

Snapshot:

PANAMA CITY

Central America's
Capital of Cool

By Janine Clements

Celebrating its 500th anniversary in 2019, Panama City is a thriving hot spot where cultures converge, and old and new worlds collide.

Although popular with expats and snowbirds, Panama has remained largely off-the-beaten tourist path until recently. With a heady mix of fascinating history and exciting modernity, as well as its proximity to natural wonders, this alluring and cosmopolitan capital has much to explore.



CASCO VIEJO
@ECCO/CIRCUITOS

THE CITY'S HIPPEST NEIGHBOURHOOD:

CASCO VIEJO

In the heart of the city is its trendy and walkable historic district, a UNESCO World Heritage site. The narrow, cobbled streets and leafy plazas are lined with colourful Spanish colonial buildings, many of which have been transformed into art galleries, boutiques, restaurants and rooftop bars.

Take time to visit the Well Art Gallery, the Convent of Santo Domingo ruins and San José Church's golden altar, which according to legend was salvaged when the original city, Panama Viejo, was attacked by pirate Henry Morgan. Sample a cup of Geisha, the crème de la crème of coffee at Café Unido, or stop at one of the many dessert spots, such as PalettAmerica, for gourmet ice pops or the Tropical Chocolate Café.



TACOS LA NETA

GASTRONOMIC EPICENTRE:

SAN FRANCISCO

San Francisco is a popular local enclave with a laidback vibe and an array of enticing dining options ranging from food trucks to farm-to-table restaurants that reflect its ethnic diversity. For creative Panamanian cuisine with a modern twist head to Intimo. Try Tacos La Neta, a Mexican-style taqueria, or Amano, a cool craft cocktail bar. The neighbourhood is also home to vintage boutiques and the Parque Omar, the city's equivalent to New York's Central Park, which hosts free music events December through April.



STREET STALL WITH HANDMADE COFFEES FROM PANAMA CITY

THE AMADOR CAUSEWAY

This breezy six-kilometre boardwalk, named after Panama's first president, Manuel Amador Guerrero, is the best spot for viewing the gleaming skyline and the gargantuan container ships waiting to enter the Panama Canal. You'll find some of the city's top attractions including the iconic Biomuseo, a biodiversity museum designed by Canadian-born Frank Gehry, and the Smithsonian's Punta Culebra Nature Center. The Mercado de Mariscos is the place to go for ceviche and the Centro Artesanal de Panama Viejo is good for indigenous arts and crafts. It is easy to rent bikes or pedal carts along the way.



PANAMA CANAL

PANAMA CANAL LOCKS IN ACTION: MIRAFLORES

VISITOR CENTER

Panama is most famous for its legendary 82-kilometre canal, the engineering marvel that connects the Atlantic and Pacific oceans and took the lives of around 30,000 workers during its construction. The Miraflores Visitor Center has three decks offering prime viewing of its locks, as well as an interactive museum and IMAX theatre. For a more immersive experience, book a partial transit tour of the canal.



YOUNG SLOTH

WILDLIFE KAYAKING SAFARI:

GATUN LAKE

The tiny isthmus that links Central and South America is one of the most biodiverse regions in the world. A 30-minute drive from the city is Gatun Lake, a man-made lake that is part of the Panama Canal system. Take a guided kayak (or boat) trip past the huge ships into its tranquil inlets, where you can get up close to some of its rainforest inhabitants including three-toed sloths, six species of monkeys including Geoffroy's tamarin, birds of prey and crocodiles.

