

# Panamá Province



Panamá Province has a rich history of pirates, plunder, pearls and the world's most daring engineering marvel. Even before Henry Morgan's raid of Panamá, pirates such as Sir Francis Drake used Isla Taboga as a hideout and springboard for attacks on the mainland. Further off the coast, an even better hideout was the remote Archipiélago de las Perlas (Pearl Islands), which was named by Vasco Núñez de Balboa upon learning of the abundance of pearls in this area.

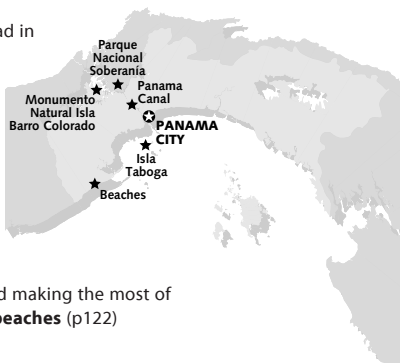
Today Panamá Province is more famed for the canal than for anything else. Cutting through the province, the canal can be explored by visiting its locks, riding a boat through its watery recesses or hiking along its jungle-clad shore. The entirety of the Panama Canal watershed is federally protected land, which makes the area one of the most accessible and best-studied tropical rainforests on the planet.

The province's attractions serve as popular day trips or minibreaks for Panamá City's weekend warriors. The charming island village of Taboga is undergoing something of a revival, but its unhurried pace hasn't changed much since the days when visitors such as Gauguin sojourned here. Along the coastline, a string of beaches attracts everyone from sun-worshippers to wave-seeking surf junkies. Farther flung are the Archipiélago de las Perlas, which draw everyone from the moneyed elite to the occasional *Survivor* television series.

Although it's the most populated province in the country, Panamá can be as big or as small as you want it to be. Tranquil rainforests and sizzling beach scenes are yours to explore and the comforts of the capital are never more than an hour away.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Laying eyes on the awe-inspiring **Panama Canal** (opposite), an engineering marvel in the midst of an expansion
- Spotting feathered friends along Pipeline Road in **Parque Nacional Soberanía** (p110), one of the world's premier bird-watching sites
- Visiting the world-famous tropical biology center on **Monumento Natural Isla Barro Colorado** (p113), the most studied patch of rainforest in the world
- Escaping the urban grind of the capital on a day trip to the flower-dotted island of **Isla Taboga** (p115)
- Soaking up the sun, surfing gnarly breaks and making the most of romantic hideaways along the Pacific Coast **beaches** (p122)



■ POPULATION: 1,460,000

■ AREA: 11,887 SQ KM

■ ELEVATION: SEA LEVEL TO 1000M

## HISTORY

Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, the Spanish used the isthmus as a transit point for shipping plundered gold between Peru and Spain. The main route was the famous cobblestoned Camino Real (King's Hwy), which linked Panamá to Portobelo, and served as the only road across the isthmus for hundreds of years. In the 1700s, however, the route was abandoned in favor of shipping gold around Cape Horn owing to repeated pirate attacks, the most famous of which was Sir Henry Morgan's sacking of Panamá Viejo in 1671.

As early as 1524, King Charles V of Spain had ordered a survey to be undertaken to determine the feasibility of constructing a transisthmian water route. But it wasn't until the 1880s that any country dared to undertake the momentous project of carving a trench through dense jungles and mountains. The first canal attempt came from a French team led by Ferdinand-Marie de Lesseps, who was riding high on his prior success building the Suez Canal.

Sadly, he and his colleagues grossly underestimated the difficulties and some 22,000 workers died during the construction attempt. The majority of deaths were due to yellow fever and malaria, which led to the establishment of an enormous quarantine on Isla Taboga – at the time, it was not yet known that mosquitoes were the disease vector.

Several decades later, the Americans learned from the mistakes of the French and succeeded in completing the canal in 1914. Today the waterway rests firmly in the hands of the Panamanian government and the face of the canal is rapidly changing as ambitious expansion plans slowly unfold.

## AROUND PANAMA CITY

No visit to Panama City would be complete without taking a day trip to its famous waterway – just remember that the Canal Zone is much, much more than just the canal.

### PANAMA CANAL

The canal is truly one of the world's greatest engineering marvels. Stretching for 80km from Panama 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 (305m long and 33.5m wide) in mind.

Ships pay according to their weight, with the average fee around US\$30,000. The highest amount paid was around US\$200,000, 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, 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 2006, Panamanian voters overwhelmingly endorsed an ambitious project to expand the Panama Canal. The US\$5.25 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 a third 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, the canal will still be unable to meet world shipping needs.

For more information on the expansion, see the boxed text on p111. For more information on the history of the canal, see p30.

### 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 Panama City. The recently inaugurated visitors center features a large, four-floor



museum, several viewing platforms and an excellent restaurant overlooking the locks. Tip: the best time to view big liners passing through is from 9am to 11am and from 3pm to 5pm, when they are more frequent.

To get there, take any Paraíso or Gamboa bus from the bus stop on Av Roosevelt across from Legislative Palace in Panama 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. Otherwise, you can take a taxi; there's a 30-minute wait at the locks and from there you get driven back to the capital. Expect to pay no more than US\$15 for the round-trip – agree on the price beforehand.

### OTHER LOCKS

Further north, past the Miraflores Locks, are the **Pedro Miguel Locks**, which can be seen from the highway to Gamboa. One hundred meters beyond the locks there's a parking strip where onlookers can watch ships transit the canal.

On the Caribbean side, the **Gatún Locks** have a viewing stand for visitors and a small replica of the entire canal that lets you place the locks in context. For more information, see p245.

## Activities

### CANAL TRANSITS

**Canal Bay & Tours** (☎ 314 1339; www.canalandbaytours.com) offers partial canal transits every Saturday morning. Boats depart from Muelle (Pier) 19 in Balboa, a western suburb of Panama City. They 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.

The highly recommended **Ancon Expeditions** (p89) also offers regularly scheduled canal transits, though it's a good idea to book in advance as this is one of the company's most popular offerings.

### FISHING

If you're looking to reel in the big one, get in touch with **Panama Canal Fishing** (☎ 6699 0507; www.panamacanalfishing.com), which runs organized tours in the Canal Zone. Their signature tour involves fishing for peacock bass in Lago Gatún and the Chagres river.

### CANAL ZONE

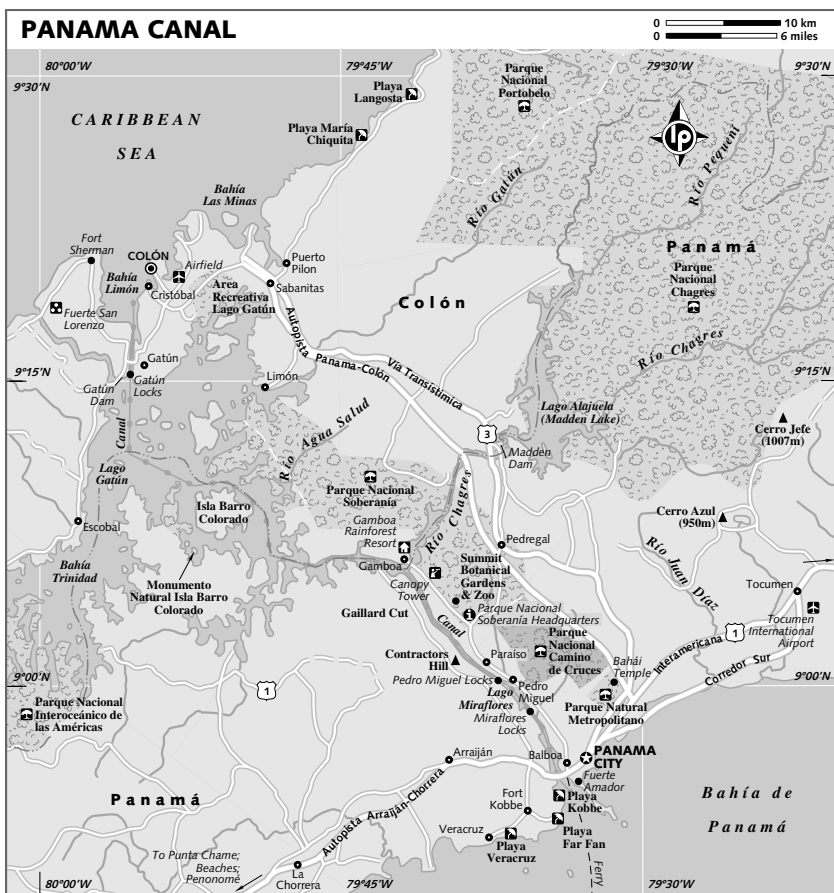
The Canal Zone is home to a number of impressive attractions, especially if you're into wildlife-watching, hiking and birding. On a day trip from Panama City, you could first visit the Miraflores Locks, then the Summit Botanical Gardens & Zoo, and finish at the Parque Nacional Soberanía and the Fundación Avifauna Eugene Eisenmann. With prior arrangements, you could also take an organized tour of Isla Barro Colorado, one of the world's most famous tropical research stations, or an Emberá or Wounaan village on the shores of the Río Chagres. If you want to spend the night in the area, it's worth parting with a little cash for the experience of staying at either the Canopy Tower or the Gamboa Rainforest Resort.

All of the attractions in the Canal Zone 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, which departs every half-hour from Av Roosevelt across from the Legislative Palace in Panama City.

### Summit Botanical Gardens & Zoo

Ten kilometers past the Miraflores Locks are the **Summit Botanical Gardens & Zoo** (☎ 232 4854; admission US\$1; ☒ 8am–4pm), which were established in 1923 to introduce, propagate and disseminate tropical plants from around the world into Panama. The gardens are home to over 15,000 plant species, the majority of which are laid out along well-marked trails and paths. Summit is also home to a small zoo, which was originally setup to help GIs identify animals while they were out serving in the jungles.

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 rainforest 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 rainforest 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 a remarkable variety of wildlife.

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 **Pipeline Road**, 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 Road is considered to be one of the world's premier birding sites – not surprisingly, it is intensely popular with birders, 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.

A healthy cluster of golden-collared manakins is usually found at the end of the

## THE FUTURE OF THE CANAL

On October 22, 2006, 78% of voters cast a 'yes' ballot to show their support for an expanded canal. Although only 44% of registered voters turned out for the election, this single event was the only measure of approval that the government needed to usher in a US\$5.25 billion mega-project, which will stretch over seven years and finish in conjunction with the canal's centennial in 2014.

Not surprisingly, the country's rich, elite and powerful formed the backbone of the campaign, especially since the increase in traffic and volume through the canal will inject a huge boost into the Panamanian economy. The country will maintain its current role as the maritime logistics center in the Americas and everything from the Free Trade Zone of Colón to the international financial hub of Panama City is likely to boom.

Of course, all of this is ultimately contingent on whether or not the government can actually pull it off, though skeptics should note that this plan has been in the making for over five years. In fact, the organizing minds behind the expansion do not belong to any specific political or financial group, and transcend both the Panama Canal Authority and the central government.

The rationale for the expansion is that the demands of the international maritime shipping community have changed. Although as much as 4% of the world's total sea commerce traverses the Panama Canal, the Suez Canal, which is capable of handling larger vessels, serves over 6%. Furthermore, the Panama Canal is already operating at over 90% of its maximum capacity and will reach its saturation point in less than five years.

Supporters also argue that the threat of competition in regards to alternatives to the canal underscores the importance of this project. Nicaragua has already announced plans to construct a US\$20 billion interoceanic route and Mexico is currently working to improve its Pacific and Atlantic ports as well as its internal transportation networks.

However, the biggest challenge the Panama Canal faces is to lure in the enormous post-Panamax vessels, which currently depend on either the US Trans-continental Railway or the Suez Canal. But proponents of the canal expansion are hoping that this lucrative market will adopt the Panama route, especially as trade volumes between Asia and the continental east coast increase.

Businesspeople throughout Panama are also forecasting an increase in tourism, especially since the new locks will be able to accommodate large cruise ships. This ultimately will lead to an increase in tourist infrastructure throughout the country, especially in the rapidly developing Canal Zone.

Of course, the biggest question on everyone's mind is how the project is going to be financed, especially considering that there is no guarantee that the expansion will generate higher revenues and offset the construction costs. Furthermore, critics from all sectors of society are pessimistic that the government can actually pull off the project at its stated price tag.

The current plan is to borrow US\$2.3 billion, with the remainder of the money to come from both the Panamanian government and the Panama Canal Authority. Since it's estimated that the value of tolls will increase significantly over the next 20 years, the hope is that the expected flow of post-Panamax vessels through the canal will eventually pick up the tab. In the meantime, however, the project will need to acquire an incredible volume of financial resources.

In the end, the success of the project will ultimately be determined by whether or not Panama receives the international backing it's hoping for. Fortunately, Panama has thus far done an exemplary job running the canal since the US pullout, though it remains to be seen whether or not this ambitious project will ruin the country's economy. Commentators from all sides of the political spectrum are chiming in with their views, but the truth of the matter is that, at this point, it's anybody's guess.

first 100m of the road, on the left-hand side. Other typical sounds on the first 2km of the road come from white-bellied antbirds, black-bellied wrens, collared aracaris, keel-billed toucans and buff-throated woodcreepers. Also keep an eye out for rarities such as

the tiny hawk, the hook-billed kite, the great jacamar and the black-tailed trogon.

In order to fully appreciate the wildlife on Pipeline, it's wise to hire a guide – it's one of the world's premier birding sites, and it would be a shame to give it short shrift. A recommended

### BRINGING BACK THE HARPY

Panama's national bird, the harpy eagle, was once found in lowland rainforests throughout Central America. But, these large, bold eagles are often the targets of hunters, which lead to their extirpation from the Canal Zone during the 20th century. The **Peregrine Fund** ([www.peregrinefund.org](http://www.peregrinefund.org)), an international organization dedicated to the conservation of the world's raptors, has created a small captive, breeding nucleus of harpy eagles unable to return to the wild (usually due to injury) at the Neotropical Raptor Center near Panama City.

Ultimately, the Peregrine Fund aims to reinstate these birds throughout their former range, but it's a long road: a female released in 1998 was retrapped and brought back into human care after she repeatedly strayed outside protected areas in the Canal Zone. A male harpy eagle hatched in 1997 and released in Parque Nacional Soberania in 1998 was not so fortunate – he was shot by a hunter in 2000.

Recognizing that the cooperation of local people is essential in preserving this species, the Peregrine Fund is now also devoting resources to wildlife education in villages surrounding officially protected areas. For more information on the project, and to learn how you can get involved, visit the Peregrine Fund's website.

operator is **Ancon Expeditions** (see p89), which runs regular trips to the park. Another option is to stop by the **Fundación Avifauna Eugene Eisenmann** (see right), which is located near the entrance to Pipeline.

The **Río Chagres**, which flows through the park and supplies most of the water for the Panama Canal, is home to several **Emberá** and **Wounaan** communities (see p275). Although the Darién is the ancestral home of these two indigenous groups, a wave of migration to the shores of the Río Chagres commenced in the 1950s. However, following the establishment of the national park in the 1980s, the government culled the practice of slash-and-burn agriculture, which has severely affected their livelihood. Today, several villages are turning to tourism for survival.

Before visiting these communities, it's important to realize that over the past 50 years, both the Emberá and the Wounaan have had a turbulent history of land grabs, legal battles and political misrepresentation. As a result, both groups have been forced to modernize, though the Emberá and the Wounaan still maintain their incredibly rich cultural heritage. If you arrive expecting to see villagers living traditional lifestyles in harmony with the land, then you will be disappointed. However, the Emberá and the Wounaan still have a lot to show to visitors, especially their traditional dances, music, handicrafts and the surrounding national park that has become their de facto home.

The neighboring Emberá community of **Ella Puro** (☎ 6537 7223) and Wounaan community of **San Antonio** (☎ 6637 9503) regularly receive

tourists and with prior notice you can arrange a pick up from the docks in Gamboa. Tour prices vary from US\$20 to \$US30 per person depending on the activities you arrange and there is no shortage of possible excursions, ranging from guided rainforest walks to watching traditional dances.

For more information on the plight of the Emberá in Panamá Province, see the boxed text, opposite.

### FISHING

Fishing is permitted on the Río Chagres and Lago Gatún. Leaflets and information about the park, including a brochure for self-guided walks along the nature trail, are available from **park headquarters** (☎ 276 6370) in Gamboa.

If you're interested in arranging a private tour, contact Panama Canal Fishing (above).

### 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](http://www.avifauna.org.pa)), an ambitious project with the mission to protect Panama's bird fauna and rainforest 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 Road (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 Road, this project is likely to receive a lot of publicity following its opening launch.

## Monumento Nacional 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 the most intensively studied area in the neotropics. 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 only to scientists, a limited number of tourists are now allowed to enter as part of a guided tour. 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 pp76-7; ☎ 212 8026; www.stri.org; Tupper Bldg, Av Roosevelt, Ancón district; adult/student foreign student US\$70/40, adult/Panamanian 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 public visits on Monday, Thursday 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.

## Canopy Tower Ecodge & Nature Observatory

Located in Parque Nacional Soberanía, this former US Air Force radar station now serves a very different function, namely ecotourism. The **Canopy Tower** (☎ 264 5720; www.canopytower.com; d per person US\$130-200, day visit US\$85; 📍) is an ecologically-minded three-story, cylindrical lodge and observatory that offers guests the chance to immerse themselves in the sights and sounds of the rainforest. From the third and rooftop levels, you have a 360-degree view over the national park and you can even see ships passing through the canal a mere 2km away. The bird-watching in the surrounding area is top-notch and there's no shortage of other tropical wildlife, including howler monkeys, sloths and a slew of frogs and lizards.

In addition to the viewing platforms, there is also a small ground-floor museum, a tropical biology library, a cozy sitting area and a handful of attractive guest rooms ranging from quaint singles to luxurious four-person suites. Each room is awash in tropical hues,

### LOCAL VOICES: MELIO & THE PLIGHT OF THE EMBERÁ

Melio is an Emberá who lives along the shores of Río Chagres, which is located within the Panama Canal Watershed and Parque Nacional Soberanía.

- **What is the history of your community?** The father of our community is Antonio Sarco, who is 96 years old. In 1950 he left Río Chico in the Darién and travelled down the Chagres river until he settled here. Antonio was an important man because he knew a lot about survival. Back then, the canal was controlled by America. So, when he contacted the US military, they gave him a job training astronauts and soldiers.
- **What has happened in Río Chagres since then?** Until the national park was created in 1984, we were a free people. We used to hunt, fish, cut down trees and grow crops. Then, once the national park was created, we were told that we had to change. We worried about our survival because everything would be different. We knew that saving the forest was important, but we were nervous about how to survive.
- **How did you survive?** Times were difficult until 1998. Then we were told by the government that we could promote tourism. We were told that we could show our dances, sell our handicrafts and that we wouldn't have to pay taxes. So, that's how we survive now.
- **Do you want to go back to how it was before?** How could we go back? We've lost our skills. And it's too much for us to go back. There is more income with tourism. In the Darién, the Emberá still live like before. But here, it's different.



## THE CANAL ZONE: THE GRASS WAS GREENER ON THE OTHER SIDE *Ivan Hoyos*

Before coming to Panama, most travelers have a mental image of the Panama Canal as an industrial area where ships are raised and lowered through a system of locks. However, the Panama Canal and the surrounding Canal Zone are in fact an oasis of public green space, national parks and wildlife reserves.

The Panama Canal relies on the rainforest that embraces the channel to guarantee a continuous volume of water and to reduce the impact of erosion. As a result, Panama created a series of national parks, including Parque Nacional Soberanía, in order to safeguard this watershed. These very same forests also provide a sanctuary for the high diversity of flora and fauna that live on the banks of the canal, including jaguars, monkeys, sloths and hundreds of species of tropical birds. Unfortunately, while other countries are rushing to safeguard what little natural habitats they harbor, Panama seems to be thinking otherwise. The current development boom is placing an ever-increasing pressure on our natural landmarks, and residents of the Canal Zone are up in arms.

When Panama received the lands and properties once controlled by the US, Panama inherited a 'Garden City.' Former military bases such as Clayton and Albrook, and civilian communities such as Cardenas and Los Rios, provided families with playgrounds, soccer fields, swimming pools and public areas for recreation. As a result, the cities of Panama and Colón inherited the much-needed green space and recreational areas otherwise not found in these high-density urban environments. Furthermore, the masterfully planned communities yielded architecture unique to Panama – perfectly lined, red-tiled roofs and wooden houses on stilts are a sight that is not matched anywhere else in Central America.

However, with the ever-increasing demand for luxury apartments and gated communities, the 'Law 12' legislation was approved by the Panamanian Government in 2007. This ill-conceived law allows a developer to change the current zoning regulations without any regard for the natural surroundings. Green areas could soon become the site of multiple high-rise constructions, such as the ones found in the high-density districts of Paitilla and Punta Pacifica in Panama City. Mature rainforest areas and old historical homes could vanish, only to be converted into ostentatious gated communities. As a result of this law, Panama's historical, natural and architectural patrimony is in grave danger.

As a mockery to concerned Panamanians such as myself, billboards at the main entrances of Albrook and Clayton display high-rise buildings with catchy slogans like 'in harmony with nature.' Although these billboards are promising tranquility and peace in a natural surrounding, they are setting a precedent for what could turn the Canal Zone into a cornucopia of cement and glass.

Fortunately, there are organizations such as the Confederación de Comunidades de las Áreas Revertidas (Confederation of Communities in the Canal Zone) and the Comité Pro Defensa Camino de Cruces (Path of the Crossings Pro-Defense Committee) that are striving to put an end to harmful legislation like Law 12. Though these organizations are comprised primarily of residents from the Canal Zone, they have also reached the interest of Panamanians from as far as away as Chiriquí Province and the Azuero peninsula.

Beyond zoning laws, the Canal Zone is facing other devastating issues, such as the destruction of the mangrove ecosystems of Colón to make room for container yards, ship holding pens and shopping malls. There are even talks of building a massive port on the west bank of the Pacific entrance of the canal, which would eliminate one of the healthiest tracts of dry deciduous forest in Panama. Unfortunately, the future of the Canal Zone is very bleak for anyone concerned with protecting the environment.

As a concerned Panamanian, I hope that property developers and local authorities realize that travelers visit Panama for its premier natural heritage, and not to see an ever-increasing urban jungle.

*Ivan Hoyos is a life-long resident of the Canal Zone and is an active promoter of environmental issues throughout Panama.*

natural hardwoods, firm beds and a few hammocks to help you pass the time easier. Rates include three meals and guided nature walks in Parque Nacional Soberanía. Even if you're not spending the night, a day visit will allow you to visit the viewing platforms and partake in a few guided walks through the park.

To reach the Canopy Tower, pass the entrance to Summit on your way to Gamboa, and take the second road to the right – the turnoff is marked with a Canopy Tower sign. Follow the road for exactly one mile until you reach the top of Semaphore Hill and the entrance to the hotel.

### Gamboa Rainforest Resort

Near the junction of the Panama Canal and the Río Chagres, 9km past the turnoff for Canopy Tower on the road to Colón, is the US\$30-million **Gamboa Rainforest Resort** (☎ 314 9000; www.gamboaresort.com; villas from \$150, d from US\$225; 📍 📺 📶 🚰). Although it's just a resort located in a rainforest as opposed to an environmentally friendly ecodge, it's hard to deny the grandeur of this place. The main building has sweeping vistas of the jungle-flanked Río Chagres, an awesome panorama of river and rainforest seen through windows three stories high – all 110 luxurious guest rooms offer slices of the same view. Flanking the driveway to the main building, there are also 65 colonial villas that once housed the administrators who managed canal dredging operations a century ago.

Holding true to its resort moniker, it's hard to get bored here. Guests can take advantage of the on-site golf course, spa, gym, marina, swimming pool and bar-restaurant. There's even an aerial tram that brings you up into the canopy, as well as healthy offering of guided nature walks and birding trips. If you're planning on spending a few days here, check the website for special package deals, which often include activities, meals and transfers.

One note of caution: we have received complaints from readers about Gamboa's 'Monkey Island' tours, where the highlight is feeding a colony of monkeys on a small island in Lake Gatún. Although we probably don't have to say it, let's be perfectly clear about this – feeding wildlife is an environmentally detrimental practice that should not be encouraged. Please do not frequent tours of this nature and don't be afraid to inform the management of Gamboa about the ill-effects of this practice.

## PACIFIC ISLANDS

Wedged between two oceans, Panamá is an island-hoppers dream – spend some time on the Pacific side of things, especially if you're a fan of fiery sunsets and scenic coastlines.

### ISLA TABOGA

pop 1000

A tropical island with only one road and no traffic, Isla Taboga is a pleasant place to escape from 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, namely the Causeway (p86). Also, rumors abound that the now-defunct Hotel Taboga will be knocked down to make way for a sophisticated resort. In the meantime however, Taboga still serves as a laid-back day trip from Panama City for anyone looking 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. Naturally, peace was not established, especially since Taboga became the favorite spot of English pirates.

On August 22, 1686, the ship of Captain Townley was lying in front of Taboga when it was attacked by three Spanish ships armed with cannons. During the ensuing battle, Townley destroyed one of the ships and took the other two vessels captive as well as a fourth ship that had arrived as reinforcement. Afterwards, Townley sent a messenger to the president of Panamá demanding supplies, the release of five pirates being held prisoner and ransom for the Spanish captives.

When the president refused to send anything other than medicine, Townley replied that heads would roll if his demands weren't met. When the president ignored the threat, Townley kept his word by sending him a canoe that contained the heads of twenty Spaniards. Townley's message got the president's attention and all of pirate's demands were immediately met.

For years afterward, peace continued to elude the little island. 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 party of Chileans sacked the island and killed most of its inhabitants.

During the 1880s, when the French took a stab at digging a canal across the isthmus, Taboga became the site of an enormous sanatorium for workers who had contracted malaria or yellow fever. The Island of Flowers might well have earned its name from all the flowers placed on graves here. Sadly, Taboga's centuries-old cemetery has been looted so many times that it looks like it was hit by artillery fire.

Real artillery fire also took a toll on Taboga. The US Navy used the broad hill facing the town for artillery practice during WWII and even installed a number of anti-aircraft guns and machine-gun bunkers atop the island. Although they were abandoned in 1960, these ruins can still be visited today.

In recent decades, peace has finally come to Taboga, though the island is continually assailed by weekend vacationers from Panama City and groups of foreign tourists.

## 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 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, seek out the excellent English-language site, [www.taboga.panamanow.com](http://www.taboga.panamanow.com).

## Sights

There are fine **beaches** in Taboga in either direction from the ferry dock. Many visi-

tors head straight for the Hotel Taboga, to your 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.

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, 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**, who is honored with a procession every July 16. The statue is carried upon the shoulders of followers to the oceanside, placed on a boat and ferried around the island. Upon her return she is carried around the island, while crowds follow and everyone else watches at their windows. The Virgin is returned to her garden shrine and the rest of the day is one of rejoicing. Seemingly everyone partakes in games, fire-breathing or dancing.

For a fine view, you can walk up the **Cerro de la Cruz** hill on the east side of the island to the cross on the top. At the top, look for abandoned bunkers that were used by US troops during WWII. If you look below and to the right of the old cross, you'll also see a white-and-brown pile of rubble amid thickening vegetation. This is the ruins of a Spanish cannon emplacement put here 300 years ago to protect the island from pirates.

## Activities

### SNORKELING

On weekends, when people are most likely to visit Taboga, fishermen at the pier can 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 treasure left 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.

### DIVING

Taboga offers typical Pacific-style diving, with rocky formations and a wide variety of marine life. The beauty of the Pacific is enhanced by the schools of fish that roam about: on a good

dive you can expect to see jack, snapper, jewfish, eels, rays, lobsters and octopuses. With a little luck, you may also come across old bottles, spent WWII-era shells and artifacts from pirate days. **Scubapanama** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 261 3841; www.scubapanama.com; cnr Av 6a C Norte & Calle 62 C Oeste, El Carmen, Panama City) offers periodic dive trips to the island.

### BIRD-WATCHING

The islands of Taboga and nearby Urabá are home to one of the largest breeding colonies of brown pelicans in the world. The colony has contained up to 100,000 individual birds, or about half of the world population of this species. A wildlife refuge, the **Refugio de Vida Silvestre Islas Taboga y Urabá**, was established to protect their habitat, and covers about a third of Taboga as well as the entire island of Urabá, just off Taboga's southeast coast. May is the height of nesting season, but pelicans can be seen from January to June.

### WHALE-WATCHING

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.

### Sleeping & Eating

Most people choose to visit Isla Taboga as a day trip from Panama City, though there are a handful of places to stay on the island.

**Kool Hostel** (☎ 690 2545; luisveron@hotmail.com; dm/house US\$10/25) 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, but there are shared hot-water bathrooms and a communal kitchen. Guests can rent bikes, snorkel gear or 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 you up the hill.

**Vereda Tropical Hotel** (☎ 250 2154; veredatropicalhotel@hotmail.com; d from US\$45; 🍷) Atop a hill with commanding views, this beautiful hotel is one of the most charming places to stay on the island. Colorful rooms, some with balconies, are stylishly decorated and have high ceilings, comfortable beds and shutters that open onto the village or the sea. The open-air restaurant, with sunny adjoining patio, serves tasty meals

prepared by the talented Portuguese chef. 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, which was most likely caught just a few hundred meters from where you're sitting.

### Getting There & Away

The scenic boat trip out to Isla Taboga is part of the island's attraction. **Barcos Calypso** (☎ 314 1730; roundtrip US\$10) has departures from Panama City at 8:30am and 3:00pm Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 8:30am on Tuesday and Thursday, and 8:30am, 10:30am and 4:00pm on Saturday and Sunday. Ferries depart Isla Taboga at 9:30am and 4:00pm Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 4:30pm on Tuesday and Thursday, and 9:00am, 3:00pm and 5:00pm on Saturday and Sunday.

Ferries depart from La Playita de Amador, which is located behind the Centro de Exhibiciones Marinas on the Causeway (p86). 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. It's one of 90 named 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 are found in its waters, the Pearl Islands are comprised of 90 named islands and over 100 unnamed islets, each surrounded by travel magazine-worthy, 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 the 2003 season of their sensationalist series on an unnamed island in the chain.

### History

True to its name, it was pearls that initially brought the archipelago to the Old World's



### LOCAL LORE: LA PEREGRINA

The oysters that abound in the water of archipelago have produced some of the world's finest pearls. However, none are as celebrated or well documented as the La Peregrina (The Pilgrim Pearl). This enormous, pear-shaped white pearl weighs 203.84 grains or 31 carats. When it was discovered 400 years ago, it was considered so magnificent that the slave who discovered it was given his freedom.

In the mid-16th century, the pearl was given to King Phillip II of Spain, who later presented it as a wedding gift to his wife, Queen Mary of Scots. Later it belonged to the Bonaparte family, though it was eventually acquired by the British Marquis of Abercorn from the son of French emperor Napoleon III.

In 1969 it was purchased for US\$37,000 by actor Richard Burton for his wife, Elizabeth Taylor. Today, the pearl is still owned by Ms Taylor, who has one of the largest private jewelry collections in the world. Of course, it's worth noting that La Peregrina was briefly lost for a period of time when her pet dog scampered away with the pearl in its mouth!

In the years that followed Morales' arrival in the archipelago, the Spaniards harvested the islands' oyster beds. However, since they had slain the entire population of the islands, they had to import slaves from Africa to collect the oysters. Today the descendants of the first slaves who came to the Archipiélago de las Perlas live on the islands.

### 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, which is the site of an exclusive resort; and neighboring Islas Casaya and Casayeta, which are frequented by pearl shoppers. However, since less than a dozen of the Pearl Islands are inhabited, there are ample opportunities here for independent exploration, especially if you have a sense of adventure and the help of a local guide.

### Isla Contadora

pop 350

Isla Contadora (Counting House Island) was the historic accounting center for pearls before they were shipped off to Spain. Today however, there's not much accounting being done on the island, especially since the island's residents are multimillionaires, the majority of which probably haven't filed their tax returns in quite some time.

Owing to its close proximity and frequent air connections to Panama City, Isla Contadora is the only island in the archipelago with a developed tourist infrastructure. For the most part, Contadora is a prestigious destination that caters to its wealthy residents and

moneyed tourists from the mainland. However, the beaches on the island are spectacular, the snorkeling is worldclass, and the island is a great jumping off point for independent exploration of the archipelago.

### ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Isla Contadora is only 1.2 sq km in size and nearly all of its tourist facilities are on the northern side of the island, within walking distance of the airstrip. The other side consists primarily of forest, palatial homes and secluded beaches.

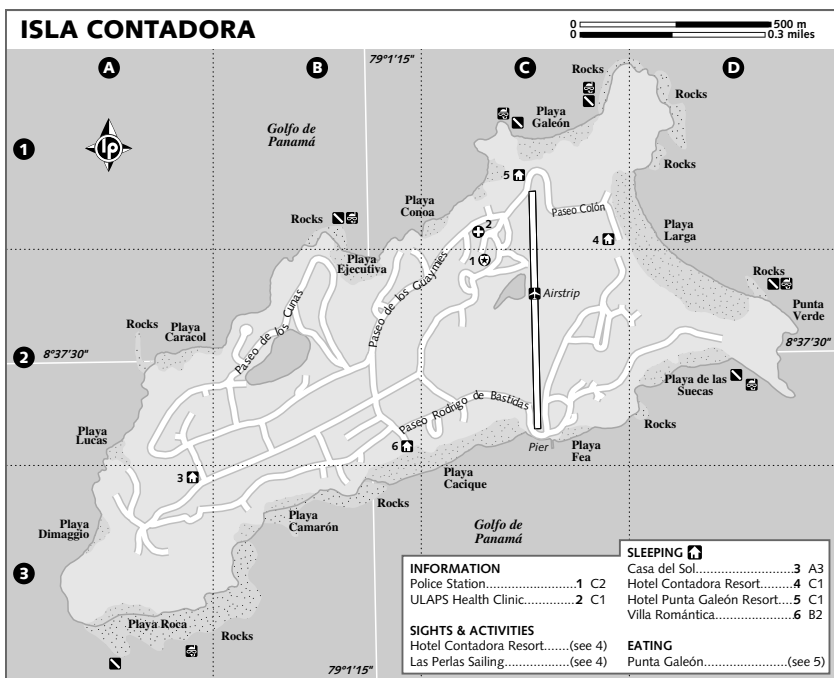
There's a **ULAPS Health Clinic** (☎ 250 4209; 🕒 24hr) a short walk from the airstrip. If no one answers the door, walk around to the back of the facility to the house there – it's the doctor's home and he doesn't mind being disturbed if someone's in need.

### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

#### Beaches

Isla Contadora is home to no less than 12 beaches, all of which are covered with tan sand and are 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 four-wheeler.

**Playa Larga** (Long Beach), which is located in front of the Hotel Contadora Resort, is always crowded, but it's the best place for spotting marine life. Around the corner to the south is **Playa de las Suecas** (Swedish Women's Beach), where you can sunbathe in the buff legally – the Swedish women are



the ones with blond hair, blue eyes and sunburnt skin. Continuing west 400m, you'll find **Playa Cacique**, a fairly large and unvisited beach that's a good choice if you want a little peace and quiet. On the northern side of the island, **Playa Ejecutiva** (Executive Beach) is another intimate escape – the large house on the bluff to the east is where the shah of Iran once lived. **Playa Galeón** (Galleon Beach), to the northeast, is another good spot for snorkeling, though the surf can really pick up here at times.

### Snorkeling & Diving

The snorkeling and diving around Contadora is fantastic. There are five coral fields near the island and within them you can expect to see schools of angelfish, damselfish, moray eels, parrot fish, puffer fish, butterfly fish, white-tip reef sharks and a whole lot more. Even in the waters off Playa Larga, the most popular of Isla Contadora's beaches, you can often spot sea turtles and manta rays.

The coral fields are found offshore from the following places: the eastern end of Playa de las Sucas, Punta Verde, near the

southern end of Playa Larga, both ends of Playa Galeón and the western end of Playa Ejecutiva. In addition, although there is little coral at the southwestern end of the island, there is a lot of marine life among the rocks in front and east of Playa Roca.

Snorkeling and diving trips can be arranged at the Hotel Punta Galeón Resort or the Hotel Contadora Resort (see opposite).

### Sailing

One of the best ways to appreciate the beauty and isolation of the Archipiélago de las Perlas is to explore them on a chartered sailboat. **Las Perlas Sailing** (☎ 250 4214), located just before the Hotel Contadora Resort, offers a number of trips ranging from one-hour circumnavigations of the island (US\$15 per person) to four-hour excursions (US\$40 per person) to nearby islets. If you have had previous experience with boats, Las Perlas will also rent one- and two-person sailboats as well as a whole range of motorboats. You can also arrange sportfishing excursions here, but an outing will set you back a few hundred dollars.

## Four-Wheeling

Contadora lends itself to getting around in a four-wheeler – in fact, it's the only way to get around the island aside from walking. You can rent them at the Hotel Punta Galeón Resort or the Hotel Contadora Resort (see below) for US\$20 per hour.

## SLEEPING

All of the accommodations listed below will meet you at the airport and provide transportation (via golf cart) to the resort or hotel.

**Casa del Sol** (☎ 250 4212; www.panama-isla-contadora.com; r from US\$55; 🏠 📶 🚗) Located in a pleasant residential neighborhood, this adorable inn is surrounded by a native tropical wooded area of towering palms and tropical flowers. Each of the five rooms on offer are individually decorated and have just the right amount of personal touch. The friendly owners have a wealth of knowledge about Contadora and will go out of their way to make sure you enjoy your time here.

**Villa Romántica** (☎ 250 4067; www.contadora-villa-romantica.com; d from US\$80) Overlooking the lovely beach of Playa Cacique, this small inn caters to anyone looking for a romantic getaway, though the vibe here is more 'Vegas Weekend' than 'Hawaiian Honeymoon.' Rooms decked out in odd murals come complete with waterbeds and are centered on a large open-air restaurant and hot tub. This is definitely one of the island's more unusual spots and it can be a lot of fun if you're in the right mindset.

**Hotel Contadora Resort** (☎ 264 1498; www.hotelcontadora.com; d from US\$160; 🏠 📶 🚗) This hulking monstrosity of French Colonial design has deteriorated over the years, but it still manages to fill up with unsuspecting guests. The landscaped grounds are beautiful – and the golf course, swimming pool and tennis courts are an attractive lure – but the rooms are poorly maintained.

**Hotel Punta Galeón Resort** (☎ 214 3719; www.puntagaleon.com; d from US\$165; 🏠 📶 🚗) The best hotel on the island has a dramatic location, perched on a cliff up above Playa Galeón. Several white-washed thatch buildings with modern interiors are connected by an attractive boardwalk that's perfect for slow struts and long gazes out to the sea. There's also no shortage of amenities on offer, including a swimming pool, a spa and a handful of bars and restaurants.

## EATING

Unfortunately, Isla Contadora has something of a reputation for terrible and overpriced food. The main problem is that everything needs to be shipped from the mainland, which leaves something to be desired in terms of price and freshness.

Even if you're not staying at the resort, **Punta Galeón** (mains US\$9-15) is probably your best bet for a decent meal. There is usually a fair selection of fresh seafood on offer and the attached bar has the best liquor selection on the island.

## 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.

## GETTING AROUND

Because the island is only about a square kilometer in size, there are no taxis. Hotels shuttle guests to and from the airport via golf cart, and there is no shortage of four-wheelers for rent.

## Isla San José

Home to the most exclusive resort in the Pearl Islands, Isla San José has a dark and overlooked history as a US chemical weapons testing ground. During a 2001 inspection, the entire island was placed under temporary quarantine following the recovery of unexploded ordinance, which led to a tiff between Panama and the US over who should pick up the cleaning bill.

History aside, most of the 45.3 sq km island is covered in a bank of rainforest that's networked by all-weather roads installed by the US military decades ago. With the exception of the roads, the only development on the island is a gorgeous resort at the cliff's edge.

**our pick Hacienda del Mar** (☎ 269 6634, 269 6613 in Panama City; www.haciendadelmar.net; cabin from US\$360) presently has the island's 37 tan-sand beaches, nine year-round rivers and seven accessible waterfalls all to itself. The resort is the creation of Aeroperlas President George Novey, who spared no expense in the construction of his resort. Each of the 12 stand-alone luxury cabins is overflowing with amenities and overlooks a picture-perfect sweep of beach and a lonely sea. Although most guests are



## PIRATES IN THE BAY

From the late 17th century, the Bahía de Panamá, home to the Pearl and Taboga island groups, was the scene of pirate exploits unsurpassed anywhere in the New World. After Henry Morgan's successful 1671 sacking of the city of Panama, other buccaneers were enticed to enter the area and to try their hands at plundering and pillaging Spanish territory and ships along the Pacific coast. Many are the stories of pirates using the Archipiélago de las Perlas as a hideout and springboard for attacks.

One of the era's most significant escapades occurred in May 1685 near Las Perlas when the largest number of trained seamen and fighters ever assembled under a buccaneer flag in the Pacific played cat-and-mouse with a Spanish armada of 18 ships. The pirate fleet consisted of 10 French and English vessels united under the English captain Edward Blake. Because his fleet was deficient in cannons but sufficient in muskets, it was Blake's policy to avoid long-range fighting. Despite his fleet's inferior numbers, he itched for a close encounter with the Spaniards.

When the two great forces crossed paths on May 28, Blake ordered two of his principal ships (one led by a Frenchman, the second by an Englishman) to initiate an attack on the Spanish fleet. Fearing the Spaniards' cannons, both men refused to obey. Blake's crew exchanged shots with the Spanish vice admiral, but Blake, seeing the imprudence of continuing battle with the odds stacked against him, ordered his slower ships to flee while his and another fast vessel delayed the conquistadores.

The Spaniards opened fire with their big guns, but the pirates managed some risky evasive maneuvers between rocky islets at the northern end of the archipelago, and their pursuers gave up the chase. Blake's ships anchored off the archipelago's Isla Pacheca that night, fully expecting the Spanish armada to engage them the next day. Instead, for reasons that mystify historians, the Spanish admiral ordered his fleet to return to Panamá. In the days that followed, dissent arose among the buccaneers, and the short-lived French-English pirate confederacy dissolved.

Today, little evidence of the pirates and Spaniards remains in the Archipiélago de las Perlas, with the exception of the distant descendants of the Spaniards and their slaves. Forests once felled to make ships have grown back. Storms, termites and wood worms have destroyed the old Spanish structures – only a church and a stone dam on Isla Saboga and wells on Islas Pacheca and Chapera testify to the Spaniards' presence.

Exploiting this buccaneer reputation, the popular US show *Survivor* brought attention to the islands in fall 2003 by setting their reality TV series here.

content simply soaking up their exclusive slice of paradise, there is an incredible list of tours to offer here and the incredibly professional staff can make all of the necessary arrangements in a blink of an eye.

Air transportation between Panama City and Isla San José is by private charter flight, and must be arranged through Hacienda del Mar in advance.

## Islas Casaya And Casayeta

Oysters are still harvested throughout the archipelago, and their pearls are just as legendary as they were when Balboa first arrived. Although pearls are sometimes offered for sale on other islands, the best places to shop for them are Isla Casaya and neighboring Isla Casayeta, about 12km to the south of Contadora.

When you're looking at pearls, you should know that pearl sellers tend to keep their goods in oil, so that they'll have a lovely

shine when presented – always dry the pearl that intrigues you before you buy. Prices are generally very reasonable, and there's always room for bargaining.

Accommodations on either Isla Contadora or San José can arrange transportation to the pearl shops on Islas Casaya and Casayeta.

## PACIFIC COAST

Every weekend, thousands of stressed-out Panama City residents hop into their cars or board buses and head west on the Interamericana – their destination: the beach.

### LA CHORRERA

pop 60,000

One of the first major towns you hit along the Interamericana is La Chorrera, which is famous throughout Panama for its *chich-*

*eme*, a nonalcoholic drink made from milk, mashed sweet corn, cinnamon and vanilla. Although this heat-quenching beverage isn't likely to make you cancel your beach-going plans, there are some attractive waterfalls near the town that are worth exploring if you can bear to be away from the coast for a little longer.

## Orientation

The Interamericana runs from east to west through La Chorrera, slowing to one sluggish lane in each direction as vehicles enter and exit the highway from side streets. However, most people bypass the city on the 28km-long tollway (US\$0.50).

## Information

There is no tourist office in La Chorrera, but you can obtain reliable information from the **Instituto Nacional de Cultura** (INAC; ☎ /fax 253 2306; Calle María Leticia; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat), 75m north of the Interamericana, at the east end of town (the turnoff is 100m before the Super 99 supermarket). The office, located in an art school, can tell you (in Spanish only) about the town's culture and festivals.

There's a small, unnamed internet café just beyond the Super 99. Most banks in La Chorrera are conveniently located on the Interamericana halfway through town. The **post office** (Calle San Francisco) is two blocks south of the Interamericana.

## Festivals & Events

La Chorrera is known for its beautiful folkloric dances, which can best be seen during its popular fair. **La Feria de La Chorrera** lasts for 10 days, and is held in late January or early February – dates vary from year to year. The festivities also include parades, a rodeo, the odd cockfight or two and drum dances, which have their origin in African music brought by slaves.

## Sights

La Chorrera has only one true tourist attraction, and sadly, it isn't what it once was. **El Chorro** is a series of cascades on the Río Caimito, the last of which takes a 30m plunge into a broad swimming hole. Years ago the Caimito was a raging river and its banks were swathed in pristine jungle. Today much of the river has been siphoned off upstream.

Still, if you're in need of a cool dip, a visit to El Chorro makes for a nice stop, especially if the air-conditioner isn't working in the car. Plus, it's likely that you will have the entire place to yourself, aside from a few local children.

To get here from the Interamericana, turn north onto Calle Larga at the Banistmo and drive 1km until you reach an intersection with a Super La Fortuna market on one side and a Mini Super Pacifico market on the other. Turn right just before the minimarket and then stay to the left of the road. The falls are at the end of this road, 1km from the intersection. You can also hire a taxi (US\$1.50 each way) or hail a bus (US\$0.35) with 'Calle Larga' scrawled on its windshield.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Hospedaje Lamas** (☎ 253 7887; Av de las Américas; d with fan/air-con US\$15/20; (P) (♿)) Near the west end of town, this old standby features a number of concrete box-style rooms, though the beds are somewhat firm and the showers are somewhat warm. However, it's one of the better places to stay in town and it has less 'hourly guests' than other nearby spots. The building itself is clearly marked, though anyone in town can point out its location to you.

**El Chichemito** (cnr Calles L Oeste & 26 Norte; snack US\$1-3) This is an excellent spot to try *chicheme*, the favored drink in La Chorrera, which goes down nicely with a *boyo chorrenano* (tamale filled with marinated chicken and spice). As you're driving west on the Interamericana, turn right onto Calle 26 Norte (just beyond the 'bbb' shoe store sign) and look for the restaurant, 30m further on the left.

## Getting There & Away

East- and west-bound buses stop at the Delta station, opposite the Pribanco bank and Matrox pharmacy on the Interamericana. Buses for Panama City (US\$1.25, one hour) leave every fifteen minutes – ask for the express bus or you'll be making frequent stops.

## LAGO GATÚN

Adventurous souls might want to venture to Lago Gatún (Gatún Lake), which is easily reached from La Chorrera. With rain-forested shores and thousands of tiny islets, Lake Gatún is a gorgeous spot that sees few tourists aside from those on canal transits. However, there's usually a local or two at the

lake's edge with a spare boat, and it shouldn't cost you more than a US\$25 to go fishing for a few hours.

To get to the lake by car, turn off the Interamericana onto the unmarked road beside the Caja de Ahorros, which is 100m west of the Banco del Istmo and turnoff for El Chorro. Proceed north 800m to the Plaza de 28 de Noviembre, on the right side of the road. Just beyond the plaza, on a corner on the left side of the street, you'll see a butcher shop called Carnicería Victor Loo. Turn left onto the street in front of Victor Loo. (The street is unmarked and no one seems to know the name, hence all these landmarks used as pointers instead of street names. However, most people know this as the road to Mendoza, or 'calle a Mendoza'.)

To reach Lago Gatún from here, make your way to Mendoza, then continue on the road for another 5km until you reach the lake's edge. There's a pier there, which is your best option for hiring a boatman. When you've returned with your catch, walk from the pier up the road a little way to the Club Campetre Arco Iris, where there are some *bohíos* (thatched-roof huts). There, for a few dollars, someone will gladly cook your fish for you.

If you're relying on public transportation, back at the Caja de Ahorros store, catch a bus with 'Mendoza' or 'Mendoza/Represa' on the windshield and tell the driver that you want to go to Lago Gatún (US\$1.50).

## CAPIRA

Fifty-seven kilometers from Panama City is the nondescript town of Capira, which is home to the famous cheese shop **Quesos Chela** (Interamericana; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat), an institution that few Panamanian drivers can pass without stopping. It's a plain shop that usually has piping hot fresh cheese (string, mozzarella, farmers, ricotta) and homemade meat empanadas for sale. The cheese shop is right next door to a Texaco and a Mr. Precio supermarket on the right-hand side of the road if you're heading west.

## PARQUE NACIONAL Y RESERVA BIOLÓGICA ALTOS DE CAMPANA

This obscure and relatively unknown national park is a favorite of both local and international bird-watchers. Common sightings include the scale-crested pygmy-tyrant,

orange-bellied trogon and chestnut-capped brush-finch, though rare avians including the slaty antwren, the white-tipped sicklebill and the purplish-backed quail-dove are occasionally spotted here.

This park requires at least several hours to be appreciated because it's best viewed on foot. Starting at the road's end, beyond the microwave tower, trails will take you into some lovely forest, which is on the much greener Atlantic slope. The difference between the deforested Pacific and the lush Atlantic slopes is nowhere more evident.

The easy-to-miss turnoff for this national park is 25km southwest of La Chorrera, on the western side of the Interamericana. More specifically, it's at the top of a steep and windy section of the Interamericana known locally as the Loma Capana. From the turnoff, a rocky road winds 4.6km to an **ANAM ranger station** (park fee US\$1, per night camping US\$5) at the entrance to the park, which is located on Cerro Campana; pay fees here. Camping is allowed but there are no facilities.

No buses go up the road leading to the park. You pretty much need to have your own vehicle, rely on the services of a guide company or do some rather serious hiking to get in. However, getting to the turnoff for the park is easy. Virtually any bus using that section of the Interamericana will drop you there – there's a bus stop beside the turnoff. Getting picked up isn't a problem either as there are many buses that pass by the turnoff during daylight hours.

## PUNTA CHAME

pop 390

Just before the Interamericana reaches the coastline, there is a turnoff immediately east of Bejuco, which leads to the tiny sliver of a peninsula known as Punta Chame. The road out to the sea winds past rolling hills before opening up to flat land that consists mainly of shrimp farms and mangroves. Few people live along this 25km road because the brackish water makes farming near impossible, though the environment here is unique to this region, and well worth the diversion.

Punta Chame is a one-road town on a long, 300m-wide peninsula, with residences and vacant lots lining both sides. Although the beaches at Playa Chame on the east coast of the peninsula have lovely tan sand and a wilderness backdrop, they are virtually abandoned due to difficult access. The area also has

a notorious reputation for stingrays, so it's best to swim with caution and shuffle your feet while walking out.

To the north of the peninsula is a muddy bay, which is a popular spot for windsurfers. Since equipment rental is not available here, you will need to bring all your own gear. However, the location couldn't be more scenic, and the lack of crowds means that you can pretty much have the bay to yourself.

As you enter Punta Chame, on the right side of the street you'll see a sign for **Fundación Amigos de las Tortugas Marinas** (☎ 227 5091 in Panama City; cabin per person US\$30; **P**). The Friends of Sea Turtles Foundation was founded by brother and sister Ramón and Vilma Morales in 1998 to reverse the declining numbers of sea turtles returning to nest on Punta Chame—area beaches every year. Here, there are several hatcheries, where a turtle hunter turned savior hatches sea turtles and releases them when they are of a good size. To help finance their project, the Moraleses built several basic cabins alongside the hatcheries, which are available if you want to bed down for a night. Each cabin has a private cold-water shower and a decent bed alongside a smattering of rustic furniture. Also, if you speak a little Spanish, you'll almost certainly enjoy the company of the Moraleses and their friendly staff.

To get to Punta Chame from the Interamericana, catch a bus at the stop at the Punta Chame turnoff at Bejuco – a bus to the point (US\$1) leaves hourly from 6:30am to 5:30pm daily.

## BEACHES

Starting just south of the town of Chame and continuing along the Pacific coast for the next 40km are dozens of beautiful beaches that are popular weekend retreats for Panama City residents. About half of these beaches are in Panamá Province, while the remainder are in Coclé Province (p129).

All of the beaches listed in this section can be reached by local bus or taxi at the turnoffs from the Interamericana.

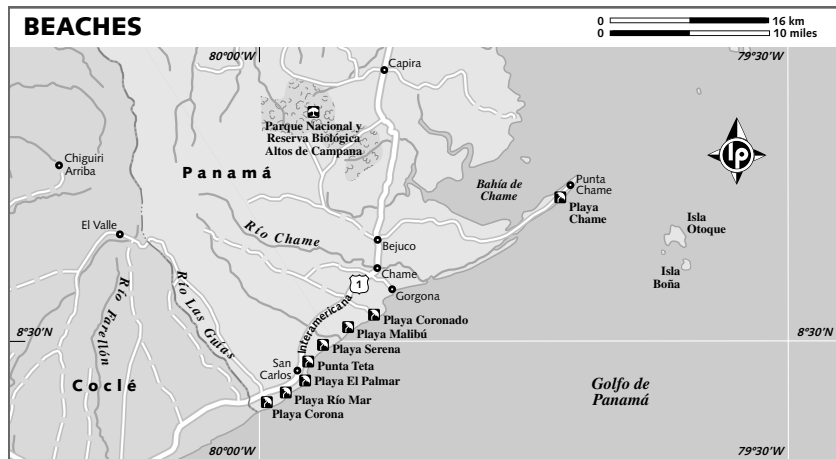
### Gorgona

Six kilometers southwest of the turnoff for Punta Chame is the turnoff for Gorgona, a small oceanside community that fronts a curving beach of mostly black sand. Bring your sandals – it gets very hot.

Located near the beach is the **Cabañas de Playa Gorgona** (☎ 269 2433; cabin weekdays/weekends from US\$25/35; **P** ♻️ 🚰), which is popular with vacationing Panamanian families. It's a fairly large complex of over 40 concrete cabins, each of which has a kitchenette and a private hot-water bathroom. However, the best part of staying here is lounging on the beach property, which is open to all guests and has two pools and a clutch of thatched-roof *palapas*.

### Playa Coronado

Four kilometers southwest of the turnoff for Gorgona is the turnoff for Playa Coronado, an affluent beachside community that is a haven for water-sports lovers. The salt-and-pepper beach here is also one of the most



## SURFING IN PANAMÁ PROVINCE

The beaches to the southwest of the capital are a popular destination for Panamanian surfers, especially since they're easy to access and offer relatively consistent surf year-round. The following list will help you get started, though don't be afraid to ask local surfers to let you in on their hidden spots. The following beaches and other top spots for surfing are mapped on pp68–9.

- **Playa Malibu** Near Gorgona. Sand-bottom right and left break. Best during medium to low tide. Consistent, good tubes and long rides when there is a strong swell.
- **Playa Serena** In Coronado, past the security gate. Right point break with good tubes. Long rides when there is a strong swell.
- **Frente de Teta** Rock/sand bottom break at the mouth of the Río Teta. Long lefts at low tide, and rights and lefts at medium to high tide.
- **Punta Teta** Point break over rocks to the south of the Río Teta mouth. Lefts and rights with good tubes, especially at medium tide going up.
- **Rinconsito** Rock-bottom point south of Punta Teta with a long, right break on a good swell. Named after California's famous Rincón break.
- **Frente Palmar** South of San Carlos. Beach break, partial rock bottom that is popular with beginners.
- **Punta El Palmar** South of San Carlos. Rock-bottom point break. Right peeling waves at medium to high tide when there is a good swell.
- **Hawaiisito** South of San Carlos. Rock-bottom point break. Lefts at full high tide. Closes out if there is a strong swell.
- **Frente Río Mar** Somewhat rocky beach break in front of Río Mar. Rights and lefts at medium to high tide.
- **Punta Río Mar** South of the Río Mar, near jutting rocks. Walk and paddle at low tide. Rights best. Breaks only at low tide.

developed strips of sand along the coast and is extremely popular with affluent Panama City denizens.

If you're travelling on a tight budget, a popular destination for shoestringers is the **SeaSolBeach Coronado Guest House** (☎ 6689 1262; www.seasolbeach.com; dm US\$10–12, s/d US\$25/30; 📞 📺 📺), which is located on a grassy lot in the center of town. The staff at the SeaSolBeach also work as surfing, kite surfing and windsurfing instructors, so it's fairly easy to arrange lessons or outings and the price is more affordable than you'd imagine. The building itself is well-maintained and has a laid-back atmosphere. It makes for a good place to wind down after a long day of having fun in the sun.

If you're looking to live it up in unchecked luxury, then look no further than the **Coronado Hotel & Resort** (☎ 240 4444; www.coronadoreort.com; d from US\$180; 📞 📺 📺 📺), the granddaddy of Pacific Coast resorts. With more than 100 amenity-laden rooms, a top-notch beachside golf course, swimming pools, tennis courts,

an equestrian center, a casino, a dayspa, a gym, a marina and a whole slew of bars and restaurants, you may not be able to find the time to actually visit the beach. Even if you're not staying here, the town's nightlife revolves around the hotel, so dress smart and stop by the attached nightclub.

Beside the turnoff for Playa Coronado is **Restaurante Los Che's** (Interamericana; mains US\$6–12), a long-standing local favorite that is famous for its rotisserie-cooked meats. This is also a great place to sample the local seafood, especially if you stop by the coast during lobster season.

### Playa El Palmar

Ten kilometers west of the Playa Coronado is the turnoff for this lovely white-sand beach, which is located in the village of San Carlos. Although much less developed than Coronado, El Palmar is still popular with weekendening families from the capital, but the atmosphere is much more low-key.

**Hotel Palmar Surf Beach & School** (☎ 240 8004; camping per person US\$5, r from US\$20; 📍 🚻) is an excellent choice for shoestringers who want to surf or learn the ropes. Rooms are extremely basic and minimally furnished, but all you really need after a long day out on the surf is a place to crash. Surf lessons here are US\$25 per hour and the friendly owner can also arrange surf trips throughout Panama. And don't worry about not having a board – they're available here for rental.

## THE ROAD TO THE DARIÉN

East of the capital, the Interamericana passes through several small towns before arriving at Yaviza, the end of the road – literally.

### CHEPO

pop 14,000

Beyond the urban sprawl east of Panama City, the landscape becomes increasingly barren on both sides of the Interamericana. Gas stations and accommodations become somewhat scarce, and the views are monotonous to say the least.

As little as 40 years ago, the highway ended at Chepo and a sign announced the start of the Darién Gap – from Chepo to the Colombian border there was only roadless jungle. Today Chepo is one of several ranching towns along the Interamericana and is notable only for its abundance of gas stations and supermarkets.

Buses leave the Terminal Nacional de Transporte, in the Albrook district of Panama City, for Chepo (US\$1.50, 1½ hours) almost hourly from 6:30am to 5pm.

### NUSAGANDI

Just before you reach the town of El Llano, you'll see the turnoff for Nusagandi, a small town inside the **Área Silvestre de Narganá** wildlife reserve. This reserve was created by the Kuna, primarily to try to keep squatters from settling on their land. However, it consists mostly of species-rich primary forest and was a perfect choice for conservation.

The road into the reserve is pretty rough, and you'll need a 4WD vehicle with a strong engine and plenty of clearance. However, it's worth the trip in, especially if you're a birder –

this is the best place in Panama to spot the speckled antshrike, the black-headed ant thrush and the black-crowned antpitta.

At the 17km mark, there's the remote **Burbayar Lodge** (☎ 264 1679; www.burbayar.com; 1st/additional night per person with 3 meals & tours US\$115/75; 📍), an ecologically minded, low-impact lodge accommodating up to 14 guests in six simple cabins. A tiny generator provides some electricity, but at night most of the light comes from gas lanterns or candles, lending an old-time feel to the setting. There's primary forest surrounding the lodge, complete with waterfalls, caverns and a trail all the way to the coast in Kuna Yala (27km, six to eight hours). Booking in advance is essential. If you don't have your own car, note that the price includes round trip transportation from Panama City.

### IPETÍ

pop 600

Forty-five kilometers east of Lago Bayano, is the town (or towns) of Ipetí-Emberá, Ipetí Kuna and Ipetí Colono – each is occupied by a different cultural group (Kuna, Emberá and Latino). With the help of a local Peace Corps worker, Ipetí has started a community-based tourism project that presents a unique opportunity to learn more about rural Panamanian life.

From the Interamericana, be on the lookout for a faded green sign that says '*bienvenidos*' (welcome) – this signals that you have entered the town of Ipetí. From here, turn right at the sign and follow the dirt road for 2km until you reach your first stop, the village of Ipetí-Emberá.

Overlooking the Río Ipetí, this small Emberá village consists of several dozen wood-sided, thatched-roof houses including a Casa Cultural (an open-sided building used as a meeting space), a Casa Medicinal (where healing herbs are grown) and a network of trails leading into the surrounding rainforest. From the village, it's a mere 45-minute walk upstream along the Río Ipetí to a series of natural swimming pools that are fed by small waterfalls. You can also hire one of the villagers to take you up here by dugout canoe, which presents a unique opportunity to wildlife-watch at an unhurried pace. If you want to stay the night, you can either pitch a tent for a few dollars, or arrange a homestay for US\$9 per night. If you don't have your own food, you can purchase a simple meal in town for around US\$2. There's also a small handicrafts

## THE END OF THE ROAD

Since the first Interamericana Congress met in Buenos Aires in 1925, the nations of the Americas have devoted considerable money and engineering skills to the completion of a great hemispheric road system. Today, only 150km of unfinished business prevents that system from being realized – the Darién Gap. This defiant stretch of wilderness, which separates the continents of North and South America, is the sole barrier in the way of an otherwise unbroken 30,600km highway winding from Circle, Alaska, to Puerto Montt, Chile.

Until recently, the governments of Panama and Colombia stood poised to construct this missing bit of pavement. However, with the civil war raging in Colombia, and the threat of foot-and-mouth disease spreading to North America, it appears that the hemispheric highway won't be finished any time soon. Until it's completion, the highway on the Panamanian side of the divide will continue to end at the sweaty, ramshackle town of Yaviza in Darién Province. Yaviza and Panama City are separated by 266km of bad road and endless cattle country. Efforts to pave the road all the way to Yaviza began in 2001, though it will take several more years to complete the project.

The drive from the capital to Yaviza currently takes about six hours during the dry season, but will take longer during the rainy season. For information on Yaviza and the Darién Gap see p280.

store selling Emberá woven baskets and there is usually someone around that can give you a traditional *jagua* body painting for a few dollars. This hennalike plant extract leaves a temporary tattoo for about a week.

Directly across the highway from the turnoff to Ipetí Emberá is Ipetí Kuna. This is a very traditional Kuna village – many of the residents don't speak Spanish, let alone English – and it's not set up for tourism in the same manner as Ipetí Emberá. However, **Igua** (☎ 595 9500), one of the Kuna chiefs here, leads boat tours to nearby Lago Bayano and can take hikes into the rainforest, though it helps to have a decent command of Spanish.

If you continue up the road 1km you'll reach Ipetí Colono, which is just a few buildings scattered off the highway. Some fine horsemen hail from this village and anyone looking for some impromptu adventure should stop in and inquire about hiring horses – you can reach virgin forest on horseback in under two hours.

## TORTÍ

pop 8500

Twelve kilometers past Ipetí is the village of Tortí, which is a useful place to stop for the night if you don't think you can make it as far as Yaviza. The **Hospedaje Tortí** (s/d with fan US\$6/8, s/d with air-con US\$10/12; **P** **☎**) isn't the Ritz, but it has a number of relatively clean cinderblock rooms, each with a decent mattress and clean towels. The shared facilities are also passable and although there isn't hot water, you're not likely to miss it in these parts.

Also in town are three public phones, a health clinic, police and gas stations and several restaurants – these so-called 'conveniences' tend to trail off south of here, so it's best to enjoy them now. If you're looking for a hot meal, **Avicar** (dishes US\$2-4) serves traditional country-style Panamanian dishes and you're likely to share a table with some pretty interesting characters in these parts. A grocery store of the same name adjoins the restaurant and it's good place to stock up on supplies before pressing on.

Up the road, you'll reach a leather-goods store named **Echao Palante** (Going Forward; ☎ 10am-8pm). Inside, hard at work, you'll find Pedro Guerra, who has handmade more than 5000 saddles (it takes him a day to make one) and countless belts and sandals over the years.

## HIGUERONAL

pop 200

Ten kilometers past Tortí is the village of Higueronal, which is likely the first military checkpoint you'll pass on your way to the Darién. If you're a foreigner, you must enter the building and show your passport to the soldiers, who will note your name and nationality in their ledger before returning your passport. This is done so that if something happens to you, the checkpoint will be able to inform the search party that you passed by here.

If you don't like military checkpoints, either turn around or get used to it – they increase in frequency south of Yaviza.

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