



PANAMA'S

CAPTIVATING COASTAL CAPITAL

Panama City offers history, nature and gastronomic delights, plus a modern wonder of the world, says Janine Clements

Often overlooked as a vacation destination, Panama is making its mark on the map. Visitors are captivated by its spirit and diverse blend of cultures and traditions. Panama City is a place of contrasts, with a mesmerizing skyline of modern skyscrapers towering over the pastel-colored colonial buildings of its chic historic quarter and the glistening Bay of Panama.

Founded by the Spanish, the colorful capital is going through an exciting period of change and its vibrant energy is palpable. New hotels, as well as restaurants, bars and boutiques are springing up all over, many of them with an artisanal focus and with young Panamanians at the helm.

Sitting at the entrance of the Panama Canal, hailed as one of the greatest accomplishments of the 20th century, Panama City is a modern metropolis and it's easy to become immersed in its enthralling history, lush rainforests, lively neighborhoods, coastal promenades and parks. The city's biggest secret is the opportunities it provides to encounter some of Panama's incredible wildlife within their natural habitat.

THE WILD SIDE

The capital offers easy access to much of Panama's unique flora and fauna. In the heart of the city, close to the old quarter is Cerro Ancon, a 645ft hill. The leisurely climb through the rainforest to its summit, the city's highest point, takes around 40 minutes and provides the best views across the city. It's best to go early morning to beat the heat: aim to get to the top in time for sunrise. As well as Panamanian guinea pigs, monkeys and toucans, early risers may get lucky and spot a sleepy sloth. There's also a Panamanian flag the size of a basketball court flying high above the city as a symbol of national sovereignty.

Just outside downtown Panama City is the Parque Metropolitano, a lush, 106sq-mile urban jungle home to over 500 plant and animal species. This peaceful and popular hiking spot feels remote despite being within the city limits and provides welcome relief from the frenetic pace of the city. There are a number of walking trails and some wildlife, including adorable Geoffroy's tamarin monkeys. Take the Camino de Mono Titi or the



Panama City
Left: Keel-billed toucan
in the Panama jungle

IMAGES: BETTY



// PANAMA CITY



Clockwise from top left:
Embera girl in Darien
National Park; traditional
Panama hats; ruins of
Panama Viejo

IMAGES: AWL IMAGES; BETTY

tougher Sendero La Cieneguita to the top to be rewarded with views of the city and canal. For an added thrill, book a ride on the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute's 115ft-high canopy crane.

To gain an in-depth understanding of Panama's ecological riches, visit the Biodiversity Museum, which has eight galleries dedicated to the origin of the Panamanian isthmus and its enormous impact on the planet's biodiversity. It's also worth going to Punta Culebra Nature Center, part of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, which features an array of fascinating open-air marine and amphibian exhibits. These are found along the Calzada de Amador, a scenic promenade and popular biking route that links mainland Panama to four small islands.

HISTORY AND HERITAGE

The city, which turned 500 in August this year, offers endless opportunities to explore its heritage and culture.

Founded in 1519 by a Spanish conquistador, the original city, Panama Viejo, became an important trading post for gold and silver. It was abandoned in the mid-17th century after being attacked by pirates. Now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, its expansive crumbling ruins are well preserved and there's a museum and visitor center with a handicrafts market.

A walled city, now known as Casco Viejo (the old quarter), was built two years after the founding of the city, on a small peninsula near the foot of Cerro Ancon. Although a no-go area ruled by gangs until two decades ago, the neighborhood has been through a period of rapid gentrification since being declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997. Built in a grid and only four avenues wide, this chic neighborhood is easy to navigate. Within it is an eclectic

mix of Spanish, French and early American architecture, bougainvillea-filled plazas, historic landmarks and brick streets with eye-catching murals designed by local street artists. In its center is Plaza Independencia, and the Museo del Canal Interoceanico, which delves into the history of the canal, and also an indigenous craft market at weekends. A couple of blocks away is the Iglesia de San Felipe, which houses the legendary Cristo Negro de Portobelo (the Black Christ). Cool off from the heat with a *raspao* (similar to a snow cone) from a street cart. For those who want to go completely off the beaten path, it's worth seeking out a local guide, who can take visitors

into neighboring community, El Chorillo, and show Panama City's grittier side, as well as giving a fascinating insight into local life.

The Panama Canal stretches from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans. Now over 100 years old and one of the so-called 'new seven wonders of the world', it's a major route

for international maritime trade, accommodating every type of vessel, from small private yachts to colossal supertankers. Around one-and-a-half hours from the city, in Colon, is the Agua Clara Visitor Center, where it's possible to watch the world's biggest container ships journey through the canal's newest locks.

CULINARY CULTURE

Panama's cuisine comes from a fusion of cultures, with influences from around the region as well as Europe, the Caribbean and the USA. The city's gastronomic scene has exploded in recent years, thanks to young chefs reinventing Panamanian dishes and getting creative with local flavors and ingredients, as well as an influx of talent from abroad. Little pockets around the city are now synonymous with good food.

// THE CITY'S GASTRONOMIC SCENE HAS EXPLODED IN RECENT YEARS

BEST OF THE REST



Cinta Costera

This palm-lined waterfront promenade that stretches along the coastline is home to parks and restaurants as well as biking and running paths. There are stunning views of the city and the Bay of Panama, as well as the container ships lining up to enter the Panama Canal. Carnival, Panama's biggest national celebration and Pride are also held here.

Pearl Islands

The Pearl Islands off Panama's Pacific coast are an archipelago of over 200 islands where it's possible to see humpback whales as they migrate from the southern hemisphere in their droves. The best viewing time is during breeding season, from July to mid-October.

MAC Panama

This contemporary art museum showcases the work of up-and-coming and established local and Latin American artists, including Brooke Alfaro. It is designed as a meeting point for the community and is spread across two floors with various permanent as well as traveling exhibitions.

Oro Moreno

Oro Moreno is a little café on a side street in Casco Viejo and is a charming place to grab a coffee and buy handmade Panamanian chocolates, which come in an array of exquisite designs and unusual flavors. They run hour-long tasting sessions, sampling eight types of chocolate made in Panama.

// ESSENTIALS



When to go: The most popular time to visit Panama City is in the dry season, between December and April. It's cheaper to travel in the wet season, known as the green season, which is still pleasant, although October and November have the most rainfall.

Currency: USD and Panamanian Balboa \$1=1 Balboa

Language: Spanish is the official language, but an increasing number of people speak English.

Getting around: It's easy to get around the city. Uber is popular and inexpensive. The Metro subway and Metro Bus are cheap public transport options.

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Panamanian-style ceviche

On a quiet street in Casco Viejo is Fonda Lo Que Hay where visitors can enjoy a taste of Panamanian home cooking. It's based on a typical open-air restaurant found in local neighborhoods, with dishes such as costillas (ribs) and tajadas (sweet, fried plantains.) Owned by Jose Carles, one of Panama's top chefs, the menu changes every day and is only in Spanish. He also owns Donde Jose, a 16-seater fine dining restaurant that showcases contemporary Panamanian cuisine. It's almost impossible to get a table without booking well in advance.

To experience some of Panama City's most inventive cooking, head to hipster suburb San Francisco. Some of the city's best food trucks such as Anti Burger and Esa Flaca Rica are based here, as well as upscale restaurants such as Segundo Muelle, which does great seafood, and a number of microbreweries including La Rana Dorada Brewery and Istmo Brew Pub. La Casa de las Frutas, Jugos y Helados, a drive-through

juice and ice-cream stand, is fun for a post-dinner treat.

One of Panama's most popular national dishes is ceviche, made with fresh raw fish marinated in citrus juice with chili peppers for spice. Panamanian ceviche uses cubes of fresh fish and is served in pastry shells, while Peruvian ceviche uses strips of fish that have been marinated for longer. A portion costs around \$2 from the Mercado de Mariscos, the city's waterfront fish market, which is well worth a visit.

Panama has made a name for itself around the world for coffee; its highlands blessed with the ideal climate for growing beans. It famously produces Geish, one of the most expensive coffees in the world, which sells for around \$9 a cup in the city, but much more outside Panama. There are plenty of artisanal coffee houses where visitors can sample it, including Bajareque in Casco Viejo, which is owned by the Lamastus family, who have their own coffee plantations. □

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