



THE ROUGH GUIDE to Panama

EXPERT ADVICE • FULL COVERAGE • EASY TO USE



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HOW TO USE THIS ROUGH GUIDE EBOOK

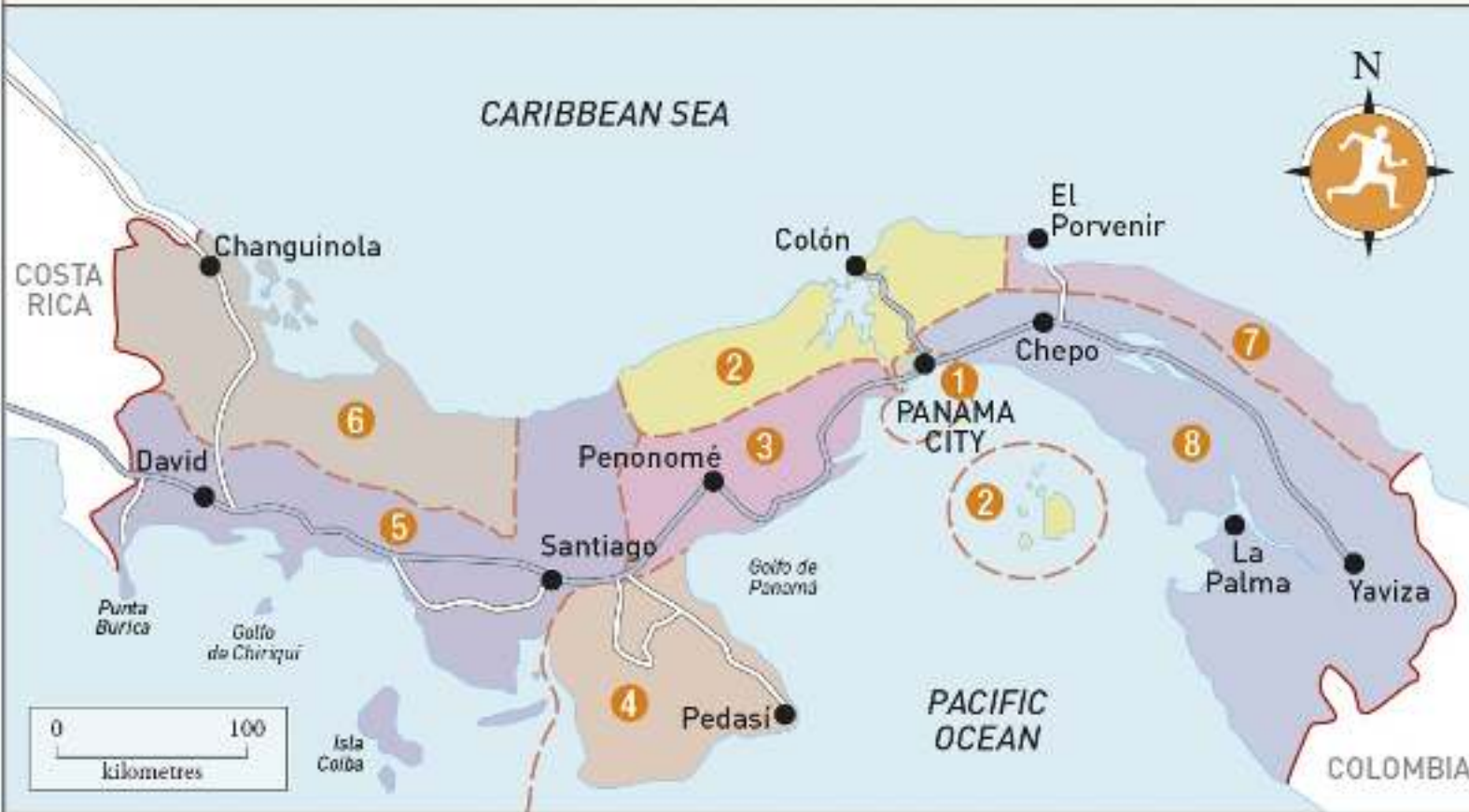
This **Rough Guide to Panama** is one of a new generation of informative and easy-to-use travel-guide ebooks that guarantees you make the most of your trip. An essential tool for pre-trip planning, it also makes a great travel companion when you're on the road.

From the [table of contents](#), you can click straight to the main sections of the ebook. Start with the [Introduction](#), which gives you a flavour of Panama, with details of what to see, what not to miss, itineraries and more – everything you need to get started. This is followed by [Basics](#), with pre-departure tips and practical information, such as flight details and health advice. [The guide](#) chapters offer comprehensive and in-depth coverage of the whole of Panama, including area highlights and full-colour maps featuring all the sights and listings. Finally, [Contexts](#) fills you in on history, wildlife and environmental issues, and includes a handy [Language](#) section.

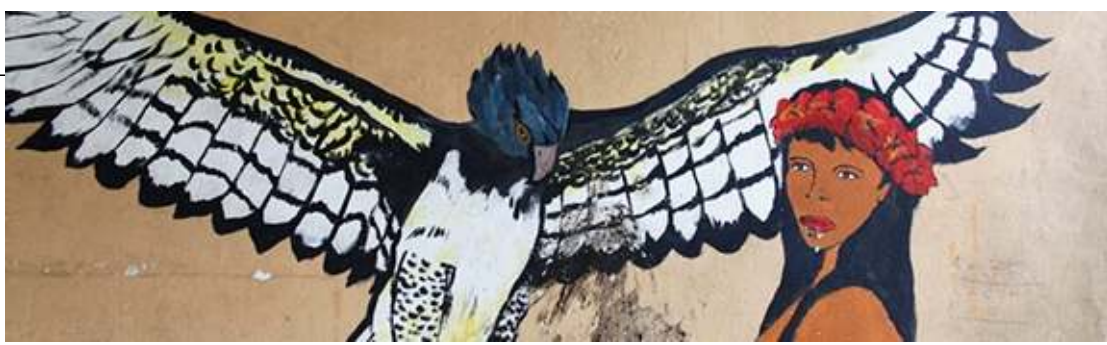
Detailed area maps feature in the guide chapters and are also listed in the [dedicated map section](#), accessible from the table of contents. Depending on your hardware, you can double-tap on the maps to see larger-scale versions, or select different scales. There are also thumbnails below more detailed maps – in these cases, you can opt to “zoom left/top” or “zoom right/bottom” or view the full map. The screen-lock function on your device is recommended when viewing enlarged maps. Make sure you have the latest software updates, too.

Throughout the guide, we've flagged up our favourite places - a perfectly sited hotel, an atmospheric café, a special restaurant - with the “author pick” icon ★. You can select your own favourites and create a personalized itinerary by bookmarking the sights, venues and activities that are of interest, giving you the quickest possible access to everything you'll need for your time away.

Panama chapters



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INTRODUCTION TO PANAMA

Encompassing cloud-forested highlands, glorious palm-fringed islands, vibrant indigenous cultures and Central America's most ebullient capital city, Panama offers a surprisingly varied landscape for such a small country. This slender, serpentine nation has a unique history: from the loot-laden mule trains of the Spanish Camino Real to the scything open of the rainforest by the world's most famous canal, Panama has long proved valuable as a shortcut between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Constituting a biological crossroads, too, the isthmus boasts an even greater density of plant biodiversity than Amazonia.

Panama's compact size means the vast majority of its sights are easily accessible. From the comfort of your hotel in the capital, you can head out in the morning to tramp in the footsteps of the conquistadors through spectacular, primate-packed rainforest, yet be swinging your hips to a salsa beat or dining on damask by candlelight in downtown Panama City the same evening. The ancient and modern, artificial and natural are irresistibly juxtaposed: vast computerized Panamax container ships transiting the canal slice through primeval rainforests teeming with fluorescent frogs and elusive wild cats, only half an hour by dugout from where Emberá villagers practise subsistence agriculture. Visiting the country's fringes and little-visited interior, you can explore archipelagos and untracked jungle, basing yourself in small towns, friendly villages and remote eco-lodges, and from Volcán Barú – Panama's highest peak – you can witness the unique and breathtaking sight of the sun rising over both Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

Despite these attractions, Panama has often been overlooked as a tourist destination, overshadowed by its neighbour Costa Rica, and mistakenly viewed at times as a US annexe – thanks to the US occupation of the former Canal Zone and the dollarized economy. Add to that Panama's not entirely undeserved reputation for money-laundering and the current trend of attracting North American retirees, and it's no wonder that tourists have initially been slow to appreciate the country's multifaceted identity and outstanding natural beauty.

Yet the US is only one of many **cultural influences** – which derive from Spain and other parts of Europe, West Africa, the West Indies, China, India and the Middle East – fused with the fascinating heritage of the eight indigenous peoples that survived the Spanish conquest.

Panama's complexities and contradictions confront you at every turn, which can intrigue and frustrate in equal measure. The Panamanian government has actively started to promote **tourism**, yet there's often very little information on offer. The colourful traditional attire of Panama's indigenous populations is unashamedly used as photo fodder, but the people themselves are frequently ignored by their government. Many inhabit the tropical rainforests of Panama's national parks, which remain desperately underfunded and are threatened by government-sanctioned projects.

Indeed, it's hard to visit Panama and not be both amazed and perturbed by the pace of change in this small, young nation, as skyscrapers increasingly fill Panama City's skyline and motorways push deeper into the Darién. The world's grandest canal celebrated its centenary in 2014, to much media

hype, and the country increasingly features on backpackers' itineraries. Outside the big attractions, though, it's easy enough to get off the beaten track. Make the effort to seek out the country's lesser-visited corners – far-flung island or deepest jungle – and you'll discover a remarkably authentic slice of undeveloped Latin America.



ZOOM LEFT



ZOOM RIGHT

FACT FILE

- Though Panama has the highest growth rate in Latin America at around 8.5 percent, over a quarter of the population lives below the poverty line – the majority from indigenous communities.
- Panama hosts almost 1000 species of bird, including the odd-looking three-wattled bellbird, resident in the Chiriquí Highlands, whose extraordinary “bonk” call can be heard almost a kilometre away.
- Panama City’s new 14km Metro line cost an estimated \$1.88 billion dollars to build, with likely annual maintenance costs of around \$56 million – the country’s second most expensive project after the Panama Canal expansion.
- The Panama Canal took over 60 million pounds of dynamite to blast through the rock; the ships laden with the explosives each contained 20,000 boxes that all had to be unloaded by hand.
- The Guna, Panama’s most high-profile indigenous people, have one of the highest rates of albinism in the world with one in 150 being born a “moon child”.



COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE, PANAMA CITY

Where to go

The vast majority of visitors fly in to cosmopolitan **Panama City**, where countless brash skyscrapers stare across the bay at the rocky peninsula of **Casco Viejo**, the city’s rapidly transforming colonial centre, whose elegantly restored mansions, palaces and leafy plazas demand at least a day’s leisurely exploration. If you’re planning a short visit, it’s easy to base yourself in the city and make daily forays to the Spanish **colonial forts** along the Caribbean coast near Portobelo, the monumental **Panama Canal** and the crumbling port city of **Colón**. Should the frenetic energy and interminable traffic din of the city’s clogged arteries get too much, a quiet day lounging on a **Pacific beach**, birdwatching in the **Parque Nacional Soberanía** or fishing on **Lago Gatún** are all possible without forgoing the epicurean delights of the capital’s sophisticated bars and restaurants in the evening.

After Panama City, the country’s most popular tourist area is the Caribbean archipelago of **Bocas del Toro**, close to the Costa Rican border. Its deserted stretches of sand, powerful surf and colourful coral reefs are matched by an oft-forgotten mainland that offers opportunities for spectacular wilderness hiking as well as wildlife viewing in the Humedales de San San Pond Sak. Bocas’s bohemian vibe and

Afro-Caribbean culture contrasts with the vast stretch of **Guna Yala**, an archipelago that extends for hundreds of kilometres and is home to Panama's most politically independent and culturally distinct indigenous people, the Guna. Its densely populated islands provide a base from which to explore picture-postcard cays of white-sand beaches and coconut palms. With more time, you can explore the less accessible aquatic wonderlands of the Pacific coast, with world-class scuba diving and sport fishing in the mangrove-rich protected marine parks of the **Golfo de Chiriquí** and **Coiba**, the penal colony turned wildlife reserve, generally reached from the laidback surfing hotspot of **Santa Catalina**.

From there it's a short hop east to the rolling pastureland and quaint villages of the **Azuero Peninsula**, a region that revels in its colonial heritage. Once neglected by visitors, its festivals, including the country's most ardent Carnival, overflow with enthusiastic accordion and violin playing, colourful costumes, masks, rodeos and lashings of seco – Panama's potent national tippie – and provide ample opportunities to interact with the outgoing locals.

The dorsal mountain range dividing Panama's two coasts rises dramatically from the Pacific coastal plains that constitute the country's agricultural heartlands, with the most impressive peaks located in the spectacular **national parks** of Chiriquí's **Western Highlands**, surrounding the alpine towns of **Boquete** and the less touristed **Cerro Punta**. Here it's hard to resist the allure of verdant cloud forests filled with orchids, quetzals and hummingbirds, precision rows of shade-grown coffee plantations and fast-flowing rivers, perfect for whitewater rafting or kayaking. Further east, the **Cordillera Central** hosts other parks and rainforested peaks laced with waterfalls above the small communities of **El Copé**, **Santa Fé** and **El Valle**, all of which offer rewarding hiking, birdwatching and horseriding.

Few visitors venture east of Panama City to the **Darién** jungle, which has gained almost mythical status, as much for FARC guerrillas and drug-traffickers as for its spectacular scenery and wildlife. Requiring patience, money and more than a smattering of Spanish, the rewards are ample: sinuous river journeys by dugout, great canopies of cathedral-like rainforests sheltering some of Panama's most spectacular fauna, and remote indigenous communities, keen to share their skills and culture with visitors.



FROM TOP SURFER, SANTA CATALINA; LOTTERY STALL, CHITRÉ

ARTS AND CRAFTS IN PANAMA

It may not have the sprawling markets of Mexico or Guatemala, but Panama's arts and crafts are thriving. From appliqué textiles to coiled basketry, woodcarving to mask-making, the range of materials reflects the country's multi-ethnic make-up. Here's our pick of the top five crafts:

Basketry and woodcarving Head for the Darién to pick up some exquisite Emberá basketry in villages such as [Mogué](#) and [La Chunga](#), or smooth cocobolo and tagua carvings of animals in Wounaan communities like [Puerto Lara](#).

Straw hats Panama's hats may not be true Panama hats – they are made in Ecuador – but some finely woven specimens are available: consider buying a [sombrero pintao](#) in La Pintada, or an [ocueño](#) in Ocu.

Devil masks Although made for festivals around the country, the most famous [mask-makers](#) hail from La Villa de los Santos and Chitré, their workshops stuffed full of terrifying salivating dragon or gargoyle-like monsters in kaleidoscopic colours.

Molas Guna women's distinctive multicoloured, embroidered [molas](#) are transformed into everything from cushion covers to Christmas stockings using traditional geometric designs or modern-day icons such as Batman. Widely available everywhere in Guna Yala, you'll just as easily trip over them on the street corners of Panama City.

Beaded necklaces Though once fashioned out of dyed pebbles, shells and bone worn by Ngäbe and Buglé warriors, these modern-day colourful *nguñunkua* (*chaquira* in Spanish) still make beautiful adornments. You'll find them sold in stalls along the [Interamericana](#) near Tolé.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP THE CHIRIQUÍ HIGHLANDS; A NGÄBE FAMILY; SHOE-SHINE STALL

When to go

Squeezed between between seven and nine degrees north of the equator, Panama is located firmly within the **tropics**, with a climate to match: relentlessly hot and humid in the lowlands, cooling off fractionally to give balmy nights, whereas in the highlands, temperatures vary significantly with altitude, and can be chilly at night.

Most travellers visit during the shorter **dry season** (*verano*, “summer”), which runs from late December to the end of April, and with good reason. Azure skies predominate, at least on the drier Pacific plains, sheltered by Panama’s mountainous spine. The firmer going underfoot makes it easier to travel on unpaved roads and explore the rainforests, and the reduced rainwater run-off ensures clearer waters to swim in. The dry season also includes the lively holiday periods of Christmas, New Year, Carnaval and Holy Week, when flights and hotels in popular tourist spots are at a premium.

You’ll avoid the crowds and the mark-ups in the **rainy season** (*invierno*, “winter”), which stretches from May to December. Although the mountainous and rainforested regions in Panama are best avoided during the wettest months, since peaks are constantly swathed in cloud and tracks are boggy, if you stick to the lowland areas on the Pacific coast, the downpours, while frequent and intense, rarely last more than a few hours at a time, leaving plenty of sunny, dry periods to enjoy. In particular, the otherwise parched Azuero Peninsula offers much more picturesque scenery during its understated rainy season.

By contrast, the **Caribbean coast** receives almost twice as much rain as the Pacific, with virtually no recognizable dry season. Regional variations impact here too: the Trade Winds (at their strongest Dec to mid-Feb) make the water choppy and outer islands inaccessible in Bocas del Toro and Kuna Yala, while Bocas enjoys two relatively dry spells around March and October.

AVERAGE DAILY TEMPERATURES AND RAINFALL

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
PANAMA CITY												
Max/min (°C)	30/22	31/22	32/23	32/23	31/24	30/23	30/23	31/23	30/23	30/23	30/23	30/23
Max/min (°F)	86/71	87/71	89/73	89/73	87/75	86/73	86/73	87/73	86/73	86/73	86/73	86/73
Rainfall (mm)	33	18	13	74	201	203	178	198	198	262	254	137
BOQUETE												
Max/min (°C)	25/13	27/13	28/14	29/14	28/15	27/14	27/14	27/14	27/14	28/14	27/14	27/13
Max/min (°F)	77/55	80/56	82/58	84/59	82/59	80/58	81/58	81/58	80/57	83/57	81/56	82/56
Rainfall (mm)	2.5	38	81	231	472	432	467	660	546	925	376	121
BOCAS DEL TORO												
Max/min (°C)	31/20	31/20	31/21	31/21	32/22	32/22	32/22	32/22	32/22	32/22	32/22	31/21
Max/min (°F)	88/68	88/68	88/70	88/70	90/72	90/72	90/72	90/72	90/72	90/72	90/72	88/70
Rainfall (mm)	204	235	188	323	273	287	387	346	254	219	390	485

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FROM LEFT HARPY EAGLE; FESTIVAL DE LA MEJORANA; VIEW FROM CERRO ANCÓN

AUTHOR PICKS

To research this guide, Rough Guides authors spent countless hours squatting in dugout canoes, tramping through rainforest and fending off sandflies as they travelled from the cocktail bars of Bocas to the Emberá villages deep in the Darién. Aside from the major sights, here are some personal picks.

Top boat trip The [Humedales de San San Pond Sak](#) are at their best at sunrise, as the mist clears, and you glide through the wetlands on the look out for herons and hawks, sloths and snakes, and the extraordinary-looking manatee.

Memorable jungle experience After a dawn hike through the Darién rainforest, and a lengthy stakeout of a nest, the sight of a majestic adult [harpy eagle](#) swooping down to feed its chick is truly special.

Most exhilarating flight Peering out of your eight-seater twin-prop over [Guna Yala](#) will leave you gasping at the countless tiny specks of white sand dotted with coconut palms that dazzle in translucent turquoise shallows.

Most panoramic view The vistas from the summit of [Cerro Ancón](#) take your breath away: on one side the city with its shimmering skyscrapers dwarfing the colonial architecture of Casco Viejo, on the other a procession of vast ships passing through the Panama Canal.

Challenging hike It's hard to beat the four-day trek across the cordillera from Boquete to Bocas, hiking through cloud forest, traversing rivers and sleeping in Ngäbe villages, with the reward of a soak in the Caribbean at the end.

Most enjoyable fiesta While the extreme hedonism of Carnival grabs the headlines, tiny Guararé's [Festival de la Mejorana](#) is a more mellow but joyous affair, including heavy doses of *pindín* – upbeat folk music featuring accordion-playing – and competitions in traditional skills.

Best ice cream The sweltering heat of Panama City is best alleviated by a cone from [Granclement](#): choose from mouthwatering sorbets and unusually flavoured *helados*, such as Earl Grey tea and vanilla and walnut.

Our author recommendations don't end here. We've flagged up our favourite places – a perfectly sited hotel, an atmospheric café, a special restaurant – throughout the guide, highlighted with the ★ symbol.

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16 THINGS NOT TO MISS

It's not possible to see everything Panama has to offer in one trip – and we don't suggest you try. What follows, in no particular order, is a selective taste of the country's highlights: remote islands, great coffee, colonial architecture and unique wildlife. Each one has a reference to take you straight into the guide, where you can find out more.



1 [Archipiélago de las Perlas](#) Choose from a myriad of idyllic tropical islands ringed with white-sand beaches and azure waters.



2 [Stay in an Emberá village](#) Experience traditional village life with the Emberá in the Darién and learn the medicinal secrets of the rainforest.



3 [Birdwatching](#) Get close to the country's 978 bird species – including dazzling hummingbirds, the resplendent quetzal and the blue-crowned motmot.



4 Colonial architecture From ruined [Caribbean fortresses](#) to [Baroque Pacific churches](#), Panama possesses some fine conquest-era buildings, including the gleaming spires of the [Catedral Metropolitana](#) in Panama City.



5 [Casco Viejo](#) Seek out hidden gems in the colonial churches, leafy plazas and narrow streets of Panama City's colonial city centre.



6 [Santa Fé](#) A fresh climate, abundant orchids and picturesque waterfalls make this village an appealing retreat.



7 [Panama Canal](#) The twentieth century's greatest engineering feat is best experienced first-hand with a transit through the locks.



8 [Island life in Guna Yala](#) Stay in a simple cane-and-thatch *cabaña* amid swaying coconut palms, dipping into the warm Caribbean waters to cool off, on one of many postage-stamp-sized islands in the archipelago.



9 [Outdoor sports](#) There are plenty of ways to soak up the spectacular scenery of Chiriquí's Western Highlands, from a pulse-quickening swing on a canopy ride, to a more serene paddle in a kayak



10 [Diving and snorkelling](#) There's some great snorkelling to be done off the coral reefs of Bocas del Toro, while the aquatic paradise off [Isla Coiba](#) provides world-class diving.



11 [Coffee in Boquete](#) Learn to detect floral, caramel, citrus and spice aromas in some of the world's finest gourmet coffee estates.



12 [Chilling in Bocas](#) Laidback bars, party hostels, mellow lodges and Caribbean cuisine make Bocas a fine spot to let your hair down.

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