain plots in town. Today gated communities dot the hillsides, and the face of Boquete is slowly being transformed.

Orientation

Boquete's central area is only a few square blocks. The main road, Av Central, comes north from David, passes along the western side of the plaza and continues up the hill past the church.

Information

Banco Nacional de Panama (Av Central) Has 24hr ATM.

Centro Medico San Juan Bautista (☎ 720 1881)

Global Bank (Av Central)

Internet Kelnix (Av Central; per hr US\$1)

IPAT (☎ 9:30am-6pm) It's about 1.5km south of town, sitting atop a bluff overlooking Boquete. You can pick up maps here and obtain information on area attractions. On the 2nd floor is an exhibit detailing the history of the region (Spanish only).

Post office (☎ 7am-6pm Mon-Fri, 7am-5pm Sat)

Sights

COFFEE PLANTATIONS

No trip to Boquete is complete without learning the secrets of a perfectly blended cup of joe.

Café Ruíz (☎ 720 1392; www.caféruiz.com; Calle 2 Norte; 3hr tour US\$14), on the main road about 600m north of the town center, offers a tour that includes transportation to a nearby coffee plantation, a presentation on the history of coffee in Boquete, a tour of a roasting facility and the obligatory tasting session. Tours depart at 9am daily except Sundays and holidays, but you have to make advance reservations.

Kotowa Coffee Estate (☎ 720 1430; www.myroaster.com; 2½hr tour US\$19) offers the most comprehensive coffee-estate tour in the area. It features a description of the estate's history (beginning with a Canadian's arrival in 1918), a full tour of the production facilities and processing mill, and again, the obligatory tasting session. The estate requests 24 hours' notice prior to your visit.

GARDENS

Mi Jardín es Su Jardín (admission free; ☒ daylight hours), just uphill from Café Ruíz, is a magnificent garden surrounding a luxurious private estate. The residence is off-limits to the public, but you are free to stroll about the garden.

El Explorador (☎ 775 2643; Calle Jaramillo Alto; admission US\$2; ☒ 10am-6pm daily mid-Dec to mid-Apr, Sat & Sun only mid-Apr to mid-Dec) is a private garden in a hilly area 45 minutes' walk from the town center. The gardens are designed to look like something out of *Alice in Wonderland*, and there's no shortage of quirky displays to catch your eye.

HOT SPRINGS

Boquete is a good base for exploring the **Los Pozos de Caldera** (admission US\$1; ☒ dawn-dusk), an undeveloped hot spring that is rumored to have health-giving properties. A round-trip taxicab from the town center to the hot springs should cost about US\$6.

Activities

HIKING

With its breathtaking vistas of mist-covered hills and nearby forests, Boquete is one of the most idyllic regions for hiking and walking. Several good paved roads lead out of town into the surrounding hills, passing coffee plantations, fields and farms, gardens and virgin forest.

Although saunterers will be content with picturesque strolls along the river, the more ambitious can climb **Volcán Barú** (3475m), Panama's highest point and only volcano. There are several entrances to the park, but the trail

with easiest access to the summit starts near Boquete. For more information, see p678.

You can also access the **Sendero Los Quetzales** (Quetzals Trail; see p679) from Boquete; the trail is uphill from here though – you'll have an easier time if you start hiking from Cerro Punta (see p679).

A pleasant day-hike is along the **Sendero El Pianista** (Pianist Trail), which winds through dairy land and into humid cloud forest. To access the trail head, take the first right fork out of Boquete (heading north) and cross over two bridges. Immediately before the 3rd bridge, about 4km out of town, a track leads off to the left between a couple of buildings. You need to wade across a small river after 200m, but then it's a steady, leisurely incline for 2km before you start to climb a steeper, narrow path. The path winds deep into the forest, though you can turn back at any time.

WHITE-WATER RAFTING

Those who seek a bit of adventure shouldn't miss the excellent white-water rafting within a two-hour drive of Boquete. The Río Chiriquí and the Río Chiriquí Viejo both flow from the fertile hills of Volcán Barú, and are flanked by forest for much of their lengths. At some places, waterfalls can be seen at the edges of the rivers, and both pass through narrow canyons with awesome, sheer rock walls.

The Río Chiriquí is most often run from May to December, while the Chiriquí Viejo is run the rest of the year; the rides tend to last four and five hours, respectively. Depending on the skill level of your party, you can tackle thrilling class 3 and class 4 rapids or some seriously scary class 5 rapids.

The country's two best white-water rafting outfits are **Chiriquí River Rafting** (☎ 720 1505; www.panama-rafting.com) and **Panama Rafters** (☎ 720 2712; www.panamarafters.com), both of which are located in downtown Boquete. Both companies have bilingual employees, so you can get all the information you need in either English or Spanish. All-day trips are offered for US\$75 to US\$100, depending on the run and the size of the party.

CANOPY TOURS

Although canopy tours are about as prevalent as rice and beans in Costa Rica, they're still quite new to the Panama tourist scene. For the uninitiated, a canopy tour consists of a series of platforms anchored into the forest canopy

and connected by zip lines. Although they were originally used by biologists to study the rain-forest canopy, today they function primarily as a way for gringos to get their ecockicks.

If you're game to strap yourself into a harness and zip along the tree line, the **Boquete Tree Trek** (☎ 720 1635; www.aventurist.com; 3hr tour US\$60) is located in secondary forest, and consists of 14 platforms, 13 zip lines, a rappel and a Tarzanswing. The company stresses fun instead of ecology, and these lines pick up some serious speed, so you might want to consider going a little heavy on the hand-brake.

Courses

Spanish by the River (☎ /fax 720 3456; www.spanishbythesea.com) is the sister school to the popular Spanish school (p686) in Bocas del Toro. Rates for group/private lessons are US\$70/130 for two hours a day, five days a week, though cheaper rates are available for more comprehensive packages and longer stays. The school also offers a popular traveler's survival-Spanish course (US\$40) that includes six hours of instruction. Homestays can be arranged (per night with breakfast US\$12) or you can rent one of their simple dorms/rooms (per night US\$7.50/12). The school is located 5km south of town near the turn-off to Palmira.

The reader-recommended **Habla Ya Language Center** (☎ 720 1294; www.hablayapanama.com; Central Av) offers both group and private lessons. Five hours of group/private lessons starts at US\$50/75, though significant discounts are given for lengthier programs – 25 hours of group/private lessons costs only US\$200/300. The language school is also well-connected to local businesses, so students can take advantage of discounts on everything from accommodations to tours.

Festivals & Events

The town's annual festival is the **Feria de las Flores y del Café** (Flower and Coffee Fair), held for 10 days each January. Another popular event is the **Feria de las Orquídeas** (Orchid Fair), held every April.

Sleeping CAMPING

Nights are chilly here, and temperatures can drop to near freezing – pack some warm clothes if you plan to camp. You can also camp in nearby Parque Nacional Volcán Barú (p679).

La Montaña y el Valle (☎ /fax 720 2211; information@coffeestateinn.com; campsite 1-2-people US\$7/10, extra person US\$3) This working coffee estate, 2.5km from town, has camping on a weather-permitting basis (usually January through March). There are three tent sites, and facilities include hot showers, flush toilets, electricity and a covered cooking area. You must call ahead to let the owners know you're coming.

HOTELS

Because of the cool climate, all the places to stay in Boquete have hot showers.

Hotelito Nomba (☎ 720 1076; dm/r per person US\$6.60/8.80) The self-proclaimed chill-out hostel is bare-bones and fairly sterile, though it's certainly cheap. The management is laid-back, and a good time can be had here if you meet the right people.

Hostal Palacios (☎ 720 1653; dm/r per person US\$6.60/8.80) This long-standing budget guesthouse has a friendly and vibrant atmosphere, thanks in part to the energetic owner, Pancho. Although the rooms have definitely seen better days, this place is well-suited to backpackers, especially since there is a shared kitchen, room to pitch a tent and a fireplace out the back where you can stay warm while chatting up other travelers.

Pensión Marilól (☎ 720 1380; marilols66@hotmail.com; cnr Av A Este & Calle 6 Sur; s/d US\$7/11, with bathroom US\$10/14) This cozy, family-run spot is a good choice for travelers looking for a little bit of peace and quiet. Rooms are warmly decorated with assorted knick-knacks, and the pleasant owner, Frank Glavas, can help you make the most of your time in Boquete.

Pensión Topas (☎ /fax 720 1005; schoeb@chiriqui.com; Av Belisario Porras; s/d from US\$10/15) Built around a small organic garden, this German-run pensión features a variety of rooms to suit all budgets. Cheaper rooms share an outdoor solar-heated bathroom, while the more expensive rooms have bathrooms with steamy showers.

Hostal Doña Catal (☎ 720 1260; d with/without bathroom US\$15/10) On the central plaza, the faded blue Hostal Doña Catal is suffering from a bit of wear and tear, though the price is right, especially if you splurge for the upstairs rooms. For a few bucks more you can enjoy a private bathroom and a balcony overlooking the park.

Hostal Boquete (☎ 720 2573; s/d US\$15/20) Overlooking the Río Caldera, this quaint country

inn is excellent value. Rooms are basic, but they have lovely terraces overlooking the river, and it's likely you'll sleep well at night to the sounds of the flowing water.

Isla Verde (☎ 720 2533; islaverde@cwpanama.net; Av B Oeste; small/large cabins US\$50/65) These centrally located cabins offer some of the loveliest accommodations in Boquete. Set in a beautiful, lush, landscaped garden are six modern, comfortable two-story cabins with tall ceilings, kitchens and roomy bathrooms.

Eating & Drinking

Café Ruiz (Calle 2 Norte; coffee US\$1-2) The outdoor patio at Ruiz makes a good spot to sip locally produced coffee and watch the mist move across the mountains. It offers tours to coffee plantations (p675).

El Sabrosón (Av Central; mains US\$2-3) This much-loved local institution cooks up cheap and filling Panamanian cuisine served cafeteria style.

Java Juice (Av Central; sandwiches US\$3-4; ☎ 9am-10pm) The sister-store to the café in David, Java Juice is your spot for veggie burgers, fresh salads, juices, iced cappuccinos and tasty milkshakes.

Bistro Boquete (Av Central; mains US\$3-7; ☎ 11am-10pm) This handsome yet casual bistro in the center of town serves a range of eclectic cuisine ranging from curry chicken salad to chili-rubbed filet mignon.

La Huaca (Av Central; pizzas US\$5-7) North of the plaza, La Huaca is set in a beautifully restored colonial-style building with river and mountain views – it's locally famous for its tasty stone-baked pizzas.

Zanzibar (Av Central; drinks US\$1-2) Nightlife in Boquete is about as common as a bad cup of coffee, though this low-key jazz bar has the cure for 'what ails ya'.

If you're self-catering, the area's produce is some of the best in Panama. Check out the *mercado municipal* on the northeastern corner of the plaza as well as **Supermercado Romero** (Av A Este).

Getting There & Around

Buses to Boquete depart David's main bus terminal regularly (US\$1.50, one hour, every 30 minutes from 6am to 9:30pm). Buses to David depart from the northern side of Boquete's plaza (every 30 minutes from 5am to 6:30pm). A taxi between David and Boquete costs around US\$12.

Boquete's small size lends itself to easy exploration, and walking is a great way to see the area. The local (*urbano*) buses winding through the hills cost US\$0.50. They depart from the main road one block north of the plaza. Taxis charge US\$1 to US\$2 to get to most places around town.

PARQUE NACIONAL VOLCÁN BARÚ

This 14,300-hectare national park is home to Volcán Barú, which is Panama's only volcano as well as the dominant geographical feature of Chiriquí. Volcán Barú is no longer active (there is in fact no record of its most recent eruption), and it has not one but seven craters. Its summit, which tops out at 3475m, is the highest point in Panama; on a clear day it affords views of both the Pacific and Caribbean coasts.

The national park is also home to the Sendero Los Quetzales, one of the most scenic treks in the entire country. As its name implies, the trail is one of the best places in Central America to spot the rare resplendent quetzal, especially during the dry season (November to April). However, even if the Maya bird of paradise fails to show, the park is home to over 250 bird species as well as pumas, tapirs and the *conejo pintado* (a spotted raccoon-like animal).

Information

Admission to the park (US\$3) is paid at either of the trailheads leading to the summit or at the ranger station on the Cerro Punto side of the Sendero Los Quetzales.

The best time to visit is during the dry season, especially early in the morning when wildlife is most active.

Overnight temperatures can drop below freezing, and it may be windy and cold during the day, particularly in the morning – dress accordingly.

Sights & Activities

VOLCÁN BARÚ

There are entrances to the park, with summit access, on the eastern and western sides of the volcano. The eastern access to the summit, from Boquete, is the easiest, but it involves a strenuous uphill hike along a 14km dirt/mud road that goes from the park entrance – about 8km northwest of the center of Boquete – to the summit. If you drive or take a taxi as far up as you can and then walk the rest of the way, it

takes about five or six hours to reach the summit from the park gate; walking from town would take another two or three hours each way. It's best to camp on the mountain for at least one night; and you should be prepared for the cold. Camping will also allow you to be at the top during the morning, when the views are best.

The other park entrance is just outside the town of Volcán, on the road to Cerro Punta. The rugged road into the park – which soon becomes too rough for anything but a 4WD vehicle – goes only a short way off the main road, to the foot of the volcano. The view of the summit and nearby peaks from this entrance is impressive, and there's a lovely loop trail that winds through secondary and virgin forest. The climb from this side is steep and technical.

Sendero Los Quetzales

The park's most accessible trail is the scenic Sendero Los Quetzales (Quetzal Trail) near Cerro Punta. One of the most beautiful in Panama, this trail runs for 8km between Cerro Punta and Boquete, crossing back and forth over the Río Caldera. The trail can be done in either direction, but is easiest from west to east: the town of Cerro Punta is almost 1000m higher than Boquete, so hiking east is more downhill. A guide is not necessary as the trail is very well maintained and easily visible.

The trail itself takes about four to five hours walking west to east, though getting to and from the trailhead will take another couple of hours of walking on either side. A 4WD taxi can take you to the start of the trail on the Cerro Punta side for about US\$12; taxi drivers know the area as **Respingo**. The trail is 5km uphill from the main road and 2km from the last paved road. When you exit the trail, it's another 8km along the road to Boquete, though you may be able to catch a taxi along the road.

In total, the hike is about 23km, so plan accordingly if you intend to walk the length of the trail.

After arriving in Boquete, you can stay overnight or take a bus to David and then Cerro Punta; note that the last Cerro Punta bus leaves David at 6pm. You can also leave your luggage at one of the hotels in David (the Purple House will store luggage, as will others) and save yourself the hassle of back-

tracking. Take only the bare essentials with you on the walk (and a little cash for a good meal and/or lodging in Boquete).

Sleeping

Camping (US\$5) is available in the park and on the trail to the summit from the Boquete side, along the Sendero Los Quetzales or at the ranger station at the entrance to the Sendero Los Quetzales on the Cerro Punta side. You can also stay in bunk beds at the **ranger station** (dm US\$5); bring your own food and bedding. If you plan to stay in the station, let them know you're coming by calling **ANAM** (☎ 775 7840) in David.

Getting There & Away

See Volcán Barú (opposite) and Sendero Los Quetzales (left) for information.

CERRO PUNTA

At an altitude of 1800m, this small town is surrounded by beautiful, rich agricultural lands, and offers spectacular views across a fertile valley to the peaks of Parque Internacional La Amistad. Although the scenery is inspiring enough, the main reason travelers pass through here is to access the Sendero Los Quetzales or the Parque Internacional La Amistad.

If you find yourself crashing here for the night, the **Hotel Cerro Punta** (☎/fax 771 2020; hotelcer@hotmail.com; s/d US\$20/30) is located on the main room in town, and has 10 well-maintained rooms with picture windows and private hot-water bathrooms. Whether you stay here or not, drop by the restaurant for a smoothie, a slice of pie or pancakes with compote – the local strawberries are the best you'll ever taste.

Buses run from David to Cerro Punta (US\$3, 2¼ hours, every 20 minutes, from 5:30am to 8pm). If you're coming from Costa Rica, you can catch this bus at the turn-off from the Interamericana at Concepción.

PARQUE INTERNACIONAL LA AMISTAD

This 407,000-hectare national park was established jointly by Panama and Costa Rica – hence its name, La Amistad (Friendship). In Panama, the 207,000 hectares of the park covers portions of Chiriquí and Bocas del Toro Provinces, and is home to members of three indigenous groups: the Teribe, the Bribri and the Ngöbe-Buglé.

The bi-national park also contains large swaths of virgin rain forest that remain home to a recorded 90 mammal species (including jaguars and pumas) and more than 300 bird species (including resplendent quetzals and harpy eagles). Although most of the park's area is high up in the Talamanca Mountains and remains inaccessible, there is no shortage of hiking and camping opportunities available for intrepid travelers.

Information

Admission to the **park** (admission US\$3, parking US\$1, camping US\$5; ☞ 8am-4pm) is paid at either of the two Panamanian entrances: one at Las Nubes, near Cerro Punta on the Chiriquí side and one at Wetso, near Changuinola on the Bocas del Toro side.

Permits to camp in the park are available at the ranger station.

If you plan to spend much time at Las Nubes, be sure to bring a jacket. This side of the park, at 2280m above sea level, has a cool climate. Temperatures are usually around 24°C (75°F) in the daytime and drop to about 3°C (38°F) at night.

Sights & Activities

LAS NUBES

Three main trails originate at Las Nubes ranger station. The **Sendero La Cascada** (Waterfall Trail) is a 3.4km round-trip hike that takes in three *miradors* (lookout points) as well as a 45m-high waterfall with a lovely bathing pool. The **Sendero El Retoño** (Rebirth Trail) loops 2.1km through secondary forest, crosses a number of a rustic bridges and winds through bamboo groves. The **Vereda La Montaña** (Mountain Lane) is a more strenuous 8km round-trip hike that ascends Cerro Picacho.

The Las Nubes entrance is about 7km from Cerro Punta; a sign on the main road in Cerro Punta marks the turnoff. The road starts out good and paved, but by the time you reach the park, it's a rutted track suitable only for 4WD vehicles. A taxi will bring you from Cerro Punta for US\$4 for up to two people, then US\$2 per extra person.

WETSO

To get near the park you first have to catch a bus from Changuinola to the hamlet of El Silencio. From there you take a 45-minute boat ride up the Río Teribe. In El Silencio there's often a colectivo boat, which will cost about

US\$5 per person; if you have to hire the boat yourself it will cost US\$15 to US\$25. If you go to the **ANAM office** (☎ 758 8967) in Changuinola and tell the people there that you want to go to Wetso, ANAM can radio ahead and make sure there is someone at the river's edge.

Once on the river, you'll pass hills blanketed with rain forest and intermittent waterfalls; the backdrop is always the glorious Talamanca range. After about 45 minutes on the river, you'll see a sign on the right bank that announces your arrival at Wetso, which is actually a protected area but still some way from the park. There's a 3.5km loop trail at Wetso that cuts through secondary and virgin rain forest, with excellent bird-watching. You can also take a dip in the river (the water is too swift for crocodiles), but be careful not to wade out very far or the current will carry you downstream.

Sleeping

Ranger station (dm US\$5) The station at Las Nubes has a dorm with bunk beds. Due to the popularity of these beds among school groups from Canada and the USA, reservations are advised. To reserve a spot, call **ANAM** (☎ 775 3163, 775 7840) in David. Guests have access to the kitchen; stock up on provisions in Cerro Punta. You'll also need to bring your own bedding.

Guest lodge (lodgings per person US\$12, meals US\$3-4) There's a rustic lodge in Wetso that is run by and benefits the Teribe (Naso) indigenous people. They can prepare meals for you, and lead you on guided tours through the jungle. It's a five-hour hike from Wetso to the Parque Internacional La Amistad. For reservations, contact **ANAM** or call **Odesen** (Organización para el Desarrollo Sostenible Ecoturístico Naso; Organización for the Sustainable Development of Naso Ecotourism; ☎ 620 0192).

Getting There & Away

See Las Nubes (left) and Wetso (left) for transportation information.

FINCA LA SUIZA

If you travel along the paved road that crosses the Cordillera Central from the Pan-American Hwy to Chiriquí Grande, providing access to Bocas del Toro, you will pass a wonderful place for hiking, with excellent accommodations options.

About 41km from the Pan-American Hwy is the lodge **Finca La Suiza** (☎ 615 3774, in David 774 4030;

afinis@chiriqui.com; s/d with bathroom US\$31/40; ☞ closed Jun, Sep & Oct), a highly recommended accommodation that boasts some of the best mountain views in Panama. The lodge has three clean, comfortable rooms with private hot-water bathrooms and large windows. On a clear day, you can see the islands in the Golfo de Chiriquí. The enthusiastic and warm German owners – Herbert Brillman and Monika Kohler – will provide breakfast for about US\$3.50 and dinner for US\$9. English, Spanish and German are spoken. Be sure to make reservations, as it's a long way to the next available lodging in Chiriquí Grande or David.

Also on the property are several kilometers of well-marked hiking trails, which pass through primary tropical rain and cloud forest. The scenery features towering trees, hundreds of bird species and views of the Fortuna Park Forest Reserve, the Chiriquí mountains and the Pacific islands. Entrance to the trails costs guests US\$8 for the duration of their stay; nonguests pay US\$8 per day.

To go to Finca La Suiza, take any Changuinola-bound bus from David (hourly starting at 5am) and ask the driver to drop you off. Coming from the Pan-American Hwy, the lodge is to the right just after the Accel gas station (the only gas station on this road). Coming from the north, the lodge is on the left 1.3km after a toll plaza for trucks. While hiking, you can leave luggage with the caretaker near the entrance gate.

BOCAS DEL TORO

Located just 32km from the Costa Rican border, the Archipiélago de Bocas del Toro consists of six densely forested islands, scores of uninhabited islets and Parque Nacional Marino Isla Bastimentos, the country's oldest marine park. Although Bocas is Panama's principle tourist draw card, there's still a fair measure of authenticity left to the islands. Low-key development has maintained the charm of small-town Caribbean life, while the absence of mega-hotels has preserved the idyllic beauty of the archipelago.

The laid-back Caribbean vibe of Bocas is enhanced by the archipelago's spectacular natural setting. The islands are covered in dense jungles of vine tangles and forest palms that open up to pristine beaches fringed by reeds and mangroves. Beneath the water, an exten-

sive coral reef ecosystem supports countless species of tropical fish while simultaneously providing some seriously gnarly surf breaks.

Unfortunately the secret is out, and although locals have thus far welcomed the increase in tourism, bulldozers have already started clearing land for condos and resorts. It's difficult to predict the future of the islands, but one thing is certain – see Bocas now, as the unspoiled beauty of the islands won't last forever.

ISLA COLÓN

The archipelago's largest and most developed island is home to the provincial capital of **Bocas del Toro**, a colorful town of wooden houses built by the United Fruit Company in the early 20th century. Today, Bocas is a slow-paced community of West Indians, Latinos and resident gringos, and the town's relaxed, friendly atmosphere seems to rub off on everyone who visits. Bocas also serves as a convenient base for exploring the marine national park, as *taxis marinos* (water taxis) ply the waters and can whisk you away to remote beaches and snorkeling sites for a few dollars.

Relaxed as it is, Isla Colón is in the middle of a major development boom. Since the mid-1990s, foreign investors have been buying up land like crazy, and there are constantly new hotels, restaurants and condos springing up around the island. Fortunately, there's still a heavy dose of local flavor left on Isla Colón, and the lack of beachside Pizza Huts is testament to the fact that development is still years behind similar destinations in nearby Costa Rica.

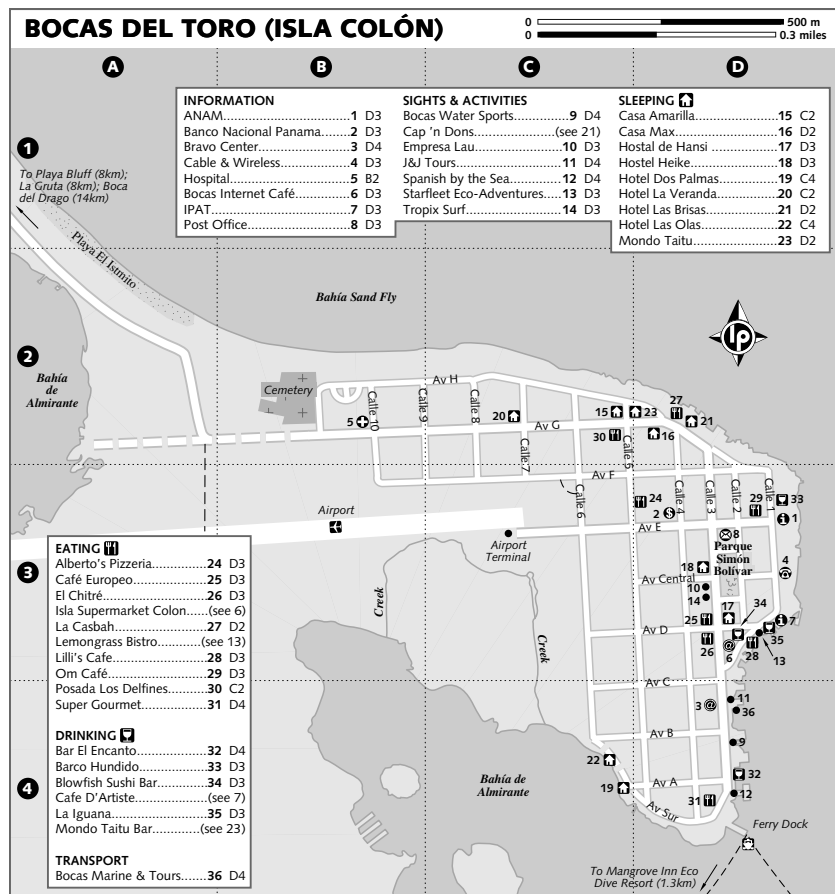
Orientation

Bocas town is laid out in a grid pattern with most of the hotels and restaurants on Calle 3. The only airport in the archipelago is on Av E, four blocks from Calle 3.

Note that the town, the archipelago and the province all share the name Bocas del Toro. Isla Colón and Bocas del Toro town are also referred to as Bocas Isla. It rains a lot in Bocas – even in the dry season, there can be long periods of constant showers.

Information

For more information on the islands, see the useful English website www.bocas.com. For a rundown on the good, the bad and the ugly, check out the island's monthly bilingual publication, *The Bocas Breeze*.



BOCAS BUTTERFLY FARM

Assuming you're not burned out from looking at all the butterfly gardens in Costa Rica, this adorable **farm** (Map p682; ☎ 6483 5741; admission US\$5; ☞ 10pm-4am) makes for a great afternoon trip. Water taxis can whisk you away from Bocas town to the entrance of the farm on nearby Isla Carenero for only US\$1.

Activities

DIVING & SNORKELING

With nearly 40 rivers unloading silt into the seas around Bocas del Toro, the archipelago's waters are notorious for their poor visibility. If it has rained a lot in recent days, visibility may be limited to only 3m; at best visibility is about 15m. Although experienced divers

accustomed to crystal-clear Caribbean diving may be disappointed with Bocas, the islands still have much to offer.

The emerald green waters of the archipelago are home to the usual assortment of tropical species, and with a little luck you might see barracuda, stingrays, dolphins and nurse sharks. Better sites nearby include **Dark Wood Reef**, northwest of Bastimentos; **Hospital Point**, a 50-foot (16m) wall off Cayo Nancy; and the base of the **Punta Juan buoy** north of Isla Cristóbal; see Map p682.

Diving trips are offered by **Starfleet Eco-Adventures** (Map p684; ☎ 757 9630; www.explorepanama.com/starfleet.htm; Calle 1) and **Bocas Water Sports** (Map p684; ☎ /fax 757 9541; www.bocawatersports.com; Calle 3). Most diving trips cost about US\$35 for a

one-tank, one-site dive, US\$50 for two tanks and two sites. PADI open-water and advanced-diver courses are also available. Starfleet offers instruction in English, and enjoys a sterling reputation among locals and travelers.

Both dive shops also offer snorkeling on their boat tours, see below.

BOAT TOURS

The most popular tours in the area are all-day snorkeling trips, which are perfect for nondivers who want a taste of the area's rich marine life. A typical tour costs US\$15 per person, and goes to **Dolphin Bay**, **Cayo Crawl**, **Red Frog Beach** and **Hospital Point**. A trip to the distant **Cayos Zapatillas** costs US\$20 (plus an additional US\$10 for admission to the marine park), and includes lunch, a laze on the beach and a jungle walkabout on **Cayo Zapatilla Sur**.

Many 'tours' are really little more than boat transportation to a pretty spot. If you have your own snorkel gear (or if you rent it), you can also get the local boatmen to take you around the area in their small, motorized canoes. They know several good snorkeling spots, and this option can be cheaper than the dive companies' trips, depending on the size of your group. Agree on a price before you go.

In addition to the dive operators listed earlier, a recommended tour operator is **J&J Tours** (Map p684; ☎ 757 9915; transparentetour@hotmail.com; Calle 3).

SURFING

Although everyone (and their grandmother) seems to have picked up surfing in nearby Puerto Viejo (p567), Bocas del Toro is still emerging as an international surf destination. However, the archipelago offers an excellent mix of beginner beach breaks, ripping reefs breaks and some seriously suicidal breaks.

For surfing information on nearby Isla Bastimentos and Isla Carenero, see p690 and p691 respectively.

Beginner surfers looking for a bit of reef experience should check out **Playa Punch**, which offers a good mix of lefts and rights. Although it can get heavy when big, Punch generally offers some of the kindest waves around.

Just past Punch on route to Playa Bluff is a popular reef break known as **Dumps**. This left break can get up to 3m, and should only be ridden by experienced surfers as wiping out on the reef here is a dangerous affair. There is also an inner break known as **Inner Dumps**,

which also breaks left, but is more forgiving than its outer brother.

Be careful walking out on the reefs as they are sharp and full of urchins – wear booties. If you wipe out and get cut up, be sure to properly disinfect your wounds. Although salt water heals, sea water doesn't, especially in the Caribbean where the water temperature means that the ocean is full of live bacteria.

The island's most notorious surf spot is **Playa Bluff**, which throws out powerful barreling waves that break in shallow water along the beach, and have a reputation for snapping boards (and occasionally bones). Though waves close quickly, the tubes here are truly awesome, especially when the swells are strong.

You can rent fairly thrashed surfboards for US\$10 to US\$15 per day from **Tropix Surf** (Map p684; ☎ 757 9727; Calle 3; ☞ 9am-7pm). The guys at **Mondo Taitu** (☎ /fax 757 9425; Av I) in Isla Colón (p686) also rent boards for negotiable prices. If heading out to Isla Bastimentos or Isla Carenero, arrange your board in advance as there are no surf shops on either island.

KAYAKING

You will need to be wary of boat traffic and the occasional swell, but sea kayak is a great way to travel between islands. **Cap 'n Dons** (Map p684; ☎ 757 9248; Calle 3; ☞ 9am-7pm) rents kayaks for US\$10 per day, as well as paddle boats, sailboats and a big water trampoline.

CYCLING

Whether you're heading to Boca del Drago on the paved road or taking the dirt path to Playa Bluff, a bike can seriously increase your mobility. Note that the bike ride to Boca del Drago is taxing, especially when the sun is beaming. If you're unsure of your fitness level, head to Bluff instead; be aware that the road floods after heavy rains. You can rent a bike for US\$8 per day and support a local Kuna by heading to **Empresa Lau** (Map p684; Calle 3; ☞ 9am-7pm), located next to Hostel Heike.

HIKING

If you're looking to seriously get off the beaten path, there is a network of undeveloped hiking trails that fans out across the island. One of the most popular hikes starts at the end of the coastal road in Mimbi Timbi and carries on along the coast to Boca del Drago. You will need about six hours of daylight to complete the hike, and you must carry in all your fresh

water. The trail winds past caves, caverns and plenty of vine-encrusted jungle. A bike will help speed things up a bit, though you will be carrying it part of the way, especially if it's been raining recently.

FISHING

The best budget option for aspiring anglers is to go surf casting with the local boat-taxi drivers. The hand lines are a bit tricky at first, though you'll soon get the hang of it. It's best to go early in the morning when the fish are biting; prices are negotiable.

Courses

Spanish by the Sea (☎ /fax 757 9518; www.spanishbythesea.com; Calle 4) is a reader-recommended language school that offers affordable Spanish classes in a relaxed setting. Rates for group/private lessons are US\$70/130 for two hours a day five days a week, though cheaper rates are available for more comprehensive packages and longer stays. The school also offers a popular traveler's survival-Spanish course (US\$40) that includes six hours of instruction.

Homestays can be arranged (per night with breakfast US\$12) or you can rent one of its simple dorms/rooms (per night US\$7.50/12). Spanish by the Sea also organizes parties, dance classes and open lectures. English, Spanish, French, German and Dutch are spoken.

Festivals & Events

Bocas celebrates all of Panama's holidays, with a few enjoyable local ones besides. Annual events celebrated on Bocas and Bastimentos include the following:

May Day (May 1) While the rest of Panama is celebrating Labor Day, the Palo de Mayo (a Maypole dance) is performed by local girls.

Día de la Virgen del Carmen (third Sunday in July) Bocatorreños make a pilgrimage to La Gruta, the cave in the middle of the Isla Colón, for a mass in honor of the Virgen del Carmen.

Feria del Mar (September 28-October 2) The Fair of the Sea is held on Playa El Istmito, a few kilometers north of Bocas.

Fundación de la Provincia de Bocas del Toro (November 16) Celebrating the foundation of the province in 1904, this is a day of parades and other events; it's a big affair, attracting people from all over the province, and the Panamanian president also attends.

Día de Bastimentos (November 23) Bastimentos Day is celebrated on the island with a huge parade and drumming exhibitions.

Sleeping

The town of Bocas has become a major tourist draw. Both expats and locals run hotels, and a few Bocas residents rent rooms in their houses. Reservations are a good idea between December and April and during national holidays and local festivals.

Other accommodations centers are Isla Bastimentos (p690) and Isla Carenero (p691).

Mondo Taitu (Map p684; ☎ /fax 757 9425; Av H; dm/s/d US\$7/8/16) This legendary backpacker joint is reason enough to cancel your travel plans and post up in Bocas for weeks on end. Owned and managed by three fun-loving Americans, Mondo is a wacky tree house–like building that is famous locally for its wild events. On Tuesdays and Fridays, the bar at Mondo hosts a variety of festivities ranging from Sake Bomb parties to '80s Night; you can kick back here any time with a beer in one hand and a hookah in the other. All of the usual backpacker amenities are on offer including a communal kitchen, lounge area, laundry facilities, free bikes and surfboards.

Hostel Heike (Map p684; ☎ 757 9708; Calle 3; dm US\$8) The sister hostel to Mondo Taitu, Heike proudly serves as the ying to Mondo's yang. Awash with colorfully painted murals and natural woods, Heike is the perfect spot for chilling out and soaking up the Caribbean ambiance. The upstairs balcony overlooks the town's park, and is a perfect spot to indulge in a cold beer and a good book. Like Mondo, the amenities at Heike are perfectly suited to backpackers.

Cabañas Estefany (Map p682; ☎ 618 3155; d US\$15; 2-/8-person cabin US\$30/55) On Boca del Drago, this cute clutch of cabins is one of the only accommodations on Isla Colón located on a beach. In addition to basic rooms with shared bathrooms, Cabañas Estefany has small two-person cabins with a bathroom and kitchen, and larger cabins for up to eight people. The cabins are often booked with researchers from the US, so it's recommended that you call ahead.

Hotel Las Brisas (Map p684; ☎ 757 9248; brisasbocas@cw.net.pa; Calle 3; d US\$17-40; 🏠) On the northern end of Calle 3, Hotel Las Brisas is built over the water, and offers a variety of rooms to meet your budget. The cheaper rooms are definitely starting to show their age, though a few extra dollars can get you nicer furnishings, better views and even air-con.

Hotel La Veranda (Map p684; ☎ 757 9211; www.explorepanama.com/veranda.htm; Av G; US\$16-35; 🏠) This

charming renovated vintage home features furnishings and fixtures in early 20th-century Caribbean style. Individually decorated rooms are priced according to their size, views and amenities.

Hostal de Hansi (Map p684; ☎ 757 9932; Calle 3; s US\$10-16, d US\$22) Run by a cheery German woman, this quite intimate spot features well-designed rooms with colorful wooden planks, set amid a tropical garden. Cheaper singles have shared facilities while the more expensive rooms (and doubles) have bathrooms.

Hotel Dos Palmas (Map p684; ☎ 757 9906; Av Sur; d/tr US\$22/28) Proudly touting the hotel as '100% Bocatorreño,' the friendly owners of Dos Palmas offer basic wooden rooms with old-fashioned furnishings. The entire hotel sits above the water, and boasts exceptional views of the bay.

Casa Max (Map p684; ☎ 757 9120; casa1max@hotmail.com; Av H; s/d/tr US\$20/25/30) This Dutch-owned spot offers a handful of brightly painted wooden rooms with high ceilings, and some come complete with dreamy balconies. The free breakfast of fresh fruit and hot coffee sweetens the deal.

Casa Amarilla (Map p684; ☎ 757 9938; Calle 5; d US\$35; 🏠 🏠) Run by a lovely retired couple from Denver, Colorado, this quaint yellow house is one of the best deals on the island. For only a few more dollars more than other hotels, you can rack in the amenities, which include cable TV, private safe, hot showers and free wireless internet.

Hotel Las Olas (Map p684; ☎ 757 9930; Calle 6; s/d US\$37/42; 🏠 🏠) Rapidly becoming one of the most popular hotels on the island, this Israeli-owned spot has polished wooden rooms that are worth every dollar. Hotel Las Olas is also built over the water, and features an intimate bar and restaurant with sweeping views. Wireless internet is available.

Eating

Although Bocas town is a small place, there's no shortage of great restaurants serving up an impressive offering of international cuisine. Most places may be slightly out of the shoe-string price range, but it's worth splurging – your stomach will thank you. All are on Map p684.

A number of food carts ply their wares around town – local favorites include the 'Chicken Lady,' the 'Batido Lady,' the 'Chicken Sandwich Guy' and the infamous 'Meat-on-a-stick Guy.'

Isla Supermarket Colon (Calle 3) If you're self-catering, this is the largest supermarket on the island.

Super Gourmet (Calle 3) This boutique place has everything from Japanese *panko* bread crumbs to California wines.

Café Europeo (Av D; pastries US\$0.75-1.50) Sample the island's best baked goods at this tasty bakery; be warned that the huge, fluffy cinnamon rolls are highly addictive.

Posada Los Delfines (Calle 5; breakfast special US\$2.50) The cheapest breakfast on the island is yours to be had at this hotel restaurant – go on and order your eggs anyway you want.

El Chitré (Calle 3; plates US\$2-3) Adored by locals and travelers alike, this no-frills cafeteria-style hole-in-the-wall is the best spot in town for cheap but tasty grub.

Lilli's Cafe (Calle 1; plates US\$3-6) Whether you feast on an omelet packed with fresh veggies or a club sandwich made with homemade bread, be sure to go heavy on the homemade 'Killin' Me Man' pepper sauce.

Alberto's Pizzeria (Calle 5; pizzas \$4-6) Nothing fills the gut like a big and cheesy pepperoni pizza – stop by this Italian-run spot and Alberto will make sure you're taken care of.

Om Café (Av E; dishes US\$4-6) There are only a handful of tables on offer at this handsome outdoor Indian restaurant, though they're all traditional family recipes that are guaranteed to make your palette water and your brow sweat.

Lemongrass Bistro (Calle 1; lunch US\$6-8) Although it's a bit pricey in the evening, don't miss the lunch specials at this popular Asian fusion restaurant, which gets rave reviews from the local gringo community.

La Casbah (Av H; dinner US\$7-12) Even backpackers need a good meal sometimes, and there's no better place than at this Mediterranean-inspired restaurant – one bite of the steak with blue-cheese sauce and you'll stop caring about your budget.

Drinking

All these are on Map p684.

La Iguana (Calle 1) A great place to kick off your crazy Bocas night is at this popular surfer bar that serves up two-for-one cocktails from 6:30pm to 7:30pm. This is a great spot for a frothy piña colada, though you can't go wrong with an ice-cold Balboa lager.

Café D'Artiste (Calle 1; coffee \$1.50) This eclectic café is a great place for a freshly brewed cup

of Panama's finest grains; don't leave without perusing the art and curios that are available for purchase.

Mondo Taitu Bar (Av H) Head to backpacker central; always guaranteed to be a good time. On Tuesday and Friday, the party-loving owners entertain their guests with a variety of themed events, though the creative cocktail list and hookahs (US\$5) make Mondo a good choice any night. If you're feeling brave (and cheap), order a tequila suicide – a snort of salt, a squeeze of lime in the eye and a shot of the worst tequila they can find (at least it's free!).

Bar El Encanto (Calle 3) All the rage among the island's youth if you're looking for a little local flair. Most nights are heavy on the reggaeton, but there is the occasional live performance here.

Blowfish Sushi Bar (Calle 1) At the time of research the owners had just finished installing a fireman's pole on the bar. So now there's raw fish, and pole-dancing.

Barco Hundido (Calle 1) Most nights in Bocas end at this open-air thatched-roof bar that's affectionately known as the Wreck Deck – the name comes from the sunken banana boat that rests in the clear Caribbean waters in the front. A short boardwalk extends from the bar over the vessel to an island seating area that's perfect for star-gazing. The fun-loving American owner also arranges private parties on his *Barco Loco* (Crazy Boat), which is arguably the most unique sea-going vessel you've ever seen.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Bocas del Toro has a fine airport that's the pride of the town. **Aeroperlas** (☎ 757 9341) and **Air Panama** (☎ 757 9841) offer daily flights connecting Bocas with Panama City (US\$74, one hour, one to two per day). Aeroperlas also has flights from David to Bocas (US\$35, 50 minutes, one daily Monday to Friday) stopping first in Changuinola. Air Panama has flights from San José, Costa Rica to Bocas (US\$100, 1½ hours, one per day on Monday, Wednesday and Friday).

BOAT

If you don't fly into Bocas, you'll have to take a water taxi from Changuinola. **Bocas Marine & Tours** (Map p684; Calle 3) has regular boat services to Changuinola (one way US\$5, 45 minutes,

eight daily); the first departs at 7am, the last at 5:20pm. The boat ride to Changuinola travels through the old canals formerly used by the banana plantations – it's a scenic trip that's well worth taking. Changuinola is connected by bus to David and to the Costa Rican border at Guabito-Sixaola.

Getting Around

WATER TAXIS

To reach nearby islands, you can hire boatmen operating motorized boats and canoes along the waterfront. As a general rule, you should always sort out the rate beforehand, and clarify if it is one-way or a round-trip. Although rates vary, you will get a better deal if you speak Spanish, are part of a group and arrange for a pick-up. Although most fishermen will perceive you as a rich gringo (and comparatively, you are), don't get angry – most boatmen are just trying to feed their families.

Round-trip rates are generally as follows: US\$4 to the near side of Isla Bastimentos, US\$2 to Isla Carenero and US\$10 to Red Frog Beach. You should always pay on the return leg – this guarantees a pick up – but most boatmen will want some money upfront so that they can buy petrol.

BIKES

You can rent bicycles from **Empresa Lau** (Map p684; Calle 3; ☎ 9am–7pm), located next to Hostel Heike, for US\$8 per day, as well as mopeds for US\$20 per day.

ISLA BASTIMENTOS

Although it's a mere 10-minute boat ride from the town of Bocas del Toro, Isla Bastimentos is a different world. The northern coast of the island is home to palm-fringed wilderness beaches that serve as nesting grounds for sea turtles, while most of the southern coast consists of mangrove islands and coral reefs that fall within the boundaries of the Parque Nacional Marino Isla Bastimentos. The main settlement on Bastimentos is the historic West Indian town of Old Bank, which has its origins in the banana industry. The island is also home to the Ngöbe-Buglé village of Quebrada Sal, which is separated from Old Bank by a huge swath of jungle.

Unfortunately, the face of Bastimentos is changing rapidly as construction has already begun on the controversial Red Frog Beach

Club. Although the development project is outside the confines of the Parque Nacional Marino Isla Bastimentos, it will completely transform the face of the island, and set a precedent for future development projects in Bocas del Toro.

Orientation

The small village of Old Bank has no roads, just a wide, concrete footpath lined on both sides with colorfully painted wooden houses. From the town, there is a path leading across the island to Wizard Beach and Red Frog Beach, though the route can turn into a virtual swamp following the rains.

On the southeastern side of the island is the remote Ngöbe-Buglé village of Quebrada Sal. Tropical forest covers the interior of the island; you can explore it, but go only with a guide, as it's very easy to get lost.

Sights

OLD BANK

Located on the western tip of the island, Old Bank or simply Bastimentos Town is a small enclave of 1500 residents of West Indian descent. Until the 1990s, most of the adults in Old Bank traveled to Almirante daily to tend the banana fields, though today residents have taken to fishing, farming small plots or just hanging out.

Although Old Bank is very poor and devoid of any real sights, it has a much more pronounced Caribbean vibe than Bocas town,

and it's a relaxing place to stroll around and soak up the atmosphere. It's also the best place in Bocas del Toro to hear Guari-Guari, a fascinating Spanish-English Creole that's native to the island.

BEACHES

Bastimentos has some amazing beaches, though be careful swimming as the surf can really pick up on the north coast of the island.

The most beautiful beach on the island is **Wizard Beach** (also known as Playa Primera), which is awash in powder-yellow sand and backed by thick vine-strewn jungle. Although Wizard Beach is connected to Old Bank via a wilderness path, the mere 30 minute walk can turn into an all-day trek through the muck if it's been raining heavily.

Assuming the weather is cooperating, you can continue walking along the coast to **Playa Segunda** (Second Beach) and **Red Frog Beach**. Like Wizard, both beaches are stunning and virtually abandoned, though it's likely that this will change as development on the island continues (see below). If the weather isn't cooperating, you can access Red Frog Beach by water taxi via a small marina on the south side of the island; entrance to the beach is US\$2. While you are on Red Frog beach, keep an eye out for the *rana rojo* (strawberry poison-dart frog) as they might not be on the island for too much longer.

The path continues past Red Frog Beach to **Playa Larga** (Long Beach), where sea turtles

THE DEAD FROG BEACH CLUB

On Isla Bastimentos the construction of a massive residential development project called the Red Frog Beach Club (RFBC) is well underway. Although the RFBC has launched a flashy public-relations campaign espousing its involvement in rural development, locals, resident expats and concerned tourists are furious about the environmental impact that the club will have on the island. The principle concerns are that the presence of the RFBC will limit local access to Red Frog Beach, have an adverse impact on nesting sea turtles and irreversibly damage terrestrial and marine ecosystems.

Despite increasing local and foreign opposition to the RFBC, it is unlikely that the project will be halted. Experts ranging from conservation biologists to sea-turtle specialists continue to petition ANAM, Panama's environmental authority, though it is feared that the RFBC's principal investors have some clout with the decision makers. However, frequent setbacks have slowed progress, and the opposition hopes that this extra time will enable them to influence the RFBC's agenda. It is almost certain that Isla Bastimentos will be the home of an exclusive residential community in the years to come – although there is hope that the developers will take it upon themselves to make their community more ecofriendly.

For more information on the Red Frog Beach Club, visit its website at www.redfrogbeachclub.com.

nest from April to August. Playa Larga and much of the eastern side of the island fall under the protection of Parque Nacional Marino Isla Bastimentos.

PARQUE NACIONAL MARINO ISLA BASTIMENTOS

Established in 1988, this was Panama's first marine park (admission US\$10). Protecting various areas of the Bocas del Toro Archipelago including parts of Isla Bastimentos and the Cayos Zapatillas, the marine park is an important nature reserve for countless species of Caribbean wildlife.

You can get current park information from the IPAT or ANAM offices in Bocas del Toro (p683). The dive operators and boatmen in Bocas are also good sources of information about the park and its attractions. If you want to camp out anywhere in the park, you are required to first obtain a permit from ANAM.

QUEBRADA SAL

On the southeastern edge of Bastimentos at the end of a long canal cut through the mangrove forest is the Ngöbe-Buglé village of Quebrada Sal (Salt Creek). The community consists of 60-odd thatch and bamboo houses, an elementary school, a handicrafts store, a general store and a soccer field. Water taxis can drop you off at the entrance, and you will need to pay the US\$1 entry fee and sign the visitor's log.

The Quebrada Sal is slowly modernizing along with the rest of the archipelago. The villagers are friendly and open to visitors, especially if you can speak Spanish. If you have the time, it's worth hiring a local guide to walk with you along the cross-island trail that leads to Playa Larga (about one hour each way).

Activities

DIVING & SNORKELING

For more information on diving and snorkeling, see p684. If you're staying on the island, diving trips are offered by **Dutch Pirate** (☎ 6567 1812; www.thedutchpirate.com). There is a small booking office in Old Bank, though it's best to phone ahead to make a reservation.

SURFING

If you're looking for a solid beach break, both **Wizard Beach** and **Red Frog Beach** offer fairly constant sets of lefts and rights that are perfect for beginner and intermediate surfers. When the

swells are in, Wizard occasionally throws out some huge barrels, though they tend to close up pretty quickly.

SPELUNKING & HIKING

Nivida is the name of a cavern recently discovered by one of Bastimentos's residents. The cave is one of the island's most fascinating natural wonders and half the fun of the place is getting to it. To reach Nivida, go to Roots (see opposite) to arrange a trip with Oscar (prices negotiable), a very reliable local guide. You'll then travel by small motorboat up a channel through lush vegetation full of wildlife. A short walk through the jungle leads to a massive cavern complete with swarms of nectar bats and a very swimmable subterranean lake.

Oscar can also arrange a challenging cross-island hike to **Laguna de Bastimentos**, a jungle lake completely surrounded by dense vegetation. This swath of rain forest is the terra firma section of the Parque Nacional Marino Isla Bastimentos.

Sleeping

If you're packing the proper gear and prepared to self-cater, the abandoned beaches of the island are perfectly suitable for wilderness camping.

Although the majority of the action is on Isla Colón, accommodations on Bastimentos are perfect for travelers seeking rustic digs and a laid-back atmosphere.

Hotel Bastimentos (☎ 757 9053; dm/d US\$5/10) On a hill off the main path, this rough-and-ready budget hotel has bright and airy rooms with great balconies overlooking the shoreline. More in touch with backpacker needs than other hotels on the island, Hotel Bastimentos offers a common room with a bar, TV, dartboard and views, and a well-equipped communal kitchen.

Beverly's Hill (☎ 757 9923; s/d US\$10/15) Rooms in clean cabins set amid a lush garden make Beverly's excellent value. The friendly hosts, Beverly and Wulf, will make you feel welcome the moment you arrive. You can sleep well at night knowing that the on-site composting and water filtration system makes this one of the most environmentally friendly hotels on the island.

Pension Tío Tom (☎ /fax 757 9831; tomina@cwpl.net.pa; d with/without bathroom \$20/10) This plank-and-thatch building has been offering cheap,

clean and unfussy rooms for years. Insanely popular and justifiably so, it epitomizes the type of rustic backpacker place that blazed the gringo trail through Central America. The five rooms at Tío Tom are built right over the water, which is part of the attraction – plank windows open to a sea view. The friendly German owners rent snorkel gear (per day US\$5), offer tours and can cook up some seriously gourmet dinners for pennies.

Point (☎ 757 9704; cabin US\$40) At the northern tip of Bastimentos lie two cabins overlooking the sea, with crashing waves just a few meters from the doorsteps. Each of the cabins boasts handsomely designed rooms with wooden accents, ecologically designed septic systems, and private hot-water bathrooms. Guests also have free use of the kayaks, and you can surf right off the tip of the island (bring your own board).

Eating & Drinking

Although you're just a short boat ride away from Isla Colón, there are a handful of interesting spots on the island that are worth checking out.

Rooster (mains US\$2-4) This inexpensive, low-key spot is also known as Pete's Place, and specializes in dishes that are hearty, healthy and heavy on the island's fresh produce.

Roots (mains US\$3-5) This universally loved restaurant over the water is a Bocas institution, and is famous for its masterfully prepared dishes of local meats and seafood that are perfectly accented with fresh coconut milk. Yumm.

La Feria (drinks US\$1) This blue, barn-like structure is the seat of the island's nightlife – during the evening hours, just follow the sound of reggae.

Getting There & Away

To get to Isla Bastimentos from Bocas del Toro, just walk down to the waterfront and ask a boatman to take you over. The ride will cost about US\$2 to get to the near side of the island or US\$4 to the far side.

ISLA CARENERO

A few hundred meters from Isla Colón is the oft-forgotten island of Isla Carenero. The island takes its name from 'careening,' which in nautical talk means to lean a ship on one side for cleaning or repairing. It was on Careening Cay in October 1502 that ships

EXPLORE MORE OF BOCAS DEL TORO

Hire a boatman and go check out the following.

- Don some snorkeling gear and explore the 20m wall at **Hospital Point** near Isla Solarte.
- Clean your binoculars and then keep your eyes peeled for red-billed tropic birds and white-crowned pigeons in **Swan Cay** near Isla de los Pájaros.
- Apply some sunscreen and set out for the pristine white-sand beaches and virgin forests of the **Cayos Zapatillas**.
- Break out your camera and get lost in the mangrove-dotted channels of **Cayo Crawl** near Isla Bastimentos.

under the command of Christopher Columbus were careened and cleaned while the admiral recovered from a bellyache.

Today, the wave of development that transformed Isla Colón is also making headway on Isla Carenero. Although the majority of the accommodations on Isla Carenero are borderline resorts, staying on the island is a great alternative to Isla Colón, especially if you're looking for a bit of peace and quiet.

Orientation

Water taxis dock at the small marina on the tip of the island. From here, there is a path that leads to the island's fledgling town, and continues across the island.

Activities

SURFING

If you've got some serious surfing experience under your belt, then you're going to want to build up the courage to tackle **Silverbacks**, an enormous barreling right that breaks over a reef and can reach heights of over 5m. On a good day Silverbacks is a truly world-class break that wouldn't look out of place on Hawaii's North Shore. Silverbacks breaks off the coast, so you're going to need to hire a water taxi (round-trip US\$3) to get out there.

Sleeping & Eating

Doña Mara Restaurante y Hospedaje (☎ 757 9551; d US\$55) On the far side of the island is this Panamanian-run spot, which consists of six guestrooms located on a secluded beach.

Although it's a bit pricey for what you're getting, the remote location makes up for the sterility of the rooms.

Hotel Tierra Verde (☎ 757 9042; www.hotelieraverde.com; s/d/tr US\$45/\$50/\$55) Offering excellent value for money, this lovely three-story building sits just back from the beach in a shady area full of soaring palm trees. The handful of spacious rooms features beautiful wood details, picture windows and steamy hot-water showers.

Restaurante Las Tortugas (mains US\$4-6) This low-key restaurant boasts fine views of Bocas town, and the local seafood on offer is about as cheap as it gets.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Isla Carenero is a quick and easy US\$1 boat ride from Bocas town.

CHANGUINOLA

pop 50,000

Headquarters of the Chiriquí Land Company, the very same people that bring you Chiquita bananas, Changuinola is a hot and rather dusty town surrounded by a sea of banana plantations. Although there is little reason to spend any more time in Changuinola than you have to, overland travelers en route from Costa Rica to Isla Colón will have to stop here.

In addition to serving as a transit point for the Bocas del Toro archipelago, Changuinola also serves as the access point for the Wetso entrance to the Parque Internacional La Amistad. The **ANAM** (☎ 758 8967) office near the center of town has information on the park.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Carol (☎ 758 8731; Av 17 de Abril; d with bathroom US\$12-16) Although rooms here could inspire a horror film, this budget hotel will do in a pinch. It's conveniently located across from the cemetery (room with a view), and it's a pretty good deal considering that the rooms have private bathrooms, some with hot water.

Restaurant/Bar Chiquita Banana (meals US\$2-4) On the main road opposite the bus station, this local favorite serves Panamanian fare, but surprisingly no bananas. (Indeed, bananas are hard to find in town as they are marked for export.)

Getting There & Away

For information on getting to Costa Rica, see p669.

BOAT

Water taxis connecting Changuinola to Bocas town (US\$4, 45 minutes, eight daily) leave from Finca 60, which is 5km south of town. Colectivos run regularly from the bus station in town to Finca 60 for US\$0.40.

BUSES

Buses depart from the station in the center of town for these destinations: El Silencio (Parque Internacional Amistad) (US\$0.50, 30 minutes, every 20 minutes from 5am to 8:30pm), Guabito-Sixaola (US\$0.50, 30 minutes, every half hour from 6am to 7pm), Panama City (US\$24, 10 hours, at 7am daily), David US\$12.50, 4½ hours, every half hour from 5am to 6pm), San José in Costa Rica (US\$8, six hours, at 10am daily).

TAXI

You can take a shared taxi from Changuinola to the Costa Rican border at Guabito (per person US\$3, 15 minutes).

THE INTERIOR

Between Chiriquí and Panama City, the regions of Veraguas, Peninsula de Azuero and Coclé – all part of the interior – have long been overshadowed by the flash of the capital, the tranquility of the Chiriquí highlands and the Caribbean lure of Bocas del Toro. You may be one of the few tourists around, but if it's Panama's heart and soul you seek, this may be the best place to look. Here, some of Panama's friendliest citizens welcome visitors to their colonial towns and hillside villages. Founded by the Spanish four centuries ago, many settlements are not much bigger now than they were then, and the majority still retain their original, well-preserved colonial churches.

Due to the relative isolation of the region, some of Panama's oldest traditions live on here, and old-world festivals straight out of Spain occur throughout the year. Today the region has an economy primarily based on agriculture, though the interior is known throughout Panama for its exquisite handicrafts. The region is also home to Santa Catalina, which is regarded as one of the best surf destinations in Central America, as well as the scenic mountain towns of Santa Fé and El Valle.

SANTA FÉ

Lacking the tourist infrastructure of Boquete, this tiny mountain is a perfect destination for independent-minded hikers and birders looking to escape the crowds.

The **Orquideario** (☎ 954 0910; orquiberta@hotmail.com; admission by donation), owned by friendly Bertha Castrellón, has one of the country's most impressive collections of orchids (over 265 species). To get here, take the right branch where the Santiago-Santa Fé road forks, then take the second right and look for the sign at that reads '*Orquideario y Cultivos...*'. As this is a home, please be respectful and visit at a reasonable hour (9am to 5pm). Bertha is also Santa Fé's top birding guide, and is a wealth of knowledge.

If you're looking to cool off in a lovely mountain stream, the refreshing **Salto de Bermejo** is only a 10-minute walk from Bertha's – proceed along the same road and take the first right down to the river.

If you take one of the roads heading west from town, you will reach the **Hacia Alto de Piedra**, a vast wilderness area that is ripe for exploration. However, it's best to go with a local guide as this forest quickly becomes a jungle as you clear the ridge.

An excellent spot to bed down for the night is the centrally located **Hostal La Qhia** (☎ 954 0903; hostal_laqhia@yahoo.es; dm US\$8, r US\$15-20), which is a Belgian-Argentinean-owned oasis of lovely gardens and comfortable beds.

Frequent buses travel from Santiago to Santa Fé (US\$2, 1½ hours, every 30 minutes), from 5am to 6pm. From Santiago you can catch frequent buses to David (US\$6, three hours) and Panama City (US\$6, three hours).

SANTA CATALINA

Although lagging behind Costa Rica in terms of tourist development, Santa Catalina is regarded as one of the best surf destinations in Central America. On a bad day, you can choose from any number of beach breaks on Playa Santa Catalina. On a good day, the rights and lefts here are easily comparable to Oahu's Sunset Beach. Generally speaking, the surf is at its best from December to April.

If you want to really explore the area, many of the local fishermen make excellent guides, and they know the best snorkeling and spearfishing spots as well as some empty surf breaks – look for them on the beach and ask around.

There is no shortage of prime beach real-estate for pitching a tent, though theft is most

definitely a problem. If there's an international surf competition taking place in town, this may in fact be your only option.

Sleeping & Eating

If you want to be on the beach, follow the road out of town – there are a number of signed turn-offs advertising accommodations.

Cabañas Rolo (☎ 998 8600; per person US\$7) If you want to bed down in the center of town, this is a good option – basic but adequate. It's owned by a friendly local named Rolo. He cooks meals by request (typically US\$3), rents surfboards (per day US\$10), and can help you find local guides for tours around the area.

Casablanca Surf Resort (☎ /fax 226 3786; per person US\$5-35; ☺) An excellent choice, this has a number of housing options in a parklike setting bordering the beach. Despite the lavish name, surfers on a budget are the main clientele at Casablanca.

Pizzeria Jamming (pizza US\$3-5; ☎ 6:30-11pm Tue-Sun) A much-loved Santa Catalina institution, located on the road to the beach-facing hotels. This pizzeria offers delicious thin-crust pizzas made from fresh ingredients, and the open-air rancho is Santa Catalina's liveliest gathering spot.

Getting There & Away

To reach Santa Catalina from Panama City, first take a bus to Soná (US\$7, six hours, six buses daily 8:30am to 6pm). From Soná, three buses serve Santa Catalina daily, leaving at 5am, noon and 4pm (US\$3, one hour). Unless the driver is pushed for time, he will take you to any one of the hotels listed for an additional US\$1. If you miss the bus, you can hire a taxi from Soná to Santa Catalina for about US\$25.

From Santa Catalina, three buses serve Soná daily – they leave at 7am, 8am and 2pm. In Santa Catalina, the bus stops near the Restaurant La Fonda – a conch-shell's throw from Cabañas Rolo. If you're staying at one of the other hotels, it's a 1km walk on mostly flat terrain. There are no taxis in town.

CHITRÉ

pop 40,000

Capital of Herrera Province, cowboy-esque Chitré is a good place to experience the rural charm of the interior. Although there's not too much in town aside from the friendly locals and hearty cuisine, Chitré serves as a good base for exploring the Peninsula de Azuero.

Sights & Activities

Chitré is centered on its understated **cathedral**, which is striking for its elegant simplicity and fine balance of gold and wood. The town is also home to the modest **Museo de Herrera** (☎ 996 0077; Paseo Enrique Geenzier at Av Julio Arjona; admission US\$1; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Tue-Sat, 8-11am Sun), a small but worthwhile anthropology and natural history museum. It contains many well-preserved pieces of pottery dating from 5000 BC until the time of the Spanish conquest, as well as photographs depicting Azuero residents, authentic folkloric costumes and also religious artifacts of the region.

Ten kilometers north of downtown Chitré, **Parque Nacional Sarigua** (admission US\$3) is a sad monument to the effects of environmental devastation. The park's land is the end product of slash-and-burn agriculture, which created a tropical desert. It's morbidly fascinating as an example of environmental apocalypse. The admission is payable at the ANAM station at the entrance. Buses do not go here; a round-trip taxi ride from Chitré will cost you about US\$20.

Playa El Agallito, 7km from Chitré, is not so much a beach as it is a mudflat, where migratory birds arrive by the thousands. These shorebirds are studied by Francisco Delgado and local volunteers at the **Humboldt Ecological Station**. You're welcome to stop by the station, where there are displays on the outside wall. If Francisco isn't around, you can try reaching him at the **restaurant-bar** (☎ 996 1820) beside the beach or at **home** (☎ 996 1725).

Sleeping & Eating

There's no shortage of cheap hotels in town.

Hotel El Prado (☎ 996 4620; Av Herrera; s US\$10-15, d US\$15-20; ☎) Just to the south of Calle Manuel Maria Correa, this is one of the best. It's a clean, well-kept hotel with a 2nd-floor restaurant, sitting area and open balcony overlooking the street.

Restaurante y Refresquería Aire Libre (dishes US\$1.50-3) If you're looking to sample traditional country cuisine, then look no further than this pleasant open-air café facing the western end of the plaza.

Getting There & Away

Chitré is a center for regional bus transportation. Buses arrive and depart from the Terminal de Transportes de Herrera, 1km from downtown. To get to the station, take a taxi

(US\$2) or catch a 'Terminal' bus (US\$0.25) at the intersection of Calle Aminta Burgos de Amado and Av Herrera.

To get to David or Panama City from Chitré, first take a bus to Divisa (US\$1, 30 minutes, hourly) and then catch a *directo* (direct bus) to either city. Buses leave from the Delta station that is at the intersection of the Interamericana and Carretera Nacional Hwys. You likely won't have to wait more than 30 minutes. The bus fare to both destinations will set you back US\$8, and the trip will take approximately six hours to both David and Panama City.

EL VALLE

pop 6000

This picturesque town (officially El Valle de Antón) is nestled in the crater of a giant extinct volcano that blew off its top three million years ago. Like Santa Fé, El Valle is a superb place for independent exploration, with many forested trails leading into the hills around the valley.

Sights & Activities

In addition to outdoor pursuits, El Valle's main attraction is its Sunday **handicrafts market**, where local indigenous groups – mostly Ngöbe-Buglé but also some Emberá and Wounaan – sell excellent-quality fiber baskets and hats, woodwork, ceramics, soapstone carvings, flowers and plants (including orchids) as well as a variety of fresh produce. It's held in the marketplace in the center of town, starting at 8am and running until early afternoon.

The one-room **Museo de El Valle** (admission US\$0.25; ☎ 10am-2pm Sun), in the church at the center of town, features exhibits on the geologic and human history of the valley.

El Nispero (admission US\$2; ☎ 7am-5pm) is a large, beautiful garden of exotic plants, located about 1km north of the town center. El Valle's famous golden frogs can be seen in grottos at El Nispero.

El Valle's famous *arboles cuadrados* or **square trees**, an unusual native species, are located in a thicket along a hiking trail behind the Hotel Campestre, east and north of the town center.

Pozos Termales (thermal baths; admission US\$1; ☎ 8am-5pm), on the west side of town (follow the signs), is a pleasant place to soak away the afternoon. The forested complex is rustic,

with two concrete swimming pools and an area (a bucket, to be precise) for applying healing mud to one's skin.

The hills around El Valle are excellent for walking and horseback riding (Residencial El Valle, below, hires out both bikes and horses). The trails are well-defined since they're frequently used by locals. **Piedra El Sapo** (Toad Stone), west of town near **La India Dormida** (a mountain ridge that resembles a sleeping Indian girl), is said to have some of the most beautiful trails. Nearby, in the neighborhood of La Pintada, are some unusual ancient **petroglyphs** depicting humans, animals and other shapes.

Chorro El Macho (admission US\$2; ☎ 8am-4pm) is one of the valley's most beautiful spots. The short hike to this 60m waterfall takes you through a lush rain forest that is protected as an ecological refuge. The waterfall is 2km northwest of town, reachable by the bus to La Mesa (US\$0.35). A lovely swimming pool made of rocks and surrounded by rain forest lies just below the falls – bring along your swimsuit.

Sleeping & Eating

Cabañas Potosí (☎ 983 6507; fax 264 3713; campsite US\$10, d cabins US\$30) A good option that lies about 1.5km west of the town center, on peaceful, park-like grounds with views of the surrounding mountains. The four cabins have two beds apiece with private hot-water bathrooms, and there is also a small campsite here (two-person tents are provided).

Residencial El Valle (☎ 983 6536; residencialevalle@hotmail.com; s/d US\$20/25) Conveniently located along the main road in town, this spot offers friendly service and excellent rooms with private hot-water bathrooms. You can also rent bicycles (per hour US\$2) or horses (per hour US\$3.50) here.

Pinocchio's (pizzas US\$3-7; ☎ 3-9pm Fri, 11am-9pm Sat, 11am-4pm Sun) A weekend tradition in El Valle is a hot, cheesy slice of pizza at this spot in the western part of town.

Getting There & Away

Buses leave Panama City for El Valle (US\$4, 2½ hours, hourly from 7am to 7pm).

The center of town is small, but many of El Valle's attractions are a distance from there. Taxis within town cost no more than US\$2. Buses to La Mesa (US\$0.35) pass by Chorro El Macho, and run along El Valle's main street.

EXPLORE MORE OF THE INTERIOR

Fiestas are part of the draw of this region.

- Four days before Ash Wednesday, **Carnaval** (February/March) in Las Tablas is considered to be Panama's most authentic.
- Forty days after Easter, from Thursday to Sunday, the famous **Fiesta de Corpus Christi** (May/June) celebration in Villa de Los Santos features medieval dances and traditional costumes.
- This lively **Festival de la Mejorana, Festival de la Virgen de las Mercedes** (September 24 to 27) festival in the tiny village of Guararé is highlighted by folkloric dance and music.
- One of the region's biggest festivals, the **Founding of District of Chitré 1848** (October 19) is celebrated with parades of people wearing historical costumes.

COLÓN PROVINCE

The mere mention of Colón sends shivers down the spines of hardened travelers and Panamanians alike, though there is much more to the province than its notorious provincial capital. Extending for over 200km along the Caribbean coast from Veraguas Province in the west to the Comarca de Kuna Yala in the east, Colón Province is mostly undeveloped and virtually inaccessible. However, the province is home to the Spanish colonial city of Portobelo, which at one time was the most prominent port on the Caribbean, as well as the famed tropical getaway of Isla Grande.

Colón definitely deserves its bad rep, and while the city itself is probably best avoided, there are many nearby attractions worth checking out, especially the Gatún Locks and the old Spanish fort of San Lorenzo. And of course, it's worth mentioning that the luxury train connecting Panama City to Colón is arguably one of the world's greatest rail journeys.

COLÓN

pop 45,000

Simply put, Panama's most notorious city is a sprawling slum of decaying colonial grandeur and desperate human existence. Prior to 1869

the Panama Railroad connecting Panama City and Colón was the only rapid transit across the continental western hemisphere. However, once the US transcontinental railroad was established, and the transisthmian trade route suddenly diminished in importance, Colón became an economically depressed city almost overnight. Although the city was temporarily reinvigorated during the construction of the Panama Canal, the city's economy collapsed following the canal's completion, with thousands of laborers suddenly rendered unemployed.

In 1948 a huge free trade zone known as the Zona Libre (Free Zone) was created in an attempt to revive the city. Unfortunately, none of the US\$10 billion in annual commercial turnover seems to get beyond the compound's walls. Today, the Zona Libre is an island of materialism in a sea of unemployment, poverty and crime.

History

Colón was founded in 1850 as the Caribbean terminus of the Panama Railroad, though it faded into obscurity less than 20 years later. At the peak of its economic depression in 1881, the French arrived in Colón to start construction of an interoceanic canal, though the city was burnt to the ground four years later by a Colombian hoping to spark a revolution. In the years to follow, Colón entered a second golden age as the city was entirely rebuilt in the French Colonial architectural style that was popular at the time. Rivaling Panama City in beauty and wealth, life in the top of the Canal Zone was pleasurable and highly profitable.

Following the collapse of Colón's economy in 1914, the city spiraled into the depths of depravity. Today, most of the colonial city is still intact, though the buildings are on the verge of collapse, with countless squatters still living inside them.

Orientation & Information

The city is reached via two major roads on the southern side of town. The roads become Av Amador Guerrero and Av Bolívar at the entrance to the town, and run straight up the grid-patterned city, ending near Colón's northern waterfront.

Perpendicular to these avenues are numbered streets. Calle 16 is the first of these you'll cross as you enter the town while Calle 1 is

at the northern end of town. The Zone Libre occupies the southeastern corner of the city while the city's cruise-ship port, Colón 2000, is located just north of the Free Zone.

Given Colón's high rate of crime, the safest place to withdraw money is the BNP ATM in the Colón 2000 cruise port.

Dangers & Annoyances

Despite Colón's new cruise port on the eastern side of the city, Colón is still a dangerous slum. Crime is a serious problem, and you need to exercise caution when walking around, even during the day; always travel by taxi at night.

Sights

For some great sights just outside of Colón, see opposite.

ZONA LIBRE

The Free Zone is a huge fortress-like area of giant international stores selling items duty free. It's the world's second-largest duty-free port after Hong Kong. However, most of these stores only deal in bulk merchandise; they aren't set up to sell to individual tourists, and simple window-shopping is not very interesting. Many travelers leave disappointed. If you do buy something, the store usually sends it to the Tocumen International Airport in Panama City, where you can retrieve your purchase before departing the country. You can enter the Zona Libre by presenting your passport at the security office.

PANAMA CANAL YACHT CLUB

This **yacht club** (Calle 16; ☎ 441 5882) in Cristóbal is a safe haven for 'yachties' heading through the canal. It has a restaurant, bar, showers and a bulletin board with notices from people offering or seeking positions as crew. This is the place to inquire about work as a line handler. Don't expect to show up and get work; it can often take several weeks. Still, seeing the canal from the inside is the best way to experience it.

COLÓN 2000

In December of 2000, the self-proclaimed 'Caribbean cruise port of shopping and entertainment' opened on the east side of Colón. Actually it's a rather modest affair, though it does have a good selection of restaurants and souvenir shops.

Sleeping & Eating

There's no shortage of hotels in Colón, though most are in seedy areas and have serious security issues. The hotels listed below are mentioned because they have 24-hour security guards.

Hotel Carlton (☎ 441 0111; Calle 10; s/d US\$20/30; 🏠) The closest hotel to the Zona Libre features well-appointed rooms complete with queen-size beds, air-con, cable TV and private hot-water showers. There's also an on-site bar-restaurant, which saves you the trouble of having to leave the hotel at night.

Hotel Washington (☎ 441 7133; Calle 2; s/d US\$50/60; 🏠 🚗) The Washington bills itself as the grand dame of Colón's hotels – and indeed it once was grand – though today its fading colonial elegance is in desperate need of a makeover. Still, the hotel's popularity makes it a safe bet, and the amenity-laden rooms are sweetened by the on-site bar, restaurant, casino and swimming pool.

Getting There & Away BUS

From Panama City, regular bus service to Colón (US\$2.50, two hours, every 30 minutes) departs from the Albrook Bus Terminal from 5am to 9pm.

Colón's Terminal de Buses is at the intersection of Calle Terminal and Av Bolívar. The terminal serves towns throughout Colón Province, including La Guayra (US\$2.50, 1½ hours, hourly), from where you can catch the boat to Isla Grande, and Portobelo (US\$1.50, one hour, hourly).

The same buses can be boarded at Sabanita, the turnoff for Portobelo, thus avoiding a trip into Colón.

TRAIN

The **Panama Railway Company** (☎ 317 6070; info@panarail.com; Carr Gaillard) operates a glass-domed luxury passenger train along the canal and through jungle to/from Panama City (US\$22/38 one-way/round-trip, one hour), leaving Colón at 5:15pm daily. The Colón train station is in the city but is best accessed by taxi.

Getting Around

While in Colón, it's a good idea to not walk much. Fortunately, taxis congregate at the bus station, train station and the Zone Libre, and fares across the city are usually around US\$1.

AROUND COLÓN

Many of these sights are on the Panama Canal map (Map p665).

Gatún Locks

The **Gatún Locks** (admission free; 🕒 8am-4pm), just 10km south of Colón, raise southbound ships 29.5m from Caribbean waters to the level of Lago Gatún. From there, ships travel 37km to the Pedro Miguel Locks, which lower southbound ships 9.3m to Lago Miraflores, a small body of water that separates the two sets of Pacific locks. The ships are lowered to sea level at the Miraflores Locks.

The Gatún Locks are the largest of the three sets, and their size is truly mind-boggling. In his superlative book *The Path Between the Seas*, David McCullough notes that if stood on its end, a single lock would have been the tallest structure on Earth at the time it was built, taller by several meters than even the Eiffel Tower. Each chamber could have accommodated the *Titanic* with plenty of room to spare.

From a well-placed viewing stand opposite the control tower, you can watch the locks in action. The whole process takes about two hours; it's probably the most interesting stage of the Canal transit, and the English brochure does a good job of describing what you're watching.

Buses to the Gatún Locks leave the bus terminal in Colón hourly (US\$1.25, 20 minutes). A taxi ride from Colón to the locks and back should cost no more than US\$15 per party – agree on a price before leaving.

Fuerte San Lorenzo

On a promontory to the west of the canal, Fuerte (Fort) San Lorenzo is perched at the mouth of the Río Chagres. It was via this river that the Welsh pirate Henry Morgan gained access to the interior in 1671, enabling him to sack the first Panama City, today the ruins of Panamá Viejo.

This Spanish fortress is built of blocks of cut coral with rows of old cannons jutting out. Among the many Spanish cannons, you might spot a British one – evidence of the time when British pirates overcame the fort. Much of the fort is well preserved, including the moat, the cannons and the arched rooms.

There is unfortunately no public transportation to Fuerte San Lorenzo from Colón. However, a round-trip taxi ride from Colón should cost around US\$30.

PORTOBELO

pop 4100

Today it is little more than a sleepy fishing village on the shores of the Caribbean, but Portobelo was once the greatest Spanish port in Central America. Gold from Peru and treasures from the Orient entered Panama City and were carried overland by mule to the fortresses at Portobelo. During the annual trade fair, galleons laden with goods from Spain arrived to trade for gold and other products from the New World. Unfortunately, Portobelo met the same fate as Panamá Viejo when it was destroyed by the British in 1746.

Visitors to Portobelo can explore the extensive ruins of the Spanish stone fortresses that once graced the city. In addition to its historical attractions, Portobelo has also established itself as a popular Caribbean scuba-diving destination.

History

Portobelo, the 'beautiful port,' was named by Columbus in 1502, when he stopped here on his fourth New World voyage. For the next 200 years, Portobelo served as the principal Spanish Caribbean port in Central America.

Aiming to disrupt the Spanish treasure route, Portobelo was destroyed in 1739 by an attack led by the British admiral Edward Vernon. Discouraged by the loss of the city, the Spanish abandoned the overland Panama route, and instead started sailing the long way around Cape Horn to and from the western coast of South America.

Portobelo was rebuilt in 1751, though it never attained its former prominence, and in time became a virtual ruin. Later, much of the outermost fortress was dismantled to build the Panama Canal, and many of the larger stones were used in the construction of the Gatún Locks. There are still considerable parts of the town and fortresses left, and today Portobelo is protected as a national park and historic site.

Orientation

Portobelo, located 43km from Colón, consists of about 15 blocks of homes and businesses that line a paved, two-lane road. This road intersects with the Panama City-Colón road at the town of Sabanitas, 33km to the west.

East of Portobelo, the road forks after 9km. The left branch extends 11km to the village of La Guayra, where you can hire boats to take you to Isla Grande.

Sights

The remnants of **Fuerte San Jerónimo** and **Fuerte Santiago** can still be seen near town, and the ruins of **Fuerte San Fernando** occupy a grassy flat across the bay. The ruins of Santiago, 500m west of Portobelo's center, include officers' quarters, an artillery shed, a sentry box, a barracks and batteries. You can climb up a hill behind the fort for a fine view overlooking the ruins and bay. At the center of Portobelo, Fuerte San Jerónimo is a more complete fort than Santiago.

The restored **Real Aduana de Portobelo** (Customs House; admission US\$0.50), also known as the *contaduría* (counting house), has interesting exhibits of Portobelo's history as well as a three-dimensional model of the area.

Another notable feature of Portobelo is its large **colonial church**, which was built in 1776. It contains a life-size statue of the Black Christ, which is believed to have miraculous powers. On October 21 each year, the **Festival of the Black Christ** attracts hundreds of pilgrims, many dressed in the same royal purple color as the statue's clothes. The statue is paraded through the streets starting at 6pm, and street festivities follow.

On the way to Portobelo, the black-sand **Playa María Chiquita** and the white-sand **Playa Langosta** are two attractive beaches.

Activities

Although the clarity of the water here is not spectacular, Portobelo enjoys a good diving reputation due to two unique sites off the coast, namely a 33m (110ft) cargo ship and a C-45 twin-engine plane.

There are two dive operators in Portobelo, both located along the Sabanitas-Portobelo road 2km west of town. A 1-/2-tank dive will cost US\$60/80 whereas an open water/advanced course will cost US\$200/275. If you're planning to dive with either, it's best to phone ahead. **Twin Oceans Dive Center** (☎ 448 2067; www.twincoceans.com) is in the Coco Plum Hotel, while **Scubaportobelo** (☎ 261 3841; www.scubapanama.com) offers dorm-bed accommodation (per night US\$10).

Sleeping & Eating

Several local families in town advertise spare rooms for about US\$5 to US\$10 per night – ask around for details.

Hospedaje La Aduana (☎ 448 2925; d with fan/air-con US\$15/20; 🍴) Conveniently located in the

center of town, this bare-bones budget hotel offers a handful of spartan rooms. If possible, ask to see a few as the better ones have a private bathroom.

Coco Plum Hotel (☎ 264 1338; s/d with bathroom US\$35/45; 🍴) This newly constructed lodge is located 2km west of town along the Sabanitas-Portobelo road, and is home to the Twin Oceans Dive Center. Although the rooms are simple, they all feature air-con, cable TV and private hot-water bathrooms, and the on-site restaurant is perfect for getting your energy back after a long day diving.

Restaurante La Torre (dishes US\$3-6) One of the few restaurants in town, this centrally located spot serves some of the best seafood in town (conch in coconut sauce) and juicy cheeseburgers.

Getting There & Away

Buses to Portobelo (US\$1.50, one hour, hourly) depart from Colón's Terminal de Buses from 6:30am to 6pm. If you're coming by bus from Panama City, take the bus heading for Colón and get off at Sabanitas, 10km before Colón, about a 1½-hour ride from Panama City. Next, catch the bus coming from Colón to Portobelo when it passes through Sabanitas, thus avoiding a trip into Colón.

ISLA GRANDE

Palm trees and white-sand beaches form the backdrop to this lovely island 15km northeast of Portobelo. A popular getaway for Panama City folk, Isla Grande is an ideal setting for snorkeling, scuba diving or simply soaking up the island's relaxed vibe. About 300 people of African descent live on the island, most of whom eke out a living from fishing and coconuts – you'll get a taste of both when you sample the fine island cuisine.

Activities

Some lovely beaches on the northern side of the island can be reached by boat (hire a water taxi at the dock in front of Cabañas Super Jackson) or on foot (there's a water's-edge trail that loops around the 5km long, 1.5km wide island, as well a slippery cross-island trail).

If you're looking for a good surf break, take a water taxi out to La Guayra where you can find a good reef break that peaks right and left.

The trail across the island leads to **Bananas Village Resort** (☎ 263 9766; www.bananasresort.com),

where US\$25 will get you use of their facilities for the day, including access to the beach, snorkeling equipment and kayaks.

Some fine snorkeling and dive sites are within a 10-minute boat ride of the island. **Isla Grande Dive Center** (☎ 223 5943), located 50m west of Cabañas Super Jackson, offers a variety of dives around the island and in the San Blas archipelago.

For US\$30, one of the boatmen in front of Cabañas Super Jackson will take you on a half-day adventure – the possibilities are quite appealing. The mangroves east of Isla Grande are fun to explore, or you could go snorkeling off the coast of the nearby islets.

Festivals & Events

The **Festival of San Juan Bautista** is celebrated here on June 24, with swimming and canoe races. The **Virgen del Carmen** is honored on July 16, with a land and sea procession, baptisms and masses.

Carnaval is also celebrated here in rare form. Women wear traditional *pollera* dresses while men wear ragged pants tied at the waist with old sea rope – everyone dances the conga. Along with the dancing, there are also satirical songs about current events and a lot of joking in the Caribbean calypso tradition.

Sleeping & Eating

Cabañas Super Jackson (☎ 448 2311; d with fan/air-con US\$20/35; 🍴) Closest to the main pier, this Isla Grande landmark offers a handful of cheap and cheerful rooms with private bathrooms. There are definitely more comfortable spots on the island, but it's hard to beat the price, the convenience factor and the humorous name.

Cabañas Cholita (☎ 448 2962; fax 232 4561; d/tr US\$40/50; 🍴) Just east of the Super Jackson, Cabañas Cholita offers 14 oceanside rooms complete with private cold-water bathrooms and tranquil views. The on-site restaurant has delicious cinnamon French toast for breakfast (US\$3) and spicy Caribbean fare (US\$5 to US\$7) for lunch and dinner.

Hotel Isla Grande (☎ 267 3643; d US\$45-60; 🍴) About 200m west of Super Jackson, the Hotel Grande features double rooms with private hot-water bathrooms and ocean views. Although the Isla Grande has definitely seen better years, you're paying for the privilege of accessing the hotel's private beach, though the barb wire is slightly off-putting.

Sister Moon Hotel (☎ 226 9861; d from US\$50) A 10-minute walk east of Super Jackson brings you to this lovely clutch of cabins perched on a hillside at the end of the island. Surrounded by swaying palms and crashing waves, each cabin boasts fabulous views from its porch (and hammock). The hotel also has an excellent bar-restaurant that's built right over the water, and features the island's incredible seafood (US\$5 to US\$8).

Getting There & Away

Buses from Colón go to La Guayra (US\$2.50, 1½ hours, hourly). A five-minute boat ride from there to Isla Grande costs US\$2. Parking costs US\$1 per day.

COMARCA DE KUNA YALA

The Comarca de Kuna Yala is a narrow, 226km-long strip on the Caribbean coast that includes the Archipiélago de San Blás, which stretches from the Golfo de San Blás to the edge of the Colombian border. Many of the nearly 400 islands of San Blás are real *Fantasy Island*-type settings: uninhabited islands covered by coconut trees and ringed by white-sand beaches with the turquoise Caribbean lapping at their shores. The ones that aren't uninhabited contrast sharply with those that are: acre-sized cays are packed with bamboo huts and people, allowing barely enough room to maneuver among the detritus-lined pathways.

The islands are home to the Kuna, who run San Blás as a *comarca* – an autonomous region – with minimal interference from the national government. They have their own system of governance, consultation and decision making, while maintaining their own economic system, language, customs and culture. Given that the Kuna have been in contact with Europeans ever since Columbus sailed along here in 1502, this has been no small achievement. Their success is the result of remarkable tenacity, and their zealous efforts to preserve a traditional way of life. Today, they have one of the greatest degrees of political autonomy of any indigenous group in Latin America.

HISTORY

The Kuna have lived in Eastern Panama for at least two centuries, though scholars fiercely debate their origins. Language similarities with people who once lived several hundred

kilometers to the west would indicate that the Kuna migrated eastward. However, oral tradition has it that the Kuna migrated to San Blás from Colombia after the 16th century, following a series of devastating encounters with other tribes armed with poison-dart blowguns.

No matter where the Kuna came from, however, scholars agree that life on the islands is relatively new for the Kuna. Historians at the end of the 18th century wrote that the only people who used the San Blás islands at the time were pirates, Spaniards and the odd explorer.

Today, there are an estimated 70,000 Kuna; 32,000 live on the district's islands, 8000 live on tribal land along the coast and 30,000 live outside the district. So communal are the island Kuna that they inhabit only 40 of the 400 cays – the rest are mostly left to coconut trees, sea turtles and iguanas. On the inhabited islands, so many traditional bamboo-sided, thatched-roof houses are clustered together that there's scarcely room to walk between them.

Historically, the Kuna subsisted on freshly caught seafood including fish, lobster, shrimp, Caribbean king crab and octopus. This was accompanied by food crops, including rice, yams, yucca, bananas and pineapples, which were grown in plots on the mainland, a short distance away. Today, this traditional diet is supplemented by food products obtained by bartering coconuts with passing Colombian ships.

ORIENTATION

The only practical way of visiting the Comarca region is to fly here; the inaccessibility of the place has helped preserve traditional Kuna culture. At the northwest end of the province, El Porvenir is the gateway to the San Blás islands, and one of the most popular destinations for visitors. From here, boat transportation can be arranged to other islands in the archipelago, several of which have basic hotels. If you're planning on staying at any of the far-flung islands, you can also fly into Río Sidra.

INFORMATION

Although a trip to the Archipiélago de San Blás may not fit in the budget, these culturally rich Caribbean islands are a good place for a splurge if you can swing it. Prices vary,

but if you stick to the cheaper hotels, you can survive on about US\$35 per day; this includes meals, lodging and daily boating excursions.

Owing to the limited number of flights to the area, you should book as far in advance as possible. It's also recommended that you reserve your hotels in advance, especially since package deals are pretty much the norm in the Comarca. You're also going to want to hit an ATM before you touch down on the islands.

The Kuna are very particular about what foreigners do on their islands (see p702). As a result, they require that tourists register and pay a visitation fee between US\$3 and US\$5 on the main islands. On smaller, privately owned islands, visitors must seek out the owner, receive permission and pay a fee (around US\$2).

Visitors must also pay for any photo they take of the Kuna. If you want to take someone's photo, ask their permission first and be prepared to pay US\$1 per subject (some Kuna expect to be paid US\$1 per photo). You may not be expected to pay for a photo taken of an artisan from whom you buy crafts from, but it depends on the subject. Some islands may charge you US\$50 just for possessing a video camera.

ACTIVITIES

Most hotels offer complete packages, where a fixed price gets you a room, three meals a day and boat rides to neighboring islands for swimming, snorkeling and lounging on the beach. Before swimming off the shores of a heavily populated island, take a look at the number of outhouses built over the ocean – they may change your mind. Snorkeling is good in places, although many of the coral reefs in the region are badly damaged. You can often rent snorkeling equipment from your

hotel, but serious snorkelers should bring their own gear. If you seek community life, you can also arrange visits to more populated islands such as Carti Suitupo, Nusatupo and Río Sidra.

Independent travelers often complain that they feel trapped inside their hotels, but striking off on your own and exploring the Comarca is definitely possible, albeit tricky, as you will need to negotiate boat rides between islands and find places to stay and eat. If you speak a fair bit of Spanish (or better yet a smattering of Kuna), it can be done. Another option is to grab a spot on a chartered boat to Colombia (see p707).

Plenty of adventurous travelers succeed in hiring a boat and a guide to take them to the far-flung reaches of the Comarca, though this takes a bit of time and cash. Costs, however, can be kept to a minimum if you're prepared to camp on small islands or stay with local families. Although it can be tough going at times, this is perhaps the best way to truly experience the lifestyle and culture of the Kuna.

SLEEPING & EATING

In a protectionist move to preserve local culture, the Kuna Congress passed a law several years ago that prohibits outsiders from owning property in the Comarca. One direct consequence of the law was that a handful of foreigners living on the islands were kicked out without compensation. However, the law has kept foreign investment out of the region, and the few hotels in the Comarca are 100% owned by local families.

Since there are no restaurants on the islands; each hotel provides all the meals for its guests. The meals are usually based on seafood, with lobster and fish the specialties. Quality varies, as some of the fishing stocks have been

THE TRADITIONAL DRESS OF THE KUNA

The distinctive dress of the Kuna is immediately recognizable no matter where you are in the country. Most Kuna women continue to dress as their ancestors did. Their faces are adorned with a black line painted from the forehead to the tip of the nose, with a gold ring worn through the septum. Colorful fabric is wrapped around the waist as a skirt, topped by a short-sleeved blouse covered in brilliantly colored *molos* (traditional Kuna textiles). The women wrap their legs, from ankle to knee, in long strands of tiny beads, forming colorful geometric patterns. A printed headscarf and many necklaces, rings and bracelets complete the wardrobe. In sharp contrast to the elaborate women's wear, the Kuna men have adopted Western dress, which in these warm islands often means shorts and a sleeveless shirt.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL IN THE COMARCA DE KUNA YALA

If you're thinking about whether or not to visit the Comarca de Kuna Yala, please consider the impact that you might have on the Kuna community. On the one hand, revenue from tourism can play a vital role in the development of the region, particularly if you are buying locally produced crafts or paying for the services of a Kuna guide. On the other hand, the San Blás archipelago is not a human zoo; unfortunately indigenous tourism is often an exploitative force. If you decide to visit, please remember that Western interests have already caused an irreversible amount of damage to the region – be aware of your surroundings, and be sensitive to the plight of the Kuna.

It's worth noting that the Kuna sometimes appear unfriendly to tourists, and understandably so, given that most visitors view them as oddities who must be photographed. Cruise ships visit several islands, and when the ships arrive, the number of people on an already congested island can triple. Nonetheless, nearly two-thirds of the populace (the tourists) are trying like crazy to photograph the other third (the Kuna). It's a pretty ugly scene that's repeated again and again.

Furthermore, the behavior of many tourists is appalling to the Kuna. For example, Kuna women dress conservatively, and always keep their cleavage, bellies, and most of their legs covered. Yet many foreign women arrive in Kuna villages in bikini tops and short skirts, an act that is nearly always interpreted by the Kuna as a sign of disrespect. Likewise, Kuna men never go shirtless, and travelers who do so risk offending local sensibilities.

As a result of repeated violations, the Kuna ask that travelers pay fees for photographs taken of them as well as visitation fees for each island. Travelers who consider these policies intolerable should leave their cameras tucked away and see what a little personal interaction can bring.

Unfortunately, tourism is developing too rapidly in the region, and according to Kuna elders, the invasion of foreigners poses a major threat to the preservation of Kuna culture. In response, the Kuna Congress has started to debate the extent to which foreigners should be granted access to their Comarca. In the years to follow, it is likely that the Kuna Congress will ban photography in certain areas while prohibiting tourist traffic in others. As an informed and conscientious traveler, please do your best to always inquire locally about proper conduct in the Comarca.

depleted through over-fishing; there is always a healthy stock of fresh coconuts on hand.

If you want to camp on a relatively uninhabited island, US\$5 a night per couple will usually do the trick. However, there's a risk of encountering unwanted visitors in the night. The Kuna do not allow the Panamanian coast guard or US antidrug vessels to operate in the archipelago, so the uninhabited islands are occasionally used by Colombian narcotraffickers running cocaine up the coast. If you're thinking about camping, you may want to check into one of the hotels for a day or two to get oriented, and then start inquiring locally for up-to-date information.

Note that the hotels following are arranged by island (west to east) instead of by price.

Hotel San Blás (☎ 290 6528; Nalunega; r per person incl meals & boat tours US\$35) Near El Porvenir, the Hotel San Blás is the most popular and accessible hotel in Kuna Yala. The ocean-side hotel consists of rustic Kuna-style palm cabins with sand floors as well as modern rooms with hard floors – if you like the simple life, this is a good place to enjoy it.

Kuna Niskua Lodge (☎ 225 5200; Wichub-Walá; r per person incl meals & boat tours US\$35) A five minute boat ride from El Porvenir brings you to this attractive bamboo-and-thatch hotel, located near the island's interior. Although the rooms are lacking the ocean views found at other spots, the Kuna Niskua is artfully strung up with ample hammocks, and the island's rural charm is infectious.

Ikuptupu Hotel (☎ 220 9082; Ikuptupu; r per person incl meals & boat tours US\$35) On the tiny artificial island of Ikuptupu, just a few hundred meters from Wichub-Walá, this hotel was a former research facility used by the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute from 1974 to 1998. Although this is not the best choice if you want to mingle with Kuna, if you are in the mood for a break, you can't beat the isolation and setting.

Hotel Kuna Yala (☎ 315 7520; Nusatupo; r per person US\$40) Accessible by the airstrip in Río Sidra, this bare-bones hotel sacrifices comfort for location, though it's a worthwhile trade when you set out for the pristine Isla Aguja (Needle Island). Although the rooms leave something

to be desired, the kitchen here will stuff you until you roll out of your chair.

Robinson's Cabins (☎ 299 9058; Kuanidup; huts per person & boat tours US\$17.50) Also accessible by the airstrip in Río Sidra, Robinson's is set on an uninhabited island surrounded by a fine sandy beach. The accommodations consist of rustic bamboo huts. There's fine snorkeling off the island, and the friendly Robinsons can also take you to other islands in the area.

SHOPPING

Molas are the most famous of Panamanian traditional handicrafts. Made of brightly colored squares of cotton fabric sewn together, the finished product reveals landscape scenes, birds, sea turtles or fish – often surrounded by a mazelike pattern. Craftsmanship varies considerably between *molas*. The simplest are peddled for a few dollars; more elaborate designs are works of art and can cost several hundred dollars. You can find *molas* on the islands (or rather, the *mola*-sellers will find you).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Both **Air Panama** (☎ 316 9000; www.flyairpanama.com/tickets in Spanish) and **Aeroperlas** (☎ 315 7500; www.aeroperlas.com) fly to the San Blás Archipelago. Air Panama has one flight per day to El Porvenir (San Blás) and Río Sidra (both one-way US\$35), while Aeroperlas flies to both places three times per week. Book as far in advance as possible as demand far exceeds supply. Note that planes may stop at other islands in the archipelago, loading and unloading passengers or cargo before continuing on. Flights depart from Albrook airport.

You can get around the islands by boat (see p 707).

DARIÉN PROVINCE

The Darién is one of the wildest and most ravaged areas in the Americas. It is the largest province in Panama, and the country's most sparsely inhabited province, with fewer than three people per square kilometer. Home to Panama's most spectacular national park and to its worst scenes of habitat destruction, it is two worlds, divided into north and south.

Although the northern Darién has suffered serious environmental damage in previous decades, southern Darién is an adventurer's

dream. Home to the 576,000-hectare Parque Nacional Darién, a Unesco World Heritage site, southern Darién is where the primeval meets the present – where the scenery appears much as it did over a million years ago. Even today, the local Emberá and Wounaan population still maintain many of their traditional practices, and remain as the guardians of generations-old knowledge of the rain forest.

The Darién offers spectacular opportunities for rugged exploration by trail or by river – it's best approached by travelers with youthful hearts, intrepid spirits and a yearning for something truly wild. If you're afraid of growing old in a concrete jungle, spend some time in this verdant one.

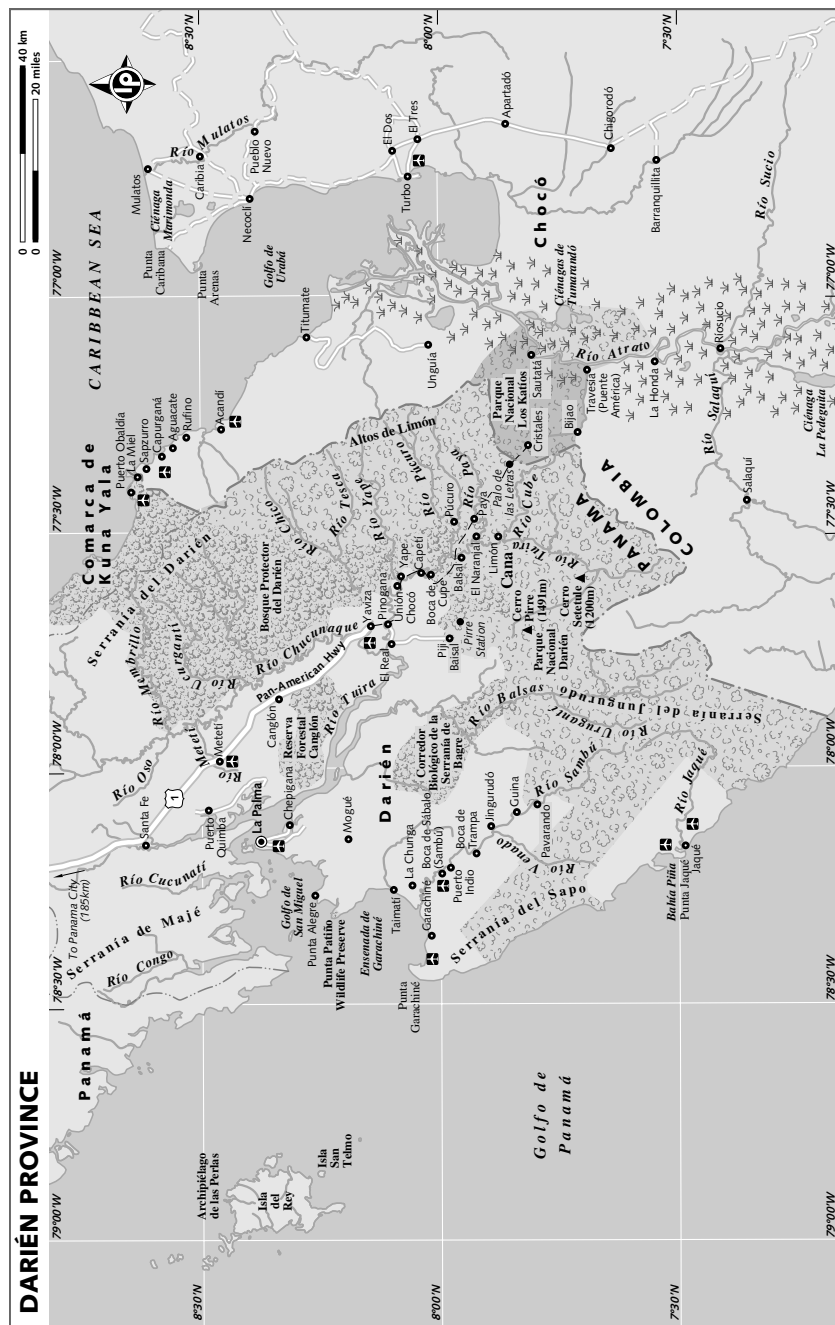
HISTORY

Living within the boundaries of the Darién are the Chocóes, as they are commonly called, who emigrated from the Chocó region of Colombia thousands of years ago. Anthropologists place the Chocóes in two linguistic groups – the Emberá and the Wounaan – though with the exception of language, the groups' cultural features are virtually identical. However, both groups prefer to be thought of as two separate peoples.

Before the introduction of the gun, the Emberá and Wounaan were expert users of the *boroquera* (blowgun), and they venomed their darts with lethal toxins from poisonous frogs and bullet ants. Many scholars believe that it was these people who forced the Kuna out of the Darién and into the Caribbean coastal area they now inhabit.

Until it left Panama in the late 1990s, the US Air Force turned to the Emberá and Wounaan for help, but for an entirely different reason: jungle survival. Because both groups have the ability to not only survive but to thrive in the tropical wilderness, quite a few of them were added to the corps of instructors that trained US astronauts and air force pilots at Fort Sherman, near Colón.

Today, the majority of the 8000 Emberá and Wounaan in Panama live deep in the rain forests of the Darién, particularly along the Sambú, Jaqué, Chico, Tuquesa, Membrillo, Tuira, Yape and Tucutí rivers. Along with subsistence agriculture, hunting, fishing and poultry raising, both *indígena* groups also work on nearby commercial rice and maize plantations.



ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The Pan-American Hwy does not go all the way through Panama but terminates in the middle of the jungle near a town called Yaviza in the vast wilderness region of the Darién, before starting again 150km further on in Colombia. This transportation break between Central and South America is known as the **Darién Gap**. It's literally the end of the road.

Despite occasional announcements by international authorities eager to improve transportation and trade between the continents, it is unlikely that the Pan-American Hwy will be pushed through the Darién Gap any time soon. Panamanians are concerned that a road could help Colombia's civil war spill over into Panama. A road could also increase illegal immigration and drug traffic, and help spread foot-and-mouth disease in cattle, which is presently limited to South America. A paved road would also make logging easier, perhaps leading to deforestation of the largest forested area in the country.

Any printed information on the Darién can become rapidly outdated. Travelers should always seek up-to-date information on local dangers. The best source of this information is a guide who leads frequent trips to the area.

Local ANAM offices in towns such as El Real or La Palma can provide some information on the park and help you find guides. Travelers should also check in with the police in these towns before heading out into the jungle.

Panama City's **Instituto Geográfico Nacional** (Tommy Guardia; Map pp652-3; ☎ 236 2444; 🕒 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) usually sells topographical maps for some regions of the Darién.

The website www.outbackofbeyond.com describes Patricia and Loren Upton's adventures through the Darién Gap. It also sells the guidebook *Through the Darién Gap* for US\$13. However, you should view any printed information as being dangerously out of date.

Keep your baggage to a minimum on any trek through the jungle. You will need insect repellent, sun block, a hat and rain gear. Food can only be found in the few towns, including Metetí, La Palma and Yaviza; otherwise bring your own. Food is not available at the ranger stations. Bring drinking water or a means of purifying water.

Remember to plan your trip for the dry season (mid-December through mid-April), or you'll be slogging through thick mud and swatting moth-size mosquitoes.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Parts of the Darién Province are extremely dangerous. The greatest hazards are the result of the difficult environment. The Darién is hot and humid. Trails, when they exist at all, are often poorly defined and are never marked. The many large rivers that form the backbone of the Darién transportation network create their own hazards. Any help at all, much less medical help, is very far away. If you get lost out here, you are done for.

Dengue and malaria are serious risks in the area. Take a prophylaxis – not chloroquine – and cover up as much as possible. Areas of the Parque Nacional Darién are prime territory for the deadly fer-de-lance snake. The chance of getting a snakebite is remote, but you should be careful; wear boots around the camp and in the forest.

In addition to the natural dangers, the human threat to travelers must not be underestimated. Illegal immigrants heading north – including Colombians fleeing the conflict in their country – make their way through the jungle. Roaming bandits prey on jungle travelers. As an outsider, you may be viewed with suspicion, and some villages do not greet tourists with open arms. Narcotraffickers also utilize jungle routes, and they don't appreciate bumping into travelers trekking through the woods. Police presence in the area south of Boca de Cupe is limited.

Parts of the Darién have also become areas of activity for guerrillas from neighboring Colombia, although they usually come to rest and hide, not to attack. Colombian paramilitary forces often cross the border to hunt the guerrillas. There are real dangers in the Darién: missionaries and travelers alike have been kidnapped and killed in Southern Darién.

The US State department has strongly advised against crossing an imaginary line drawn from Puerto Obaldía in the north to Bahía Piña in the south, with Yaviza in the center. Unfortunately, this includes the Parque Nacional Darién, though Cana and Pirre Station, both excellent places to view wildlife, are considered safe to visit. Particularly treacherous are the areas between Boca de Cupe and Colombia, the traditional path through the Darién Gap, which includes the towns of Pícuro, Paya, Limón, Balsal and Palo de las Letras. The areas north and east of this are also considered dangerous, including the mountains Altos de Limón, the Río Tuquesa

and the trail from Puerto Obaldía. Note, however, that the Boca de Cupe trail leading to Cana, the focus of the Darien Explorer Trek (see below), was safe at the time of writing. Check with local authorities to assess the situation before visiting the Darién.

Despite these warnings, there are parts of the Darién that can be visited in relative safety; these are covered later in this section. Even then, however, travelers should always hire a guide – either locally or through a reputable tour company. A knowledgeable guide will ensure up-to-date information on no-go areas, and that you don't get lost. Hiring one also supports ecotourism in the local economy, and provides safety through numbers.

TOURS

The Darién is the only major part of Panama where a guide is necessary. If you speak Spanish, you can hire guides locally who can show you the way and cook for you. The cost is reasonable: about US\$10 to US\$20 per day, plus food. Otherwise, go with a reputable tour operator, who will take care of all arrangements, provide all the food and relieve you of the necessity of speaking Spanish or one of the native languages.

Ancon Expeditions (Map pp652-3; ☎ 269 9415; www.anconexpeditions.com; El Dorado Bldg, Calle 49 Este near Av 3 Sur) in Panama City has by far the most extensive trips to the Darién, and is highly recommended for the quality and professionalism of its tours. Offerings include the following:

Darién Explorer Trek A two-week trip that includes Punta Patiño on the Pacific coast, El Real, the Pirre Station and Cana. The cost is US\$2450 per person, and the trip leaves on fixed departure dates with a minimum of four people. The highlight is a two-day trek along the Boca de Cupe trail to Cana.

Ultimate Darién Experience A five-day trip to Ancon's field station in Cana, an outstanding place for bird-watching. The cost is US\$1300 per person, and the trip leaves on fixed departure dates in the high season (December to April) with a minimum of four people. An eight-day version is also available.

Coastal Darién Explorer A three-day trip to Ancon's lodge in Punta Patiño on the Pacific coast. The cost is US\$575 per person (minimum four people), and the trip is available on request (subject to availability).

Realm of the Harpy Eagle A four-day trip to Ancon's lodge in Punta Patiño and a visit to a Mogue Emberá village on the Pacific coast. The cost is US\$695 per person (minimum four people), and the trip is available on request (subject to availability).

VOLUNTEERING

An excellent organization that takes volunteers from time to time is the **Fundación Niños de Darién** (☎ 254 4333; www.darien.org.pa). This nonprofit organization was started in 1990, and works on a variety of projects throughout the Darién. The foundation aims to improve the lives of *niños* (children) through educational and nutritional programs. The organization also works to help residents develop sustainable agriculture.

SHOPPING

The Emberá and Wounaan are excellent woodcarvers and basket weavers. Traditionally the men carved boas, frogs and birds from the dark *cocobolo* hardwood. More recently they have taken to carving tiny figurines (typically of iguanas, turtles, crocodiles and birds) from the ivory-colored *tagua* nut. The women, however, continue to weave traditional baskets with intricate designs. Crafts are typically available in towns throughout the Darién, though you'll get better prices (and support the artisans) if you buy directly from villages.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Panama City to Yaviza is a 266km journey along the Interamericana that passes through Chepo, El Llano, Cañita, Ipeti, Torti, Higueral and smaller, unmapped communities in Panamá Province before crossing into the Darién. All these towns are served by buses running between Panama City and Yaviza. There are eight buses daily to Yaviza between 5am and 3:45pm (US\$15, seven to 10 hours). Be sure to tell the bus driver your destination.

Travelers can also fly into the region. **Aeroperlas** (☎ 315 7500; www.aeroperlas.com) has three flights per week and **Air Panama** (☎ 316 9000; www.flyairpanama.com/tickets) has one flight per week to La Palma (US\$40, one hour). From La Palma, Aeroperlas offers three flights per week to El Real (US\$35, 15 minutes).

GETTING AROUND

In the jungles of the Darién, rivers are sometimes the only means of getting from one point to another, with dugout canoes providing the transport. In La Palma you can hire a motorized boat for US\$120 to US\$200 per day, which can take you to Río Sambú. From either of these rivers you'll have to negotiate with indigenous villages (in Mogue or La Chunga)

SAILING TO CARTAGENA, COLOMBIA

Want to be the envy of your friends and a disappointment to your concerned parents? One of the best ways is to explore the **Archipiélago de San Blas** by grabbing a spot on a chartered sail boat to Colombia. Although there's no shortage of merchant ships plying the waters between Colón and Cartagena, Colombia, sailing with a reputable captain pretty much guarantees that you won't be a stowaway on a ship full of narcotics. Adventure travel is one thing, but getting caught in the crossfire between narcotraffickers and border guards is another.

The best place to enquire about scheduled departures is at any of the youth hostels in Panama City (p658). At these spots, there are usually postings on the notice boards advertising specific boats and their fearless captains. If you're worried about your budget, don't be – a five-day sailing including food, drinks and activities should cost about US\$275. Of course, you will need to be responsible for your travel back to Panama; a flight back from Cartagena costs less than US\$200. And in case your parents are worried sick, you can honestly tell them that the walled-city of Cartagena is easily the safest (and most beautiful) city in Colombia. Buen Viaje!

to take you further upriver in *cayucos* (dugout canoes). Hiring boats in Río Jaqué is possible but strongly not advised owing to the dangers of guerilla activity. A shorter (and cheaper) boat trip goes from Puerto Quimba to La Palma.

LA PALMA

pop 4200

Located at the mouth of the Río Tuira, La Palma is the provincial capital and the most populous town in the Darién. However, despite its lofty position as capital of the largest province in Panama, La Palma is literally a one-street town.

Most travelers pass through La Palma for one of two reasons: they're here to catch a plane to somewhere else or they're here to take a boat ride to somewhere else. The two most popular boating destinations are the Ancon nature reserve and lodge at Reserva Natural Punta Patiño and the Emberá villages along the banks of the Río Sambú.

Every facility of possible interest to the traveler is located on the town's only street, which is about 300m from the airstrip. La Palma is home to the only bank in the Darién, the Banco Nacional de Panamá, as well as a hospital, a port and a police station – if you intend to go anywhere near the Colombian border, you should talk to the police here first.

If you have to spend the night in La Palma, the **Hotel Biauquira Bagara** (☎ /fax 299 6224; r with/without bathroom US\$20/15) is run by the friendly Ramady family, who live in a home beneath the rooms they rent. All of the rooms have private cold-water bathrooms with a tub, which is a godsend after a week or two in the jungle.

Air Panama (☎ 316 9000; www.flyairpanama.com/tickets) and **Aeroperlas** (☎ 315 7500; www.aeroperlas.com) fly direct from Panama City to La Palma (US\$40, one hour). Air Panama has one flight per week while Aeroperlas has three flights per week.

If you're looking to hire a boat and a guide, you can usually find someone near the dock who owns a vessel and is willing to go on an adventure with you for the right price (US\$120 to US\$200 per day, gas included).

RESERVA NATURAL PUNTA PATIÑO

Twenty-five kilometers south of La Palma is Punta Patiño, which is home to a 26,315-hectare **wildlife reserve** that is owned by the government conservation group Ancon. The only way to reach the reserve, short of hacking your way through many kilometers of jungle, is by boat; the scenic ride is definitely part of the Punta Patiño experience. The reserve itself protects species-rich primary forest, and visitors are treated to guided night and morning nature hikes.

If you prefer, you can arrive at the reserve without booking a guided tour through Ancon Expeditions, but you must notify it in advance of your arrival so that it can reserve a cabin for you. If you visit without Ancon Expeditions' help, lodging and three daily meals will cost you US\$90 per person per day. You can hire boats in La Palma to reach Punta Patiño; expect to pay your boatman about US\$120 to US\$150 per day.

Ancon Expeditions (Map pp652-3; ☎ 269 9415; www.anconexpeditions.com; El Dorado Bldg, Calle 49 Este near Av 3 Sur, Panama City) offers a package tour to Punta Patiño that includes the round-trip airfare

THE STYLIZED TRADITIONS OF THE EMBERÁ & WOUNAAN

Unlike the Kuna, the Emberá and Wounaan have gradually replaced their traditional attire with Western wear. Except for a few older individuals, the men have set aside their loincloths in favor of short pants, and now prefer short-sleeved shirts to going around bare-chested. The women, who traditionally wore only a skirt, increasingly don bras, and some have taken to wearing shirts as well. However, many women still wear traditional jewelry, especially wide silver bracelets and elaborate necklaces made of silver coins. Many Emberá and Wounaan also continue to stain their bodies purplish black with juice from the *jagua* fruit. The dye from this fruit is believed to have health-giving properties, and it has the added bonus of warding off insects.

between Panama City and La Palma, a boat ride up the Río Mogueú to the Emberá village, a visit to Punta Alegre, hikes in the reserve, guide service and all meals. The three-day, two-night adventure costs about US\$600 per person (party of two) and substantially less per person for larger parties.

RÍO SAMBÚ

The mouth of the wide, brown Río Sambú is 1½ hours by fast boat south of Punta Patiño. Traveling it is a heart-of-darkness experience: you pass through spectacular jungle inhabited by megafauna including jaguars and pumas while gliding past traditional Emberá and Wounaan villages.

Be forewarned: a trip far up the Río Sambú is not everyone's cup of tea. But the Sambú offers you true adventure, something that may not even be possible anywhere in the Tropics 50 years from now. Even if you travel deep into the Amazon, you'd be hard-pressed to find such wilderness these days.

Boats and boatmen can be hired in La Palma, though once you reach the Río Sambú, you will need to hire a separate dugout canoe and a guide to get further upriver. You will need to do this because the boat you'll hire in La Palma to reach the Sambú will sit too low in the water to navigate the upper portions of the river; to get any further upriver, you must negotiate the use of a shallow dugout in one of the Emberá villages. During the rainy season, the river is navigable by dugout all the way to Pavarandó, the most inland of the eight Emberá communities on the Sambú.

At night, you can make camp where you please if you have a tent. However, unless you've brought an individual tent for your boatman, he will prefer an alternative – making a deal to sleep on the floor of an Emberá family's home. If you can speak Spanish, finding a family to move in with for the night isn't

difficult, and even getting a hot meal is easy. Expect to pay about US\$10 per person for shelter and US\$5 for food.

EL REAL

pop 1300

El Real dates from the days of the early conquistadors, when they constructed a fort beside the Río Tuira to prevent pirates from sailing upriver and attacking Santa María. Gold from mines in the valley of Cana, to the south, was brought to Santa María, and stored until there was a quantity sufficient to warrant assembling an armada and moving the bullion to Panama City. Today, El Real is one of the largest towns in the Darién, though it's still very much a backwater settlement.

For travelers heading to the Pirre Station, El Real serves as a transit point since flights arrive here from La Palma. Prior to visiting Pirre, you must also stop by the ANAM office in town and pay your entry fee. The best way to locate this office is to ask someone to point you toward it, as none of the wide paths in town have names.

From La Palma, **Aeroperlas** (☎ 315 7500; www.aeroperlas.com) offers three flights per week to El Real (US\$35, 15 minutes). For information on getting to Pirre, see opposite.

RANCHO FRÍO (PIRRE STATION)

Pirre is an ANAM ranger station just inside the Parque Nacional Darién, 13km south of El Real as the lemon-spectacled tanager flies. The area around Pirre is the most accessible section of the national park, and the station's strength is that two good hiking trails originate from it. One trail leads to Pirre Mountain ridge, which takes most hikers two days to reach – a tent is a necessity, and you will have to be completely self-sufficient. The other trail winds through jungle to a series of cascades about an hour's hike away. Neither trail

should be attempted without a ranger or a local guide as they are not well marked and if you get lost out here, you're finished.

At Pirre Station are **barracks** (cots per person US\$10) with a front room with fold-out cots for visitors, a dining area that consists of two tables and four benches beside a very rustic kitchen, a *palapa* (open-sided shelter) with a few chairs, and one outhouse. Bathing is done in a nearby creek, and there is no electricity at the station.

If you plan on eating, you must bring your own food. The rangers will cook your food for you (US\$5 a day is most appreciated), but you must provide bottled water or bring a water-purification system or tablets.

Beware: most of Parque Nacional Darién is prime fer-de-lance territory, and these very deadly snakes have been found near the station. Always wear boots and long trousers when you're walking in camp at night or entering the forest at any time.

Getting There & Away

Pirre Station can only be reached by hiking or by a combination of hiking and boating. The hike from El Real takes three hours. You can also take a one-hour canoe ride from El Real to the village of Piji Baisal and then hike for one hour from Piji Baisal to Pirre Station.

If you prefer to hike, take the 'road' connecting El Real and Pirre Station, which is basically a dirt path covered with 2m-high lemongrass. Hiking this barely discernible road takes about three hours and pretty much requires a guide. The ANAM station in El Real

can help you find a local guide (expect to pay about US\$20).

The alternative is to hire a boatman to take you up the Río Pirre to Piji Baisal. Expect to pay about US\$40, plus the cost of gasoline. From Piji Baisal, it's a one-hour hike to the station. Again, you'll need a guide to lead you to the station, as no signs mark the way.

CANA

Nestled in foothills on the eastern slope of Pirre Ridge, the Cana valley is the most isolated place in the Republic of Panama. It's also the heart of the Parque Nacional Darién, and is regarded as one of the finest bird-watching spots in the world. In addition to four species of macaw, Cana is known for its harpy eagles, black-tipped cotingas, dusky-backed jacamars, rufous-cheeked hummingbirds and golden-headed quetzals.

Cana is home to the **ANAM/Ancon field station**, a wooden structure that was built by gold workers during the 1970s, and enlarged in mid-1998 by the wildlife conservation group Ancon. Today, it is the star-attraction in Ancon Expeditions' portfolio of tour offerings. The building itself offers rustic dorms, shared bathrooms and candle-lit evenings. When you consider the awesome hiking and the bird-watching possibilities in the area, the station is simply outstanding.

Ancon Expeditions (Map pp652-3; ☎ 269 9415; www.anconexpeditions.com; El Dorado Bldg, Calle 49 Este near Av 3 Sur, Panama City) offers an excellent five-day, four-night package that includes private charter flights between Panama City and Cana, an

GETTING TO COLOMBIA

The Carr Pan-Americana (Pan-American Hwy) stops at the town of **Yaviza**, and reappears 150km further on, far beyond the Colombian border. Although a trickle of travelers have walked through the infamous **Darién Gap**, the presence of Colombian guerillas, paramilitary, smugglers and bandits make this a potentially suicidal trip.

The border can also be crossed at a rugged point on the Caribbean coast between **Puerto Obaldía** on the Panamanian side, where you can obtain your exit stamp, and the town of **Capurganá** on the Colombian side, where you can obtain your entry stamp. **Aeroperlas** (☎ 315 7500; www.aeroperlas.com) has one flight per week from Panama City to Puerto Obaldía (US\$40, one hour). From Puerto Obaldía, you can either walk or boat to the Colombian village of Sapzurro. On foot this takes about 2½ hours, but the track is indistinct in places, and the presence of bandits and smugglers in the area makes boating the better option. From Sapzurro, it's a two-hour walk to Capurganá. Be advised that there is a fair amount of risk crossing here, and you should get solid information about the security situation before attempting it.

For information on sailing to Colombia, which is by far the safest of the available options, see p707.

English-speaking guide, all meals and accommodations (including tent camping along the Pirre Mountain Trail, with all provisions carried by porters). For rates, see p706.

YAVIZA

pop 3300

Yaviza is the end of the road – literally. Here, the Interamericana stops abruptly without so much as a sign announcing that you've reached the famous Darién Gap. From here, a narrow stretch of dirt road is lined with a few odd buildings and people who appear to have nothing but time on their hands.

If you have a pressing need to spend the night in Yaviza, the **Hotel 3Americas** (r from US\$8) has some tired-looking rooms with a mess of a communal bathroom.

There are eight buses daily between Panama City and Yaviza (US\$15, seven to 10 hours). From here, foolish travelers can hike along the Darién Gap if they so desire, though you'd best sort out your personal affairs first (see p709). If you do make it to Colombia – and we can't emphasize enough how seriously dangerous and inadvisable this route is – send us a postcard.

PANAMA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATIONS

Prices cited in this book for accommodations are low-season rates, and they include Panama's 10% tax on hotel rooms. High-season rates are generally about 15% higher.

There is usually no shortage of places to stay in Panama, except during holidays or special events outside Panama City, when advance reservations may be necessary.

Budget lodgings typically range from US\$5 per person to US\$20 for a double room. Hotels in the midrange category usually charge about US\$20 to US\$40 for a double room.

ACTIVITIES

Bird-Watching

Go birding in Panama, and you'll see more variety than anywhere else in Central America. More than 940 species of bird – native, migratory and endemic – have been identified here. This diversity of species is due to Panama's location relative to two continents and its narrow girth. Birds migrating between North and South America tend to be funneled into a small area.

The famous resplendent quetzal, the Maya bird of paradise and the symbol of Central America, is most abundant in western Panama. It inhabits areas around **Parque Nacional Volcán Barú** (p678), where it is commonly sighted throughout the year.

The **Camino del Oleoducto** (Pipeline Rd; p666) trail near Panama City is a favorite with birders; more than 500 species were sighted there in a single day during a Christmas bird count.

The ANAM/Ancon field station in **Cana** (p709) is often regarded as one of the top birding destinations in the world, and is the best place in Panama to spot the national bird, the harpy eagle.

Diving & Snorkeling

Panama has numerous islands with good snorkeling and diving sights. On the Caribbean coast, **Bocas del Toro** (p681) and the **San Blas Archipelago** (p700) are prime spots. Dive shops on Bocas del Toro rent snorkeling and diving gear, and offer PADI-certified classes, while snorkeling in San Blas is more of the do-it-yourself variety. There is also good diving and snorkeling around **Portobelo** (p698) as well as a couple of reputable dive shops in town.

On the Pacific coast, there is good snorkeling in the **Golfo de Chiriquí** (p673) and in the **Archipiélago de las Perlas** (p670). Although coral reefs in the Pacific are not as vibrant as their Caribbean counterparts, you're bound to see some big fish here as well as the occasional pelagic creature.

You can rent equipment at the destinations listed above, but avid snorkelers should bring their own. **Scubapanama** (Map pp648-9; ☎ 261 3841; www.scubapanama.com), based in Panama City, offers diving trips throughout the country.

Fishing

With 1518 islands, 2988km of coast and 480 rivers, there's no problem finding a fishing spot in Panama. Possibilities include deep-sea fishing, fishing for bass in **Lago Gatún** on the Panama Canal, trout fishing in the rivers running down **Volcán Barú** (p678) and surf casting on any of Panama's Pacific and Caribbean beaches.

Hiking

Hiking opportunities abound in Panama. In the Chiriquí highlands, the **Sendero Los Quetzales** (p679) winds through Parque Nacional Volcán Barú, and is regarded as the country's

top hike. **Parque Internacional La Amistad** also has some fine, short trails, starting near its Cerro Punta (p679) entrance.

From Boquete, you can hike to the top of **Volcán Barú** (p676), Panama's highest point and only volcano. The little town of **El Valle** (p694), which is nestled in a picturesque valley, is a fine place for casual walkers.

Near Panama City on the shores of the canal, **Parque Nacional Soberanía** (p666) contains a section of the old Sendero Las Cruces used by the Spanish to cross between the coasts. **Parque Natural Metropolitano** (p657), on the outskirts of Panama City, also has some good walks leading to a panorama of the city.

You can also go trekking through lush rain forests in the **Parque Nacional Darién** (p703), though this is best arranged through a reputable guide owing to the guerilla activity in the region.

See p712 for some advice on hiking.

Surfing

The country's top surfing destination is the Caribbean archipelago of **Bocas del Toro** (p685), which attracts strong winter swells and surfers from around the world. Although it remains an off-the-beaten-path destination, **Santa Catalina** (p693) on the Pacific Coast has some of the most challenging breaks in Central America. There is also uncrowded surfing on the laid-back island Caribbean island of **Isla Grande** (p699).

White-Water Rafting

White-water rafting trips are available on the Rios Chiriquí and Chiriquí Vieja in Chiriquí Province, and are best arranged in the mountain town of **Boquete** (p676).

BOOKS

Excellent books dealing with facets of Panamanian history include the following:

The Sack of Panamá: Sir Henry Morgan's Adventures on the Spanish Main, by Peter Earle, is a vivid account of the Welsh pirate's looting and destruction of Panama City in 1671.

The Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal, by David McCullough, is a readable and exciting account of the building of the Panama Canal. It's 700 pages long and reads like a suspense novel.

How Wall Street Created a Nation: J.P. Morgan, Teddy Roosevelt and the Panama Canal,

by Ovidio Diaz Espino, probes deeply into the dark alliances and backroom deals that culminated in the Canal's construction.

On a more recent note, *Inside Panama*, by Tom Barry and John Lindsay-Poland, is a look at the political, economic and human-rights scenes in Panama, with special emphasis on Panamanian society since the 1960s and on US-Panama relations from that time through to the mid-1990s.

BUSINESS HOURS

Opening hours for travel agents, tour operators and other businesses are normally 8am to noon and 1:30pm to 5pm weekdays, and 8am to noon on Saturdays. Government offices, including post offices, are open 8am to 4pm on weekdays and don't close for lunch. Most banks are open 8:30am to 1pm or 3pm on weekdays; some have Saturday hours as well. Shops and pharmacies are generally open from around 9am or 10am until 6pm or 7pm Monday to Saturday.

Grocery stores keep longer hours, opening around 8am and closing around 8pm or 9pm. A handful of grocery stores in Panama City stay open 24 hours.

Restaurants usually open for lunch from noon to 3pm and dinner from 6pm to 10pm. Those that offer breakfast open from 7am to 10am. On Sundays, many restaurants are closed. In Panama City and David, restaurants open later on Fridays and Saturdays, until about 11pm or midnight. Most bars are open from around noon to 10pm, later on Friday and Saturday nights (typically 2am). Nightclubs in Panama City open around 10pm or 11pm and close at 3am or 4am.

CLIMATE

Panama's tourist season is during the dry season from mid-December to mid-April. The weather can be hot and steamy in the lowlands during the rainy season, when the humidity makes the heat oppressive. But it won't rain nonstop; rain in Panama, as elsewhere in the tropics, tends to come in sudden short downpours that freshen the air, and is followed by sunshine. It's more comfortable to do long, strenuous hiking in the dry season.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Crime is a problem in certain parts of Panama City. The city's better districts, however, are safer than in many other capitals: witness

the all-night restaurants and activity on the streets at night. On the other hand, it is not safe to walk around at night on the outskirts of Casco Viejo – be careful in the side streets of this district even in the daytime. In general, stay where it's well lit and there are plenty of people around.

Colón has some upscale residential areas, but most of the city is a sad slum widely known for street crime. If you walk around, even in the middle of the day, well-meaning residents will inform you that you are in danger.

Parts of the Darién Province, which borders Colombia, are extremely dangerous. Not only is it easy to get hopelessly lost, but parts of the province are used by guerrillas from Colombia, the paramilitary chasing the guerrillas, and even plain old thieves pretending to be guerrillas. Particularly treacherous is the area between Boca de Cupe and Colombia, which is the traditional path through the Darién Gap. Dengue and malaria (chloroquine-resistant) are serious hazards in this area.

Plying the waters of the Archipiélago de San Blas are numerous Colombian boats that run back and forth between the Zona Libre in Colón and Cartagena, Colombia. It has been well documented that some of these boats carry cocaine on their northbound voyages. If you decide to ride on one of these slow cargo boats, be forewarned that your crew may be trafficking drugs.

Most other areas of Panama are quite safe. Police corruption is no longer a big problem in Panama, but it's not unheard of for a police officer to stop a motorist and levy a fine to be paid on the spot. Your only option may be to bargain the fine down.

You should be adequately prepared for hiking trips. Always carry plenty of water, even on short journeys, and always bring adequate clothing; jungles do cool down at night, particularly at higher elevations. Hikers have been known to get lost in rain forests – even seemingly user-friendly ones such as Parque Nacional Volcán Barú. A Panamanian hiker who entered that park in 1995 was never seen again; it's assumed that he got lost, died of hypothermia and was fed upon by various creatures.

Never walk in unmarked rain forest; if there's no trail going in, you can assume that there won't be one when you decide to turn around and come back out. Always let someone know where you are going, in order to narrow the search area if need be.

DISABLED TRAVELERS

The **Instituto Panameño de Rehabilitación Especial** (IPHE; Panamanian Institute for Special Rehabilitation; ☎ 261 0500; Camino Real, Betania, Panama City; 📍 7am-4pm) was created by the government to assist all disabled people in Panama, including foreign tourists. However, the law does not require – and Panamanian businesses do not provide – discounts for foreign tourists with disabilities.

Panama is not wheelchair friendly; with the exception of wheelchair ramps outside a few upscale hotels, parking spaces for the disabled and perhaps a few dozen oversized bathroom stalls, accommodation for people with physical disabilities does not exist in Panama. Even at the best hotels, you won't find railings in showers or beside toilets.

If you have a disability and want to communicate with another disabled person who might have been to Panama recently, consider becoming a member of **Travelin' Talk Network** (TTN; ☎ in the USA 303-232-2979; www.travelintalk.net; membership per year US\$20). This organization offers a worldwide directory of members with various disabilities who communicate among themselves about travel.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Panamanian Embassies & Consulates

Panama has embassies and consulates in the following countries:

Canada (☎ 613-236 7177; fax 613-236 5775; 130 Albert St, Suite 300, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5G4)

Colombia (☎ 257 5067, 257 5068; fax 257 5068; Calle 92, No 7-70, Bogotá)

France (☎ 01 47 83 23 32, 01 45 66 42 44; fax 01 45 67 99 43; 145 Av de Suffren, 75015 Paris)

Germany (☎ 228-36 1036; fax 228-36 3558; Lutzowstrasse 1, 53173 Bonn)

Mexico (☎ 5-250 4229; fax 5-250 4045; Schiller 326, 8th fl, Colonia Chapultepec-Morales, CP 11570, Mexico DF)

UK (☎ 171-493 4646; fax 171-493 4499; 48 Park St, London W1Y 3PD)

USA (☎ 202-483-1407; fax 202-483-8413; 2862 McGill Tee NW, Washington, DC 20008)

Embassies & Consulates in Panama

More than 50 countries have embassies or consulates in Panama City. For contact details see the Panama White Pages, listed under 'Embajada de [country]' or 'Consulados.' With the exception of the USA and France, you'll find most embassies in the Marbella district of Panama City.

Ireland, Australia and New Zealand have no representation in Panama.

Canada (☎ 264 9731; fax 263 8083; World Trade Center, Calle 53 Este, Marbella)

Colombia (☎ 264 9266; World Trade Center, Calle 53 Este, Marbella)

Costa Rica David (☎ /fax 774 1923; Calle C Sur btwn Vns 1 & 2 Este); Panama City (☎ 264 2980; fax 264 4057; Av Samuel Lewis)

France (Map p655; ☎ 228 7824; Plaza de Francia, Paseo las Bóvedas, Casco Viejo)

Germany (☎ 263 7733; World Trade Center, Calle 53 Este, Marbella)

Holland (☎ 264 7257; Calle 50, Marbella)

UK (Map pp652-3; ☎ 269 0866; Swiss Tower Calle 53 Este, Marbella)

USA (Map pp652-3; ☎ 207 7000; Avs Balboa & Calle 37 Este, La Exposición)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Panama has a range of colorful festivals that encompass everything from traditional folkloric fests to indigenous celebrations. For the lion's share of the country's revelry, head to the interior, where some of Panama's most famous events take place. For more details see p695.

The following events are the country's better known celebrations:

Carnaval (February/March) On the four days preceding Ash Wednesday, costumes, music, dancing and general merriment prevail in Panama City and in the Peninsula de Azuero towns of Las Tablas, Chitré, Villa de Los Santos and Parita.

Semana Santa (March/April) On Holy Week (the week before Easter), the country hosts many special events, including the re-enactment of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ; on Good Friday, religious processions are held across the country.

Corpus Christi (May/June) Held 40 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 enact dances, acrobatics and dramas.

Festival of the Black Christ On October 21, thousands of visitors come to honor the black Christ in Portobelo.

FOOD & DRINK

Food

The national dish of Panama is *sancocho*, a fairly spicy chicken-and-vegetable stew. *Ropa vieja* (literally 'old clothes'), a spicy shredded beef combination served over rice, is another common and tasty dish. Rice – grown on dry land – is the staple of Panama and is seemingly served with everything.

As elsewhere in the Americas, meat figures prominently in the Panamanian diet. In addition to staples such as *bistec* (steak) and *carne asado* (roast meat), you'll encounter specialties such as *carimañola*, which is a roll made from ground and boiled yuca that is filled with chopped meat and then deep fried. Far more common – in restaurants, snack bars and just about anywhere food is sold – are empanadas, which are corn turnovers filled with ground meat and fried. If you get them fresh, they're a fine treat. Another favorite is the tamale, which is cornmeal with a few spices and chicken or pork, all wrapped in banana leaves and boiled.

Gallo pinto, which means 'spotted rooster,' is traditionally served at breakfast, and consists of a soupy mixture of rice and black beans, often with a pig's tail thrown in for flavor. This dish, lightly spiced with herbs, is filling and tasty, and it sometimes comes with *natilla* (a cross between sour cream and custard) or *huevos fritos/revueltos* (fried/scrambled eggs).

Another item you might see at breakfast is a side of *tortillas de maiz*. Unlike those found in Mexico and Guatemala, Panamanian tortillas are much thicker, and are essentially deep-fried cornmeal cakes. They go quite nicely with eggs or roast meat. *Hojaldras* are also served at breakfasts and available at snack bars. Not unlike a donut, this deep-fried mass of dough is served hot, and you then cover it with sugar.

At lunch (*almuerzo*), many Panamanians opt for simple *comida corriente* (also called *casado*), the meal of the working class. This is an inexpensive set meal containing various items. Beef, chicken or fish is served alongside *arroz* (rice), *frijoles* (black beans), *plátano* (fried plantain), chopped *repollo* (cabbage) and maybe an egg or an avocado.

Seafood is also abundant in Panama. On the Caribbean coast and islands, everyday foods include shrimp, Caribbean king crab, octopus, lobster and fish such as corvina. In areas along the Caribbean coast, you'll also find a West Indian influence to the dishes. Seafood is often mixed with coconut milk; coconut rice and coconut bread are also Caribbean treats.

In Panama City you'll often see men pushing carts and selling *raspados*, cones filled with shaved ice topped with fruit syrup and sweetened condensed milk. This is no gourmet dish, but it's a favorite among Panamanians, particularly the under-10 crowd.

Drinks

Fresh fruit drinks, sweetened with heaped tablespoons of sugar and mixed with water or milk, are called *chichas*, and are extremely popular.

These drinks originated in Chiriquí Province, and are now commonly found throughout Panama. Also be on the lookout for *chicheme*, a nonalcoholic drink found in Panama and nowhere else. This delicious concoction consists of milk, sweet corn, cinnamon and vanilla.

Coffee is traditionally served very strong and offered with cream or condensed milk. Café Durán is the most popular of the local brands, and is quite good. Cappuccinos and espressos are increasing in popularity, and are commonly available in major cities and tourist destinations. Tea (including herbal tea) is available in the cities but difficult to find in towns. Milk is pasteurized and safe to drink. The usual brands of soft drinks are available.

The national alcoholic drink is made of *seco*, milk and ice. *Seco*, like rum, is distilled from sugarcane, but it doesn't taste anything like the rum you know. This is the drink of campesinos (farmers). Order a *seco con leche* in a martini lounge in Panama City and you'll likely receive some odd looks, but don't leave the country without trying to get a taste of real Panama.

By far the most popular alcoholic beverage in Panama is *cerveza* (beer), and the most popular local brands are Soberana, Panamá, Balboa, Cristal and Atlas. None of these are very flavorful, but when served ice-cold on a hot day, they do the trick. A large Atlas at a typical cantina can cost as little as US\$0.50; the same beer can cost you US\$2.50 at a decent restaurant.

There's a drink that the campesinos in the central provinces particularly like: *vino de palma*, which is sap extracted from the trunk of an odd variety of palm tree called *palma de corozo*. The sap from the palm tree can be drunk immediately (it's delicious and sweet) or fermented (which goes down like firewater).

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

Other than the gay float during Carnival in the capital, there are few open expressions of homosexuality in Panama. As in other Latin American countries, gay men and lesbians

remain closeted or else suffer a great deal of discrimination.

Panama City has a few gay and lesbian clubs (not openly advertised, however). Outside Panama City, gay bars are hard to come by. In most instances, gays and lesbians just blend in with the straight crowd at the hipper places and avoid cantinas and other conventional lairs of homophobia. There are several Panamanian websites for gays and lesbians that focus on upcoming events and parties, new club openings and political issues in Panama City.

HOLIDAYS

New Year's Day (January 1)

Martyrs' Day (January 9)

Carnaval (February to March)

Semana Santa (March to April) Holy Week

Labor Day (May 1)

Founding of Old Panama (August 15)

All Souls' Day (November 2)

Independence from Colombia (November 3)

First Call for Independence (November 10)

Independence from Spain (November 28)

Mothers' Day (December 8)

Christmas Day (December 25)

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés are widely available throughout the country. Most charge around US\$1 to US\$2 per hour.

INTERNET RESOURCES

IPAT (www.ipat.gob.pa) Panama's tourist website in Spanish. Also has a sister site in English; (www.visitpanama.com).

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

Panama info (www.panamainfo.com) Also in English.

MAPS

The **Instituto Geográfico Nacional** (Tommy Guardia; Map pp652-3; ☎ 236 2444; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri), in Panama City, sells topographical maps of selected cities and regions. Various free tourist publications distributed in Panama also have maps.

MEDIA

Newspapers & Magazines

La Prensa (www.prensa.com in Spanish) is the most widely circulated daily newspaper in Panama.

Other major Spanish-language dailies include *La Estrella de Panamá*, *El Panamá América*, *El Universal* and *Crítica*.

The **Panama News** (www.thepanamanews.com) is published in English every two weeks. It is distributed free in Panama City. *The Visitor*, written in English and Spanish and targeted towards tourists, is another free publication. The *Miami Herald International Edition* is available in some upscale hotels.

RADIO & TV

There are three commercial TV stations in Panama (channels two, four and 13) and two devoted to public broadcasting (five and 11). Many hotels have cable TV with Spanish and English channels.

Panama has over 90, mostly commercial, radio stations. The more popular:

Classical 105.7

Latin jazz 88.9

Latin rock 106.7

Reggae 88.1

Salsa 97.1 and 102.1

Traditional Panamanian 94.5

US rock 93.9 and 98.9

MONEY

Panama uses the US dollar as its currency. The official name for it here is the balboa, but it's exactly the same bill, and in practice people use the terms '*dólar*' and '*balboa*' interchangeably. Panamanian coins are of the same value, size and metal as US coins; both are used. Coins include one, five, 10, 25 and 50 *centavos* (or *centésimos*); 100 *centavos* equal one balboa. Be aware that most businesses won't break US\$50 and US\$100 bills and those that do may require you to present your passport. For exchange rates at the time of research, see right.

ATMs

Throughout Panama, ATMs are readily available except in the most isolated places. Look for the red '*sistema clave*' signs to find an ATM. They accept cards on most networks (Plus, Cirrus, MasterCard, Visa and Amex).

Credit Cards

Although accepted at travel agencies, upscale hotels and many restaurants, credit cards can be problematic almost everywhere else. In short, carry enough cash to get you to the next bank or ATM.

Exchange Rates

The table shows currency exchange rates at the time this book went to press.

Country	Unit	US dollars (US\$)
Australia	A\$1	0.85
Canada	C\$1	0.95
Euro Zone	€1	1.40
Japan	¥100	0.80
New Zealand	NZ\$1	0.80
UK	UK£1	2.05

Taxes

A tax of 10% is added to the price of hotel rooms – when you inquire about a hotel, ask whether the quoted price includes the tax. Hotel prices given in this book include the 10% tax. A 5% sales tax is levied on nonfood products.

Tipping

The standard tipping rate in Panama is around 10% of the bill; in small cafés and more casual places, tipping is not necessary. Taxi drivers do not expect tips.

Traveler's Checks

Although they can be cashed at a few banks, traveler's checks are rarely accepted by businesses, and traveler's checks in currencies other than US dollars are not accepted anywhere in Panama. Some banks will only accept American Express traveler's checks. The banks that do accept traveler's checks typically charge an exchange fee equal to 1% of the amount of the check.

POST

Airmail to the USA takes five to 10 days and costs US\$0.35 (postcards US\$0.25); to Europe and Australia it takes 10 days and costs US\$0.45 (postcards US\$0.40). Panama has neither vending machines for stamps nor drop-off boxes for mail. You may be able to buy stamps and send mail from an upscale hotel to avoid going to the post office and standing in line.

Most post offices are open from 7am to 6pm on weekdays and from 7am to 4:30pm on Saturdays. General delivery mail can be addressed to '(name), Entrega General, (town and province), República de Panamá.' Be sure the sender calls the country 'República de Panamá' rather than simply 'Panamá,' or the mail may be sent back.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Traveling sensitively in Panama means being mindful of the environment around you. Try to patronize local businesses and industries, and spend your money where it will go directly to the people working for it.

For information on responsible tourism in the Comarca de Kuna Yala, see p702.

Don't support businesses that keep caged animals – it's an offense to keep a parrot, toucan or macaw in a cage; if it bothers you report the crime to **Ancon** (Map pp648-9; ☎ 314 0060). And – hopefully this goes without saying – don't eat endangered species. If you see *tortuga* (sea turtle), *huevo de tortuga* (turtle eggs), *cazón* (shark), *conejo pintado* (paca), *ñeque* (agouti) or *enado* (deer) on the menu, take your business elsewhere.

SHOPPING

A remarkable variety of imported goods, including cameras, electronic equipment and clothing, is sold in Panama, both in Colón's tax-free Zona Libre (p696) and in Panama City (p662).

The favorite handicraft souvenir from Panama is the *mola*, a colorful, intricate, multi-layered appliqué textile sewn by Kuna women of the Archipiélago de San Blas (p703). Small, simple souvenir *molos* can be bought for as little as US\$5, but the best ones are sold on the islands and can fetch several hundred dollars.

It's possible to purchase high-quality replicas of *huacas* – golden objects made on the isthmus centuries before the Spanish conquest and placed with Indians at the time of burial. These range in price from US\$5 to more than US\$1000.

Other handicrafts that can be purchased include wood carvings (from the *cocobolo* tree), *tagua* carvings (from the egg-sized *tagua* nut) and baskets – these are all made by the Wounaan and Emberá tribes.

STUDYING

Panama is home to several Spanish-language schools, which are located in Panama City (p658), Boquete (p677) and Bocas del Toro (p686).

TELEPHONE

Panama's country code is ☎ 507. To phone Panama from abroad, use the country code before the seven-digit Panamanian telephone

number. There are no local area codes in Panama.

Telephone calls to anywhere within Panama can be made from pay phones. Local calls cost US\$0.10 for the first three minutes, then US\$0.05 per minute. You can buy Telechip phonecards at pharmacies, corner shops and Cable & Wireless offices (the national phone company) in denominations of US\$3, US\$5, US\$10, and US\$20. You then plug this into the phone and dial the local number. Some public phones accept both cards and coins, but many accept only cards. Note that calling cell phones (which typically begin with a '6') is much pricier (US\$0.35 for the first minute, then US\$0.10 per minute thereafter).

TOURIST INFORMATION

The **Instituto Panameño de Turismo** (IPAT, Panamanian Institute of Tourism; Map pp648-9; ☎ 226 7000; www.ipat.gob.pa; Centro Atlapa, Vía Israel, San Francisco, Panama City) is the national tourism agency. In addition to this head office, IPAT runs offices in Bocas del Toro, Boquete, Colón, David, Paso Canoas, Penonomé, Portobelo, Santiago, Villa de Los Santos, Las Tablas, El Valle and Pedasí. There are smaller information counters at the ruins of Panamá Viejo, in Casco Viejo, and in both the Tocumen International Airport and the Albrook domestic airport.

IPAT has a few useful maps and brochures, but often has a problem keeping enough in stock for distribution to tourists. Most offices are staffed with people who speak only Spanish, and the helpfulness of any particular office depends on the person at the counter. Some employees really try to help, but others are just passing the time. As a general rule, you will get more useful information if you have specific questions.

Panama provides tourist information in the USA (☎ 800-231-0568), and IPAT literature and other information is sometimes available at Panamanian consulates and embassies.

TOURS

In Panama, the standard for nature guides and tours is set by **Ancon Expeditions** (Map pp652-3; ☎ 269 9414/9415; www.anconexpeditions.com; El Dorado Bldg, Calle 49 A Este, Panama City). Created by Panama's top private conservation organization, Ancon Expeditions employs most of the country's best nature guides, offers a variety of exciting tours, and provides an impeccable level of service. All of Ancon Expeditions' guides are

avid birders, speak flawless English and are extremely enthusiastic about their work.

VISAS

A valid passport is required to enter Panama, though additional requirements vary by country. Note that as of January 2007, US citizens can no longer enter Panama with just a driver's license and a birth certificate.

Citizens of the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Spain, Finland, Austria, as well as a few South and Central American countries, need only a passport. Most other nationals, including US, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand citizens, may enter with a US\$5 tourist card, available from consulates, embassies and also from airlines, the Tica Bus company, at the airport or at some border posts upon entry.

Visas must be obtained before entering the country by nationals of many other countries not listed above. Visas are issued at Panamanian embassies and consulates and cost around US\$20, depending on the nationality of the applicant.

If you are heading to Colombia, Venezuela or some other South American country, you may need an onward ticket before you'll be allowed entry, or even allowed to board the plane out.

A quick check with the appropriate embassy – easy to do by telephone in Panama City – will tell you whether the country you're heading to has a requirement to have an onward ticket.

You are required by law to carry either your passport or a copy with you at all times, and police officers reserve the right to see your identification at any time.

Visa Extensions

Visas and tourist cards are both good for 90 days. To extend your stay, you'll have to go to an office of Migración y Naturalización (Immigration) – it's advisable to go to the one in Panama City (p651). You must bring your passport and photocopies of the page with your personal information and of the stamp of your most recent entry to Panama. You also must bring two passport-size photos, an onward air or bus ticket, a letter to the director stating your reasons for wishing to extend your visit, and a letter from a Panamanian citizen who accepts responsibility for you during your stay.

You will have to fill out a *prólogo de turista* form and pay US\$15. You will then be issued a plastic photo ID card.

If you have extended your time, you will also need to obtain a *permiso de salida* (permit to leave the country). For this, bring your passport and a *paz y salvo* form to the immigration office. *Paz y salvos* are issued at Ministerios de Hacienda y Tesoro, found in towns with immigration offices, which simply require that you bring in your passport, fill out a form and pay US\$1.

VOLUNTEERING

The **National Association for the Conservation of Nature** (Ancon; ☎ 314 0061; www.ancon.org in Spanish) offers opportunities for volunteering on projects in national parks and other beautiful natural areas. Volunteers might get involved in protecting nesting turtles near Bocas del Toro, do environmental-education work in Darién or assist park rangers. It's possible to volunteer for any length of time from a week to several months; you won't get paid, but Ancon will supply your basic necessities, such as food and shelter.

For other volunteer opportunities in Panama, see p658 (Panama City) and p706 (Darién Province).

WOMEN TRAVELERS

Female travelers find Panama safe and pleasant to visit. Some Panamanian men may make flirtatious comments or stare at single women, both local and foreign, but comments are rarely blatantly rude; the usual thing is a smiling '*mi amor*' (my love) or an appreciative hiss or a honk of the horn.

The best way to deal with this is to do what Panamanian women do – ignore the comments and don't look at the man making them.

Panamanians are generally fairly conservative in dress. Women travelers are advised to avoid skimpy or see-through clothing. And although Emberá women in the Darién go topless, it would be insulting for travelers to follow suit.

Women traveling solo will get more attention than those traveling in pairs or groups. Although assault and rape of foreign travelers is rare, avoid placing yourself in risky scenarios. Don't walk alone in isolated places, don't hitchhike and always pay particular attention to your surroundings.

WORKING

It's difficult for foreigners to find work in Panama as the government doesn't want them to take jobs away from Panamanians. Basically, the only foreigners legally employed in Panama work for their own businesses, possess skills not found in Panama or work for companies that have special agreements with the Panamanian government.

Small boats transiting the Panama Canal sometimes take on backpackers as deckhands

(line handlers) in exchange for free passage, room and food. Inquiries can be made at the Panama Canal Yacht Club in Colón; some boat owners post notices in *pensiónes*. The official rate for line handling is US\$55 per day, but anyone who pays this fee hires experienced locals. Competing with the locals for this work could get you and the boat captain in trouble.

Restaurants that hire foreign staff are often shut down for immigration violations.