

Destination Panama

After centuries of occupation by the Spanish and later the Americans, Panama has recently cast off the last throes of colonialism. 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. Polls taken prior to the withdrawal showed that a majority of Panamanians did not want the US to pull out completely 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 by more than 10%. Today, 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, under the leadership of President Martín Torrijos, Panamanian voters overwhelmingly endorsed an ambitious project to expand the canal. At an estimated cost of US\$5 billion, the expansion will widen and deepen 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 that higher revenues from canal tolls will inject a much needed boost into the country's economy.

The campaign for the canal expansion was endorsed by the country's rich, elite and powerful, who stand to make quite a bit of money from increased shipping traffic. Of course, this is ultimately contingent on whether or not the government can actually pull it off and critics argue that the project's final price tag may be too high to recoup.

Meanwhile real growth is happening in the economy, and President Torrijos' probusiness attitude has thus far pleased many investors. With the increase of trade and the continued flow of foreign investment, Panama's future is looking brighter than ever.

The future for Panama's natural wonders is less certain. With tourism and foreign investment making convenient bedfellows, developers are increasingly viewing Panama with dollar signs in their eyes. Real-estate moguls and wealthy investors are envisioning cruise-ship ports, giant beach resorts and gated retirement communities.

Fortunately there is hope. Several conservation organizations, most notably Asociación Nacional para la Conservación de la Naturaleza (ANCON; National Association for the Conservation of Nature), envision Panama's tourism developing slowly and sustainably. However, the road ahead is paved with potential misfortune, especially on the battlegrounds of Parque Nacional Coiba and Isla Bastimentos.

In the end, the future of Panama will be dependent on the speed at which the country's tourism sector develops. Unlike neighboring Costa Rica, which has exploded as an international tourist destination in recent years, Panama has been slow to capitalize on its potential. However, this has allowed players on both sides of the investment/conservation line to step back and assess the situation. Hopefully, Panama will adopt a low-volume, high-profit model of tourism in the near future.

FAST FACTS

Population:	3.2 million
Annual growth rate:	1.56%
Life expectancy at birth:	75.19 years (US 78)
Infant mortality rate per 1000:	15.96 (US 6.37)
Adult literacy:	92.6%
GDP:	25.3 billion
Unemployment rate:	8.8%
Population below poverty line:	37%
Number of bird species:	940
Number of endangered species:	105

Getting Started

Traveling is all about spontaneity, and plenty of people jump on the plane to Panama without making a single plan. However, although Panama is a fine country for spontaneous adventuring, you'll get more out of your trip if you do a bit of planning before you go.

For starters, there are a few destinations in Panama where advance reservations are a good idea. This is especially true for the Comarca de Kuna Yala (p258), where the demand for flights far exceeds the supply. Fortunately, you can book your outbound and inbound flights in advance (see p264). Advance reservations for Isla Barro Colorado (p113), an outpost for the Smithsonian's Tropical Research Institute (STRI), are also necessary.

If you're planning a trip with the country's leading tour operator, Ancon Expeditions (see the boxed text, p89), advance reservations are usually necessary. This is especially true for their more popular destinations, such as the far-flung corners of the Darién (p273) and the remote island of Coiba (p185).

Panama is a country for any budget. There is a plethora of budget accommodations around the country as well as many decent, inexpensive restaurants. At the other end of the scale, there are five-star lodges overlooking the sea and charming B&Bs tucked away in the mountains. So, whether you're shoestringing or spending Benjamins like they were going out of style, the only thing limiting your trip to Panama is your imagination.

WHEN TO GO

Panama's high tourist season corresponds with its Pacific-side dry season, from mid-December to mid-April. During these months, there is relatively little rain in Panama City and elsewhere south of the Continental Divide. North of the mountains, on the Caribbean side of Panama, it rains all year round. However, it tends to rain less in February, March, September and October than it does the rest of the year.

The best time to visit Panama really depends on what you plan to do. If you intend to spend most of your time on the Pacific side, you might want to visit in December or January, when there's generally little rain and the weather is pleasant. Bear in mind, however, that hotel prices and airfares are generally higher from mid-December to mid-April.

If you'll be doing any serious hiking, the dry season is the most comfortable time to do it. For planning purposes, be aware that Panama's mountains can get very cold at night; if you're considering camping at altitude (in Boquete, El Valle or Cerro Punta, for example), be sure to bring warm clothing.

If you'll be spending most of your holiday surfing, bear in mind that swells are fairly constant in the Pacific year-round, though offshore winds from December to mid-April can add a few meters to curl. However, Caribbean swells are a bit more fickle, and are usually dependent on weather patterns in the region.

Other outdoor pursuits are also weather dependent. Rafting is at its best in Chiriquí Province from May to December when the rivers are running high, while diving is best from December to mid-April when the dry season lends better visibility.

Some of Panama's colorful festivals draw enormous crowds, and are well worth attending if you're in the area. The Península de Azuero is very popular for its Carnaval (Mardi Gras; p151) – the celebrations are held on the four

See Climate Charts (p294) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Learning at least a few basic phrases in Spanish (see Language, p320)
- A poncho for rainy days and wet boat trips
- A mosquito net for trips into the jungle – or a night's rest in well-ventilated quarters
- Decent insect repellent (30% to 50% DEET)
- A flashlight (torch)
- Binoculars, if you're planning to do any bird-watching
- Sun protection – sunscreen, sunglasses, a hat
- Warm clothes for chilly nights in the mountains
- An ATM card or a Visa/MasterCard with (known) pin number
- An alarm clock for catching early-morning flights (to/from Comarca de Kuna Yala, for instance)
- An appetite for fresh seafood
- A thirst for cold lager

days leading up to Ash Wednesday. Panama City's Carnival is also popular (and one of the world's largest; p89). Hotel reservations during Carnival are a must and should be made well in advance. Panama has a number of other festivals worth catching, especially on the Peninsula de Azuero; see the boxed texts, p151 and p163.

COSTS & MONEY

Prices in Panama tend to be slightly higher than in other parts of Central America, such as Guatemala and Nicaragua, though they are about on par with Costa Rica.

Throughout the country, you can get a budget hotel room for about US\$15 to US\$20 a night, while die-hard shoestring travelers can probably find some questionable digs for about US\$10. In recent years a number of backpacker-friendly hostels have popped up around the country, particularly in Panama City, Bocas del Toro and Boquete – a dorm bed at any of these places will set you back less than US\$10 a night.

Good, inexpensive food isn't hard to come by. You can eat *comida corriente* (set meals) at Panamanian restaurants for about US\$2 to US\$4 no matter where you are in the country. Buses and taxis are also reasonable – a two-hour bus ride costs a few dollars, while a cab ride in the capital costs the same. All in all, if you're traveling frugally, it's possible to get by on US\$20 to US\$30 a day in Panama.

Midrange accommodations are reasonably priced in Panama, and compared to other parts of Latin America, you tend to get a lot more for your money. You can eat at better restaurants for US\$5 to US\$10 a person and stay in decent quarters for US\$20 to US\$40 a night. Add in a flight or two (Kuna Yala, Bocas), a few activities (national-park fees, snorkeling and/or boat trips), a nightly cocktail or two and you can easily get by on US\$55 to US\$65 a day.

With that said, you'll get more value for your money if you can split the costs with someone. At midrange hotels, single rooms aren't much cheaper than doubles, and you'll save money on excursions if there are more of you to share the cost.

If you're looking to have a blow-out vacation, there are numerous ways to experience Panama's natural and cultural riches at the top end. There



TOP 10

FAVORITE FESTIVALS

The legacy of colonial Spain lives on in the many colorful celebrations that take place throughout Panama.

- 1 Feria de las Flores y del Café, 10 days in January, Boquete (p205)
- 2 Carnaval, four days prior to Ash Wednesday (February or March), Las Tablas (p168) and Panama City (p89)
- 3 Feria de Azuero, late April or early May, Villa de Los Santos (p164)
- 4 Corpus Christi, 40 days after Easter (May or June), Villa de Los Santos (p164)
- 5 Nuestra Señora del Carmen, July 16, Isla Taboga (p116)
- 6 Fiesta de Santa Librada and Festival de La Pollera, July 21, Las Tablas (p168)
- 7 Festival del Manito Ocuéño, third week of August, Ocué (p159)
- 8 Feria de la Mejorana, September 23 to 27, Guararé (p166)
- 9 Festival of Nogagope, October 10 to 12, followed by the Kuna Feria, October 13 to 16, Isla Tigre (p263)
- 10 Festival de Cristo Negro, October 21, Portobelo (p253)

HISTORICAL READS

For such a small country, Panama has a voluminous history, as evidenced by the many books about the pirates, the visionaries and the demagogues who've all left their mark on the narrow isthmus.

- 1 *Old Panama and Castilla Del Oro*, CLG Anderson
- 2 *The Sack of Panama: Sir Henry Morgan's Adventures on the Spanish Main*, Peter Earle
- 3 *Panama: Four Hundred Years of Dreams and Cruelty*, David Howarth
- 4 *The Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal*, David McCullough
- 5 *How Wall Street Created a Nation: JP Morgan, Teddy Roosevelt and the Panama Canal*, Ovidio Diaz Espino
- 6 *Emperors in the Jungle: The Hidden History of the US in Panama*, John Lindsay-Poland
- 7 *Panama: The Whole Story*, Kevin Buckley
- 8 *The Noriega Mess: The Drugs, the Canal, and Why America Invaded*, Luis Murillo
- 9 *America's Prisoner: The Memoirs of Manuel Noriega*, cowritten with Peter Eisner
- 10 *A People Who Would Not Kneel: Panama, the United States, and the San Blás Kuna*, James Howe

THE FAMOUS & THE INFAMOUS

The lure of this lush country has been felt by some of history's most fascinating – and notorious – characters. Panama's most famous sojourners and residents include the following.

- 1 Christopher Columbus, whose only attempt at founding a colony in the New World failed miserably in present-day Veraguas
- 2 Francis Drake, who, between raids on Spain's gold-filled warehouses in Nombre de Dios, managed to find time to sail around the world
- 3 Vasco Núñez de Balboa, who was the first European to lay eyes on the Pacific
- 4 Ferdinand-Marie de Lesseps, who followed his success at Suez with the tragic failure of the Panama Canal endeavor
- 5 Paul Gauguin, day laborer on the Panama Canal, and struggling artist
- 6 Graham Greene, whose love affair with the country led to his invitation to attend the signing of the 1977 Torrijos-Carter treaty
- 7 Frank Gehry, the highly acclaimed architect whose love of Panama will soon be manifest in the Biodiversity Museum
- 8 Valentín Santana, who is king of the Teribe – the only group in all of the Americas still governed by a monarch
- 9 Colonel Manuel Antonio Noriega; one of Florida's most infamous prisoners, he's set for release when this book goes to print
- 10 Rubén Blades, a Grammy Award-winning, Harvard-educated lawyer and one-time presidential candidate (placing third)

are several excellent all-inclusive lodges throughout the country, which are designed for everything from wildlife-watching to sportfishing. Travelers looking to part with a little cash can also take advantage of the decadent restaurants in Panama City, secluded B&Bs in the highlands and luxury ocean-side resorts along the coasts.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Anyone who doubts that Panama is still an overlooked country has only to take a look at its selection of travel literature. Unlike Guatemala, Peru or even Nicaragua, there are very few accounts of travel within the country. This is good news for would-be travel writers but bad news for anyone wanting to get something other than a historical look at the country. *Travelers' Tales Central America*, published in 2002, has only three stories about Panama, but they are interesting tales (one touches on life in Isla de Coiba's penal colony, while another provides an interesting account of shamanism and the Kuna). It's a decent book for those interested in learning about other Central American countries. Among the most notable contributions is Guatemalan Nobel-laureate Rigoberto Menchú's piece on indigenous village life in the Guatemalan highlands.

For a fictional look at one of Panama's spiciest cultures, read the work of short story-writer José María Sanchez. His work was first published in the 1940s but was rereleased in an anthology titled *Cuentos de Bocas del Toro* (Tales of Bocas del Toro). Set in that beautiful province, where the author was born and raised, these fun stories – whose protagonists are driven by the sensuous, baroque excesses of the tropical jungle and sea – possess a language charged with powerful imagery.

Although *Panama*, by Carlos Ledson Miller, is a work of fiction, the story takes readers on a journey through the political turmoil of the country during the Noriega years. The author, who lived in Panama as a boy, also takes readers further back in history, giving snapshots of Balboa's arrival in 1514, Sir Henry Morgan's sacking of Panama City in the 17th century and more recently the 1964 student riots that later led to the Torrijos-Carter treaty that returned the canal to Panamanian hands.

Getting to Know the General, by Graham Greene, is a biased but still fascinating portrait of General Omar Torrijos and the Panamanian political climate of the 1960s and '70s, by one of England's finest 20th-century writers.

INTERNET RESOURCES

IPAT (www.ipat.gob.pa in Spanish) The official website of Panama's national tourism department.

Lanic (<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/panama>) Outstanding collection of links from the University of Texas Latin American Information Center.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) The popular Thorn Tree forum, travel news and links to other useful sites.

Panama Info (www.panamainfo.com) Panama's best web-based travel resource, with lots of practical information as well as info on provinces and historical background.

Visit Panama (www.visitpanama.com) IPAT's English version of its website, with a small selection of practical and historical info, a few articles and links to other sites.

HOW MUCH?

Dorm bed in Bocas del Toro US\$7

Surfboard rental in Santa Catalina per day US\$10

Cozy mountain cabin for two in Boquete US\$50

Flight from Panama City to San Blas US\$35-65

Two-tank dive off the coast of Portobelo US\$80

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

THE BEST OF PANAMA

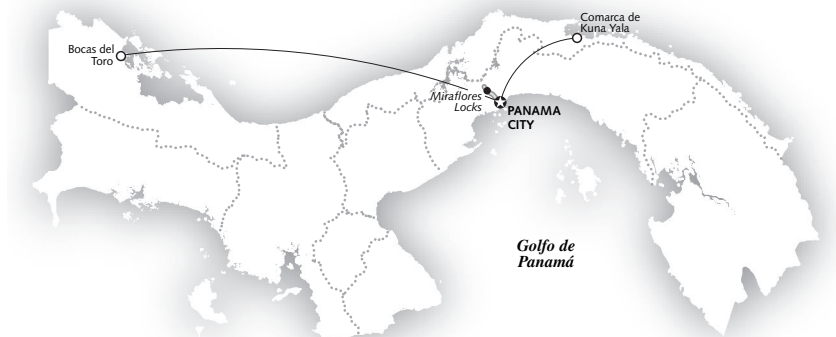
Two Weeks

For a taste of all that Panama has to offer, this classic travelers' route will take you to colonial cities, the locks of the canal and two far-flung Caribbean getaways.

In **Panama City** (p72), the country's vibrant capital, start your journey at **Panamá Viejo** (p82), the ruins of Spain's first Pacific settlement. After its sacking by pirates, the settlement was moved to present-day **Casco Viejo** (p78), where you'll find colonial buildings, 18th-century churches and scenic plazas amid the old quarters. And of course, you shouldn't leave the capital without a daytrip to the nearby **Miraflores Locks** (p107) of the Panama Canal.

From Panama City, take a quick flight to **Bocas del Toro** (p217), where you can snorkel coral reefs, surf great breaks and soak up the Caribbean vibes. Fly back to the capital and then grab another quick flight to the **Comarca de Kuna Yala** (p258), a string of hundreds of pristine islands that are lorded over by the Kuna. At the end of your trip, return to Panama City for a bit of urban decadence in open-air **restaurants** (p94) and salsa-infused **nightclubs** (p100).

CARIBBEAN
SEA



PACIFIC
OCEAN

DRIVING THE INTERAMERICANA

Two Weeks

From Panama City, head west along the Interamericana to the string of **beaches** (p125) along the Pacific coast. Whether you settle on a quiet strip of sand or live it up in the lap of luxury, chances are you'll find what you're looking for. When you're ready for a detour, take the turnoff for **El Valle** (p130), a mountain retreat surrounded by lush cloud forests and green peaks. Head back to and continue along the Interamericana, taking a quick stop to shop for some Panama hats at **Penonomé** (p139), then take the turnoff for **Santa Fé** (p179), a tiny highland town amid sparkling rivers and gorgeous waterfalls.

If you're starting to miss the beach, backtrack to the Interamericana and take a detour to **Santa Catalina** (p182), a serious surfer's destination worthy of taking down your boards from the roof rack. Get your fill of sun here before heading via **David** (p194) to the popular town of **Boquete** (p201) in Chiriquí. Once in Boquete, you can hike into nearby forests, lounge in hot springs, take a canopy tour and fill up on mountain-grown coffee.

If you've got your own wheels, hit the Interamericana for a route that passes through the interior and alternates between scenic beaches and highland cloud forests.



ROADS LESS TRAVELED

CARIBBEAN COASTAL EXPLORER

Three Weeks

Starting in Panama City, ride the luxury train along the historic **Panama Railroad** (p246) through the Canal Zone to **Colón**. Although there's little reason to linger in this infamous city, you shouldn't miss the historic Spanish forts that guard the bay in **Portobelo** (p250). Divers will want to explore the underwater world along this stretch of coast while history buffs should head to the Unesco World Heritage site of **Fuerte San Lorenzo** (p249).

Anyone looking to slow things down for a bit should check out the wind-swept beaches of **Isla Grande** (p254), which are perfect for surfing, sunning or simply lazing about. When you're ready, head back to the capital and then grab another quick flight to **El Porvenir** (p265) in Kuna Yala. From here, you can head as far south along the archipelago as your time and money will carry you. Of course, serious adventurers should consider taking a sailboat to Colombia – see p263 for details.

If you're looking to get off the beaten path, this seafarer route will bring you from the well-trodden Canal Zone to the farthest reaches of Kuna Yala (and possibly even Colombia).



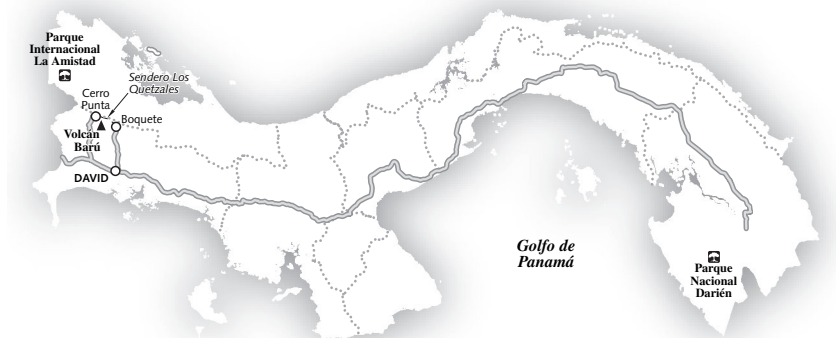
ADVENTURES ACROSS THE ISTHMUS

Three Weeks

From Panama City, travel by bus to the tourist town of **Boquete** (p201) in the Chiriquí Highlands. From here, your first destination should be an ascent up **Volcán Barú** (p209), an extinct volcano that is also Panama's tallest point. After checking out the panoramic views of both the Pacific and the Caribbean, head back to Boquete and grab a bus via **David** (p194) to **Cerro Punta** (p212). From here, you can hike along the **Sendero Los Quetzales** (p209), a stunning mountain pass that winds through wildlife-rich cloud forest. Now that you've acclimatized yourself to Panama's outdoors, your next stop should be the **Parque Internacional La Amistad** (p213). The Panamanian side of this binational park is virtually undeveloped and largely unexplored. Your final stop will require the services of Ancon Expeditions (p89), but no self-respecting adventurer can leave Panama without trekking through the jungles of the **Parque Nacional Darién** (p280).

If you're the kind of traveler who gets their kicks hiking through dense jungles and scaling towering peaks, then check out this seriously rugged route through Panama's wilderness.

CARIBBEAN
SEA



PACIFIC
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TAILORED TRIPS

WORLD HERITAGE SITES

Panama's five Unesco World Heritage sites provide visitors with a chance to discover the remainders of its storied past, a plethora of neotropical wildlife and the indigenous cultures that lie inside its borders.

The 576,000-hectare **Parque Nacional Darién** (p280) is Panama's crown jewel, with lush primary rainforest, an astounding range of animal life and Emberá and Wounaan villages scattered through remote jungle. Inside the park, **Cana** (p286), with its hundreds of tropical avian species, is regarded as one of the top birding destinations in the world.

Panama City is home to the ruins of **Panamá Viejo** (p82), the first European settlement on the Pacific coast of the Americas. On the other side of town lies the colonial district of **Casco Viejo** (p78).

Travel north of Panama City to reach several Spanish forts along the Caribbean coast. The well-preserved ruins of **Fuerte San Lorenzo** (p249) stand guard over the mouth of the Río Chagres. Further east near the historic town of Portobelo stands the impressive **Fuerte San Jerónimo** (p252).

In the western part of the country, it's back into the rainforest at **Parque Internacional La Amistad** (p213), a binational park shared with Costa Rica.

Panama's newest Unesco World Heritage site is **Isla de Coiba** (p188), a far-flung yet pristine island that is the center of a vast marine park.



WILDLIFE-WATCHING

Close to downtown Panama City, the **Parque Natural Metropolitano** (p82) is an excellent (and convenient) place to get a taste of the country's wildlife. Of course, serious birders should head to the **Parque Nacional Soberanía** (p110) in the Canal Zone, which is home to the famous Pipeline Road. Nearby is the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute on fauna-rich island of **Monumento Nacional Isla Barro Colorado** (p113), and you can spot lounging crocodiles on the banks of the canal during the jungle cruise out there. Little-visited **Parque Nacional Omar Torrijos** (p142) in nearby Coclé Province also boasts rich wildlife, well-maintained hiking trails and few tourists.

Turtle lovers shouldn't miss nesting season on **Isla de Cañas** (p173), **Isla Iguana** (p170) or in the marine park near **Isla Bastimentos** (p229). On the Caribbean coast, four species of turtle come to the **Humedal de San-San Pond Sak** (p236). If you're looking for marine life such as whales and dolphins, the best spots are **Parque Nacional Coiba** (p185) and the reefs and islands in the **Golfo de Chiriquí** (p198).

In the mountains and highland cloud forests, **Parque Internacional La Amistad** (p213) and **Parque Nacional Volcán Barú** (p208) have trails for seeking rare birds, such as the resplendent howler, and several species of primates including quetzals and capuchins. For unparalleled wildlife viewing, there's no better place than **Parque Nacional Darién** (p280).



ISLAND & BEACH HOPPING

A short flight from Panama City, **Isla Contadora** (p119) has a dozen fine beaches – and the country's only nude one. The charming island of **Isla Taboga** (p115) is closer in, with beaches, hiking trails and fine views. The windswept **Isla Grande** (p254) is a favorite of weekend urbanites, while the hundreds of islands of the **Comarca de Kuna Yala** (p258), with their white sands, coconut palms and countless coral reefs, are among Panama's loveliest. Just west of the capital along the Interamericana lie a string of **beaches** (p125), which range from low-key fishing settlements to resort getaways.

Head to the Península de Azuero for fine, untouched beaches on **Isla Iguana** (p170) and serious surf on **Playa Venao** (p171). Even better surf – and fantastic diving – is found at **Playa Santa Catalina** (p182). For a pure island getaway, head to Boca Brava in **Golfo de Chiriquí** (p198) where local fishers can show you all the secret snorkeling spots, or join an expedition out to **Isla de Coiba** (p188). And of course, don't miss out the islands and beaches of Panama's ultimate tourist destination, namely the **Archipiélago de Bocas del Toro** (p219).



FLOATING ON A CLOUD

Panama's highlands are teeming with wildlife-rich cloud forests. The quickest escape from the hustle and bustle of the capital is **El Valle** (p130), a tiny town in the crater of an extinct volcano that is surrounded by forest-covered mountains. Further west in Veraguas Province is the town of **Santa Fé** (p179), which abounds with towering waterfalls and hiking trails. Panama's highland tourist capital is **Boquete** (p201), which provides access to the Chiriquí Highlands and is the traditional starting point for hikes up **Volcán Barú** (p209). Nearby, the mountain town of **Cerro Punta** (p212) is the traditional starting point for the **Sendero Los Quetzales** (p209), the country's finest cloud forest trail. For a taste of the cloud forest without all the tourist crowds, there's no better place than **Parque Internacional La Amistad** (p213).



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On the Road



MATTHEW D FIRESTONE *Coordinating Author*

This shot was taken at the Boca de Cupe checkpoint at the start of the infamous Darién Gap. Here, my guide and I registered with police before heading on foot to the ANCON field station in Cana. The blue dye on my skin is *jagua*, a traditional dye used by the Emberá to decorate their bodies during celebrations.

DON'T MISS

Panama City (p72) is arguably the most cosmopolitan Latin American capital. With its eclectic mix of international restaurants and all-night clubs, it's hard to have a bad time here. Of course, you shouldn't let the good life distract for you too



long – the Caribbean stylings of Archipiélago de Bocas del Toro (p219) are just a quick plane ride away. Although it's hard to pull yourself away from these laid-back islands, don't miss Panama's 'other Caribbean,' namely the Archipiélago de San Blas (p258). Home to the fiercely independent Kuna, these culturally rich islands are the perfect place to slow down (or possibly get stuck) for a while.

You should set aside some time for the far-flung Isla de Coiba (p188), a genuine 'Lost World' of ecological wonders. Hikers should head to Parque Nacional Volcán Barú (p208), home to Panama's highest volcano and its most famous highland trail. Serious explorers should head to the Darién (p273), though a little preparation is in order before you tackle this frontier region. And if you've got your board in tow, don't miss the surf paradise of Santa Catalina (p182), home to the country's largest swells.

See full author bios page 330

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