History

LOST PANAMA

The coastlines and rainforests of Panama have been inhabited by humans for at least 10,000 years, and it's estimated that several dozen indigenous groups including the Kuna, the Ngöbe-Buglé, the Emberá, the Wounaan and the Naso were living on the isthmus prior to the Spanish arrival. However, the historical tragedy of Panama is that despite its rich cultural history, there are virtually no physical remains of these great civilizations.

Unlike the massive pyramid complexes found throughout Latin America, the ancient towns and cities of Panama vanished in the jungles, never to be seen by the eyes of the modern world. However, tales of lost cities still survive in the oral histories of Panama's indigenous communities, and there is hope amongst Panamanian archaeologists that a great discovery lies in waiting. Considering that much of Panama consists of inaccessible mountains and rainforests, perhaps these dreams aren't so fanciful.

Old Panama and Castilla Del Oro, by CLG Anderson, is a narrative history of the Spanish discovery, conquest and settlement of Panama as well as the early efforts to build a canal.

What is known about pre-Columbian Panama is that early inhabitants were part of an extensive trading zone that extended as far south as Peru and as far north as Mexico. Archaeologists have uncovered exquisite gold ornaments and unusual life-size stone statues of human figures as well as distinctive types of pottery and *metates* (stone platforms that were used for grinding corn).

Panama's first peoples also lived beside both oceans, and fished in mangrove swamps, estuaries and coral reefs. Given the tremendous impact that fishing has had on the lives of Isthmians, it seems only fitting that the country's name is derived from an indigenous word meaning 'abundance of fish.'

NEW WORLD ORDER

Panama: Four Hundred Years of Dreams and Cruelty, by David A Howarth, is a readable history of the isthmus from Balboa's 1513 exploration through 1964. The best sections are those dealing with the conquistadores and buccaneers.

In 1501 the discovery of Panama by Spanish explorer Rodrigo de Bastidas marked the beginning of the age of conquest and colonization in the isthmus. However, it was his first mate, Vasco Núñez de Balboa, who was to be immortalized in the history books, following his discovery of the Pacific Ocean 12 years later.

On his fourth and final voyage to the New World in 1502, Christopher Columbus went ashore in present-day Costa Rica and returned from the encounter claiming to have seen 'more gold in two days than in four years in Spain.' Although his attempts to establish a colony at the mouth of the Río Belén failed due to fierce local resistance, Columbus petitioned the Spanish Crown to have himself appointed as governor of Veraguas, the stretch of shoreline from Honduras to Panama.

TIMELINE

11,000 BC

The first humans occupy Panama, and populations quickly flourish due to the rich resources found along both coastlines.

2,500 BC

Panama is home to some of the first pottery-making villages in the Americas, such as the Monagrillo culture dating from 2500 to 1700 BC.

100 BC

Panama becomes part of an extensive trade network of gold and other goods that extends from Mesoamerica to the Andes.

Following Columbus' death in 1506, King Ferdinand appointed Diego de Nicuesa to settle the newly claimed land. In 1510 Nicuesa followed Columbus's lead, and once again tried to establish a Spanish colony at Río Belén. However, local resistance was once again enough to beat back Spanish occupation, and Nicuesa was forced to flee the area. Leading a small fleet with 280 starving men aboard, the weary explorer looked upon a protected bay 23km east of present-day Portobelo and exclaimed: *'¡Paremos aquí, en nombre de Dios!'* ('Let us stop here, in the name of God!'). Thus was named the town of Nombre de Dios, one of the first Spanish settlements in the continental New World.

Much to the disappointment of Columbus' conquistador heirs, Panama was not abundant with gold. Add tropical diseases, inhospitable terrain and less than welcoming natives to the mix, and it's easy to see why Nombre de Dios failed several times during its early years as a Spanish colony. However, a bright moment in Spanish exploration came in 1513 when Balboa heard rumors about a large sea and a wealthy, gold-producing civilization across the mountains of the isthmus – almost certainly referring to the Inca empire of Peru. Driven by equal parts ambition and greed, Balboa scaled the Continental Divide, and on September 26, 1513, he became the first European to set eyes upon the Pacific Ocean. Keeping up with the European fashion of the day, Balboa immediately proceeded to claim the ocean and all the lands it touched for the king of Spain.

THE EMPIRE EXPANDS

In 1519 a cruel and vindictive Spaniard named Pedro Arias de Ávila (or Pedrarias, as many of his contemporaries called him) founded the city of Panamá on the Pacific side, near where Panama City stands today. The governor is best remembered for such benevolent acts as ordering the beheading of Balboa in 1517 on a trumped-up charge of treason as well as ordering murderous attacks against the indigenous population, whom he roasted alive or fed to dogs when the opportunity permitted.

Among those who made the famous crossing of the isthmus were 1000 indigenous slaves and 190 Spaniards, including Francisco Pizarro, who later conquered Peru.

Despite his less than admirable humanitarian record, Pedrarias established Panamá as an important Spanish settlement, a commercial center and a base for further explorations, including the conquest of Peru. From Panamá, vast riches including Peruvian gold and Oriental spices were transported across the isthmus by foot to the town of Venta de Cruces, and then by boat to Nombre de Dios via the Río Chagres. Vestiges of this famous trade route, which was known as the Sendero Las Cruces (Las Cruces Trail), can still be found today throughout Panama.

As the Spaniards grew fat and content on the wealth of plundered civilizations, the world began to notice the prospering colony, especially the English privateers lurking in coastal waters. In 1572 Sir Francis Drake destroyed Nombre de Dios, and set sail for England with a galleon laden with Spanish

1513

Balboa endures a tortuous trek from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and becomes the first European to lay eyes on what he dubbed the 'South Sea.'

1519

Pedrarias founds the city of Panamá, which becomes a major transit point for gold plundered from Peru and brought by galleon to Spain.

1671

Henry Morgan overpowers Fuerte San Lorenzo, and then sails up the Río Chagres to sack the city of Panamá. After suffering a crushing defeat, a new walled city is built a few kilometers away in present-day Casco Viejo.

gold. It was also during this expedition that Drake climbed a high tree in the mountains, thus becoming the first Englishman to ever set eyes on the Pacific Ocean.

The Sack of Panamá: Sir Henry Morgan's Adventures on the Spanish Main, by Peter Earle, is a good read for those wanting an account of the Welsh pirate's looting of Panamá in 1671.

Hoping to stave off further ransacking and pillaging, the Spanish built large stone fortresses at Portobelo and Fuerte San Lorenzo. However, these fortifications weren't enough to stop the Welsh buccaneer Sir Henry Morgan from overpowering Fuerte San Lorenzo and sailing up the Río Chagres in 1671. After crossing the length of the isthmus, Captain Morgan destroyed the city of Panamá, made off with its entire treasure and arrived back on the Caribbean coast with 200 mules loaded with loot.

After Panamá burnt to the ground, the Spanish rebuilt the city a few years later on a cape several kilometers west of its original site. The ruins of the old settlement, now known as Panamá Viejo (p82), as well as the colonial city of Casco Viejo (p78), are both located within the city limits of present-day Panama City.

Of course, British privateering didn't cease with the destruction of Panamá. In 1739 the final nail in the coffin was hammered in when Admiral Edward Vernon destroyed the fortress of Portobelo. Humiliated by their defeat and robbed of one of their greatest defenses, the Spanish abandoned the Panamanian crossing in favor of sailing the long way around Cape Horn to the western coast of South America.

THE EMPIRE ENDS

On October 27, 1807, the Treaty of Fontainebleau, which defined the occupation of Portugal, was signed between Spain and France. Under the guise of reinforcing the Franco-Spanish army occupying Portugal, Napoleon moved tens of thousands of troops into Spain. In an act of military genius, Napoleon ordered his troops to abandon the ruse and seize key Spanish fortifications.

SALVAGING SUNKEN GALLEONS

During the period of colonization between the 16th and 18th centuries, Spanish galleons left home carrying goods to the colonies and returned loaded with gold and silver mined in Colombia, Peru and Mexico. Many of these ships sank in the Caribbean Sea, overcome by pirates or hurricanes. During these years, literally thousands of ships – not only Spanish but also English, French, Dutch, pirate and African slave ships – foundered in the green-blue waters of the Caribbean.

The frequency of shipwrecks spurred the Spaniards to organize operations to recover sunken cargo. By the 17th century, Spain maintained salvage flotillas in the ports of Portobelo, Havana and Veracruz. These fleets awaited news of shipwrecks and then proceeded immediately to the wreck sites, where the Spaniards used Caribbean and Bahamian divers, and later African slaves, to scour sunken vessels and the seafloor around them. On many occasions great storms wiped out entire fleets, resulting in a tremendous loss of lives and cargo.

1698

The ill-fated Darien scheme establishes a Scottish trading colony in the region, though it fails soon after, and plunges Scotland into economic depression. The resulting financial losses heavily influence the union of Scotland with England in 1707.

1739

Following numerous pirate attacks, Spain abandons the transisthmian trade route in favor of sailing around Cape Horn in South America.

1821

Simón Bolívar leads the northern swath of South America to independence from Spain, and Panama joins the newly formed union of Gran Colombia.

Without firing a single shot, Napoleon's troops seized Barcelona after convincing the city to open its gates for a convoy of wounded soldiers.

Although Napoleon's invasion by stealth was successful, the resulting Peninsular War was a horrific campaign of guerrilla warfare that crippled both countries. As a result of the conflict, its subsequent power vacuum and decades of internal turmoil, Spain lost nearly all of its colonial possessions in the first third of the century.

Panama gained independence from Spanish rule in 1821, and immediately joined Gran Colombia, a confederation of Colombia, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela, a united Latin American nation that had long been the dream of Simón Bolívar. However, internal disputes lead to the formal abolishment of Gran Colombia in 1831, though fledgling Panama retained its status as a province of Colombia.

BIRTH OF A NATION

Panama's future forever changed from the moment that the world's major powers learned that the isthmus of Panama was the narrowest point between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. In 1846 Colombia signed a treaty permitting the US to construct a railway across the isthmus, though it also granted them free transit and the right to protect the railway with military force. At the height of the California gold rush in 1849, tens of thousands of people traveled from the east coast of the US to the west coast via Panama in order to avoid hostile Native Americans living in the central states. Colombia and Panama grew wealthy from the railway, and the first talks of an interoceanic canal across Central America began to surface.

At one time the Panama Railroad was the highest priced stock on the New York Stock Exchange at US$295 a share.

The idea of a canal across the isthmus was first raised in 1524 when King Charles V of Spain ordered that a survey be undertaken to determine the feasibility of constructing such a waterway. In 1878, however, it was the French who received a contract from Colombia to build a canal. Still basking in the warm glory of the recently constructed Suez Canal, French builder Ferdinand-Marie de Lesseps brought his crew to Panama in 1881. Much like Napoleon before him, Lesseps severely underestimated the task at hand, and over 22,000 workers died from yellow fever and malaria in less than a decade. By 1889, insurmountable construction problems and financial mismanagement had driven the company bankrupt.

The Panama Railroad website www.trainweb.org/panama contains photographs, historical information and fascinating travelogues – one dated from 1868, written by Mark Twain.

The US, always keen to look after its investments, saw the French failure as a lucrative business opportunity that was ripe for the taking. Although they had previously been scouting locations for a canal in Nicaragua, the US pressured the French to sell them their concessions. In 1903, Lesseps' chief engineer, Philippe Bunau-Varilla, agreed to the sale, though the Colombian government promptly refused.

In what would be the first of a series of American interventions in Panama, Bunau-Varilla approached the US government to back Panama if it declared

1855

An estimated 12,000 laborers die during the construction of the Panama Railroad, particularly from malaria and yellow fever. Despite being only 76km long, the Panama Railroad requires 304 bridges and culverts.

1856

The US intervenes in Panama for the first time in a conflict that becomes known as the Watermelon War of 1856. The war starts when white US soldiers mistreat locals, which causes large-scale race riots that the Marines eventually put down.

1878

The French are granted the rights to build a canal though Panama. After malaria and yellow fever claim over 22,000 lives, the French declare bankruptcy and abandon the project altogether.

its independence from Colombia. On November 3, 1903, a revolutionary junta declared Panama independent, and the US government immediately recognized the sovereignty of the country. Although Colombia sent troops by sea to try to regain control of the province, US battleships prevented them from reaching land. Colombia did not recognize Panama as a legitimately separate nation until 1921, when the US paid Colombia US$25 million in 'compensation.'

GROWING PAINS

Following independence, Bunau-Varilla was appointed Panamanian ambassador to the US, though his first act of office paved the way for future American interventions in the region. Hoping to profit from the sale of the canal concessions to the US, Bunau-Varilla arrived in Washington, DC before Panama could assemble a delegation. On November 18, Bunau-Varilla and US Secretary of State, John Hay, signed the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty, which gave the US far more than had been offered in the original treaty. In addition to owning concessions to the canal, the US was also granted 'sovereign rights in perpetuity over the Canal Zone,' an area extending 8km on either side of the canal, and a broad right of intervention in Panamanian affairs.

Despite opposition from the tardy Panamanian delegation as well as lingering questions about its legality, the treaty was ratified, ushering in an era of friction between the US and Panama. Construction began again on the canal in 1904, and despite disease, landslides and harsh weather, the world's greatest engineering marvel was completed in only a decade. The first ship sailed through the canal on August 15, 1914.

For all things canal-related visit www.pancanal.com, with historical information, photographs and even webcams of the canal in action.

In the years following the completion of the canal, the US military repeatedly intervened in the country's political affairs. In response to growing Panamanian disenchantment with frequent US interventions, the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty was replaced in 1936 by the Hull-Alfaro Treaty. The US relinquished its rights to use its troops outside the Canal Zone and to seize land for canal purposes, and the annual sum paid to Panama for use of the Canal Zone was raised. However, increased sovereignty was not enough to stem the growing wave of Panamanian opposition to US occupation. Anti-US sentiments reached a boiling point in 1964 during a student protest that left 27 Panamanians dead and 500 injured. Today, the event is commemorated as Día de Los Mártires (National Martyrs Day).

As US influence waned, the Panamanian army grew more powerful. In 1968, the Guardia Nacional deposed the elected president and took control of the government. Soon after, the constitution was suspended, the national assembly was dissolved and the press were censored, while the Guardia's General Omar Torrijos emerged as the new leader. Despite plunging the country into debt as a result of a massive public works program, Torrijos was successful in pressuring US President Jimmy Carter

1902

US President Theodore Roosevelt convinces the US Congress to take control of the abandoned French project. At the time, Colombia was in the midst of the Thousand Days War.

1909

Colombian President Rafael Reyes presents a treaty that will recognize Panamanian independence, but the matter is dropped due to popular and legislative opposition - it is not raised again until 1921.

1914

The canal is finally completed, owing to the efforts of 75,000 laborers, many thousands of whom perish during the construction.

into ceding control of the canal to Panama. The Torrijos-Carter Treaty guaranteed full Panamanian control of the canal as of December 31, 1999, as well as a complete withdrawal of US military forces.

THE RISE & FALL OF NORIEGA

Still feeling truimphant from the recently signed treaty, Panama was unprepared for the sudden death of Torrijos in a plane crash in 1981. Two years later, Colonel Manuel Antonio Noriega seized the Guardia Nacional, promoted himself to general and made himself the de facto ruler of Panama. Noriega, a former head of Panama's secret police, a former CIA operative and a graduate of the School of the Americas, quickly began to consolidate his power. He enlarged the Guardia Nacional, significantly expanded its authority and renamed it the Panama Defense Forces. He also created a paramilitary 'Dignity Battalion' in every city, town and village, its members armed and ready to inform on any of their neighbors showed less than complete loyalty to the Noriega regime.

Things went from bad to worse in early 1987 when Noriega became the center of an international scandal. He was publicly accused of involvement in drug trafficking with Colombian drug cartels, murdering his opponents and rigging elections. Many Panamanians demanded Noriega's dismissal, protesting with general strikes and street demonstrations that resulted in violent clashes with the Panama Defense Forces. In February 1988 Panamanian President Eric Arturo Delvalle attempted to dismiss Noriega, though the stalwart general held on to the reins of power, deposing Delvalle and forcing him to flee Panama. Noriega subsequently appointed a substitute president that was more sympathetic to his cause.

Noriega's regime became an international embarrassment. In March 1988 the US imposed economic sanctions against Panama, ending a preferential trade agreement, freezing Panamanian assets in US banks and refusing to pay canal fees. A few days after the sanctions were imposed, an unsuccessful military coup prompted Noriega to step up violent repression of his critics. After Noriega's candidate failed to win the presidential election in May 1989, the general declared the election null and void. Meanwhile, Guillermo Endara, the winning candidate, and his two vice-presidential running mates were badly beaten by some of Noriega's thugs, and the entire bloody scene was captured by a TV crew and broadcast internationally. A second failed coup in October 1989 was followed by even more repressive measures.

On December 15, 1989, Noriega's legislature declared him president and his first official act of office was to declare war on the US. The following day, an unarmed US marine dressed in civilian clothes was killed by Panamanian soldiers while exiting a restaurant in Panama City.

The US Army's School of the Americas, previously based in Panama, trained some of the worst human rights abusers in Latin America – including Manuel Noriega. For information on the school's history visit www.soaw.org.

1964

The riots of January 9 (now known as Martyrs' Day) escalate tensions between Panama and the US regarding occupation rights of the Canal Zone. Twenty Panamanian rioters are killed and over 500 are wounded.

1968

The Panamanian army overthrows president-elect Arnulfo Arias after just 11 days in office. Seizing the power gap, General Omar Torrijos becomes Panama's leader.

1977

The Torrijos-Carter Treaty is signed, allowing for the complete transfer of the canal and the 14 US army bases from the US to Panama by 1999.

US reaction was swift and unrelenting. In the first hour of December 20, 1989, Panama City was attacked by aircraft, tanks and 26,000 US troops in 'Operation Just Cause,' though the US media preferred to label it 'Operation Just 'cuz.' Although the intention of the invasion was to bring Noriega to justice and create a democracy better suited to US interests, it left more than 2000 civilians dead, tens of thousands homeless and destroyed entire tracts of Panama City.

'On Christmas Day, the fifth day of the invasion, Noriega claimed asylum in the Vatican embassy'

On Christmas Day, the fifth day of the invasion, Noriega claimed asylum in the Vatican embassy. US forces surrounded the embassy and pressured the Vatican to release him, as entering the embassy would be considered an act of war against the tiny country. However, the US memorably used that psychological tactic beloved of disgruntled teenagers, namely bombarding the embassy with blaring rock music (Van Halen and Metallica were among the selections). The embassy was also surrounded by mobs of angry Panamanians calling for the ousting of Noriega.

After 10 days of psychological warfare, the chief of the Vatican embassy persuaded Noriega to give himself up by threatening to cancel his asylum. Noriega surrendered to US forces on January 3, and was flown immediately to Miami where he was convicted of conspiracy to manufacture and distribute cocaine. Although he was sentenced in 1992 to 40 years in a Florida prison, he is scheduled to be released on good behavior at the end of 2007.

MODERN WOES

After Noriega's forced removal, Guillermo Endara, the legitimate winner of the 1989 election, was sworn in as president, and Panama attempted to put itself back together. The country's image and economy were in shambles, and its capital had suffered damage not only from the invasion itself, but from widespread looting that followed. Unfortunately, Endara proved to be an ineffective leader whose policies cut jobs and cost his administration the popularity it initially enjoyed. By the time he was voted out of office in 1994, he was suffering from single-digit approval ratings.

In the 1994 elections, the fairest in recent Panamanian history, Ernesto Pérez Balladares came into office. Under his direction, the Panamanian government implemented a program of privatization that focused on infrastructure improvements, health care and education. Although Pérez Balladares allocated unprecedented levels of funding, he was viewed as corrupt. In the spring of 1999, voters rejected his attempt to change constitutional limits barring a president from serving two consecutive terms.

In 1999 Mireya Moscoso, the widow of popular former president Arnulfo Arias, Panama's first female leader and head of the conservative Arnulfista Party (PA), took office. Moscoso had ambitious plans for the country, and promised to improve education, health care and housing

1983

Following Torrijos' death in a plane crash in 1981, former CIA operative Manuel Noriega rises to power and ushers in an era of repression.

1988

US President Ronald Reagan invokes the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, freezing Panamanian government assets in US banks and prohibiting payments by American businesses to the Noriega regime.

1989

The US invades Panama, and extradites Noriega to Miami where he is later convicted on charges of conspiracy and drug trafficking.

for the two-thirds of Panamanians who were below the poverty line. She also promised to generate much-needed jobs and to reduce the staggering unemployment rate.

As Panama celebrated its centenary in 2003, unemployment rose to 18% while underemployment reached 30%. In addition, Moscoso angered many over her wasteful spending – as parts of the country went without food, she paid US$10 million to bring the Miss Universe pageant to Panama. She was also accused of looking the other way during Colombian military incursions into the Darién, implying indifference to the terrorism occurring inside the country's borders. When she left office in 2004, Moscoso left behind a legacy of gross incompetence, failing to fulfill even a single campaign promise.

Panama is currently under the leadership of Martín Torrijos, a member of the Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) and the son of former leader Omar Torrijos. Although there is still much debate regarding the successes and failures of his administration, he has already implemented a number of much-needed fiscal reforms including an overhaul of the nation's social security. Furthermore, his proposal to expand the Panama Canal was overwhelmingly approved in a national referendum on October 22, 2006.

1994

Ernesto Pérez Balladares is sworn in as president after an internationally monitored election campaign. Balladares emphasizes his party's populist Torrijos roots rather than its former association with Noriega.

1999

Mireya Moscoso becomes Panama's first female president after a free and fair election. The US ends nearly a century of occupation of Panama by closing all of its military bases and turning over control of the canal.

2006

Seventy-eight per cent of voters cast a 'yes' ballot in support of an expanded canal – voter turnout is only 44%.

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

At the crossroads of the Americas, the narrow isthmus of Panama bridges not only two continents, but two vastly different paradigms of Panamanian culture and society. While one sphere of Panama clings to the traditions of the past, the other looks to the modernizing influences of a growing economy. These forces often tug in opposition to one another, which raises the question: what exactly is the Panamanian national character?

In some ways this disorientation is only natural given the many years that Panama has been the object of another country's meddling. From the US-backed independence of 1903 to the strong-armed removal of Noriega in 1989 – with half-a-dozen other interventions in between – the USA left behind a strong legacy in the country. Nearly every Panamanian has a relative or at least an acquaintance living in the USA, and parts of the country seem swept up in mall-fever, with architectural inspiration straight out of North America. Panamanians (or at least the ones that can afford to) deck themselves out in US clothes, buy US-made cars and take their fashion tips straight from Madison Avenue.

A People Who Would Not Kneel: Panama, the United States and the San Blás Kuna, by James Howe, describes the struggles the Kuna underwent in order to gain the independence they enjoy today.

Others are not so ready to embrace the culture from the north. Indigenous groups like the Emberá and Kuna struggle to keep their traditions alive as more and more of their youth are lured into the Western lifestyles of the city. On the Península de Azuero, which maintains its rich Spanish cultural heritage through traditional festivals, dress and customs, local villagers raise the same concerns about the future of their youth.

Given the clash between old and new, it's surprising the country isn't suffering from a serious case of cognitive dissonance. However, the exceptionally tolerant Panamanian character weathers many contradictions – the old and the new, the grave disparity between rich and poor, and the stunning natural environment and its rapid destruction. In fact, much of this tolerance begins in the family, which is the cornerstone of Panamanian society, and plays a role in nearly every aspect of a person's life. Whether among Kuna sisters or Panama City's elite, everyone looks after each other – favors are graciously accepted, promptly returned and never forgotten.

This mutual concern extends from the family into the community, and at times the whole country can seem like one giant extended community. In the political arena, the same names appear time and again as nepotism is the norm rather than the exception. Unfortunately, this goes hand-in-hand with Panama's most persistent problem: corruption. Panamanians view their leaders' fiscal and moral transgressions with disgust, and are far from being in the dark about issues. Yet they accept things with patience and an almost fatalistic attitude. Outsiders sometimes view this as a kind of passivity, but it's all just another aspect of the complicated Panamanian psyche.

LIFESTYLE

In spite of the skyscrapers and gleaming restaurants lining the wealthier districts of Panama City, nearly a third of the country's population lives in poverty. Furthermore, almost three-quarters of a million Panamanians live in extreme conditions, struggling just to satisfy their basic dietary needs and living on less than a dollar a day. Those hardest hit by poverty tend to be in the least populated provinces: Darién, Bocas del Toro, Veraguas, Los Santos and Colón. There are also a substantial number of poor people living in the slums of Panama City, where an estimated 20% of the urban

population lives. Countrywide, 9% of the population lives in *barriados* (squatter) settlements.

In the Emberá and Wounaan villages of Darién, traditional living patterns persist much as they have for hundreds of years. The communities are typically made up of 30 to 40 *bohíos* (thatched-roof, open-sided dwellings), and survive on subsistence agriculture, hunting, fishing and pastoralism. However, life can be extremely difficult in these frontier villages – the life expectancy is about 10 years below the national average and the majority of the Emberá and Wounaan communities lack access to clean water and basic sanitation.

For the *campesinos* (farmers), life is also hard. A subsistence farmer in the interior might earn as little as US$100 a year, far below the national average of US$7400 per capita. The dwelling might consist of a simple cinderblock building, with a roof and four walls and perhaps a porch. Families have few possessions and every member assists with working the land or contributing to the household.

The middle and upper class largely reside in Panama City environs, enjoying a level of comfort similar to their economic brethren in Europe and the USA. They live in large homes or apartments, have a maid, a car or two, and for the lucky few a second home on the beach or in the mountains. Cell phones are de rigueur. Vacations are often enjoyed outside of the country in Europe or the USA. Most middle-class adults can speak some English and their children usually attend English-speaking schools.

Celebrations, weddings and family gatherings are a social outlet for rich and poor alike, and those with relatives in positions of power – nominal or otherwise – don't hesitate to turn to them for support.

Formal marriage is rare outside of the middle and upper classes. Some estimate that 60% of children are born to short-term unions.

POPULATION

The majority of Panamanians (65%) are mestizo, which is generally a mix of indigenous and Spanish descent. In truth, many non-black immigrants are also thrown into this category, including a sizable Chinese population – some people estimate that as much as 10% of the population is of Chinese ancestry. There are also a number of other sizable groups: about 14% of Panamanians are of African descent, 10% of Spanish descent, 5% of mixed African and Spanish descent, and 6% are indigenous. Generally, black Panamanians are mostly descendants of English-speaking West Indians, such as Jamaicans and Trinidadians, who were originally brought to Panama as laborers.

Indigenous Groups

Of the several dozen native tribes that inhabited Panama when the Spanish arrived, only seven now remain. Perhaps the most well-known group in the West, due to their distinctive dress, are the Kuna (p259), who inhabit the Archipíelago de San Blás and run their native lands as a *comarca* (autonomous region). Regarded as having one of the largest degrees of sovereignty in Latin America, the Kuna are fiercely protective of their independence and routinely introduce new legislation to protect their lands from foreign cultural invasion. In recent years, this has resulted in barring foreigners from owning property in the *comarca*, imposing restrictions on tourism in San Blás and introducing standard fees for photography and video throughout the region. However, this tenacity has proved successful as one of the highlights of visiting San Blás is witnessing first-hand the vibrancy of the Kuna's unique culture.

The Emberá and Wounaan (p275) inhabit the jungle of the eastern Panamá Province and the Darién, and although both groups distinguish themselves from one another, the difference is more linguistic than cultural. Historically, both groups have eked out a living on the edges of the jungles through

hunting, fishing, subsistence farming and rearing livestock, though rapidly increasing deforestation has reduced the extent of their traditional lands. Today, the majority of Emberá and Wounaan inhabit the fringes of the Darién and live beyond the range of destruction brought forth by loggers, farmers and ranchers. However, an increasing number of communities are turning to tourism for survival, particularly in the Canal Zone where traditional lifestyles are no longer feasible. Sadly, Panama's most recent immigrants are Emberá refugees from Colombia, who fled heavy fighting in the Chaco region by the thousands in early 2004.

The website www.dulenega.nativeweb.org has stories and poems of the Kuna people, as well as a complete list of publications about their culture.

Panama's largest indigenous group is the Ngöbe-Buglé (p193), who number close to 200,000 and occupy a *comarca* that spans the Chiriquí, Veraguas and Bocas del Toro Provinces. Similar to the Kuna, the Ngöbe-Buglé enjoy a high degree of political autonomy and have been extremely successful in managing their lands and protecting their cultural identity. Unlike the Emberá and the Wounaan, the Ngöbe-Buglé have largely resisted outside cultural interventions, primarily since their communities are scattered amongst huge tracts of undeveloped land. In recent years, the youth have been increasingly heading to the cities for work, and missionaries have made numerous inroads in their attempt to convert the indigenous population to Christianity. Religion aside, the Ngöbe-Buglé continue to live much as they have throughout history by relying almost exclusively on subsistence agriculture.

The Naso (Teribe; p237) inhabit mainland Bocas del Toro and are largely confined to the Panamanian side of the binational Parque Internacional La Amistad. Unlike other indigenous population groups, the Naso do not have an independent *comarca* of their own, which has resulted in the rapid destruction of their cultural sovereignty in recent years. Another strike against them is the tremendous tourism potential of the international park, which has prevented the Panamanian government from coming to their aid. Today, traditional villages are rapidly disappearing throughout the region and only a few thousand Naso remain. However, in an effort to ensure their cultural survival, a few villages have banded together to create an ecological center near the Wekso entrance to the park, which aims to draw more visitors to the region and employ more Naso as tourist guides.

The country's other two indigenous groups are the Bokotá, who inhabit Bocas del Toro Province, and the Bribri, who are found both in Costa Rica and in Panama along the Talamanca reserve. Both of these groups maintain their own language and culture, but their numbers and political influence are less than the groups previously mentioned.

SPORTS

Owing to the legacy of US occupation, baseball is the preferred pastime in Panama. This is indeed a rarity in Latin America where football (soccer) is normally the national craze.

Although there are no professional teams in Panama, the amateur leagues host games in stadiums throughout the country. Panamanians have their favorite teams, but are usually more interested in their favorite players in the US major leagues. Mariano Rivera, the record-setting Panamanian pitcher for the New York Yankees, is a national hero, and New Yorkers and Yankees fans alike can easily strike up a conversation with most Panamanians. Batting champ Rod Carew, another Panamanian star, was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1991. Roberto Kelly, who played for the Yankees for many years, is also fondly remembered.

Boxing is another popular spectator sport and it has been a source of pride to Panamanians (and to Latin Americans in general) ever since Roberto Durán, a Panama City native and boxing legend, won the world champion-

ship lightweight title in 1972. He went on to become the world champion in the welterweight (1980), light middleweight (1983) and super middleweight (1989) categories.

MULTICULTURALISM

Panama is a rich melting pot of cultures with immigrants from around the globe as well as a diverse indigenous population. Shortly after the Spanish arrived, slaves were brought from Africa to work in Panama's mines and perform grunt labor in the colony. Slaves that escaped set up communities in the Darién jungle, where their descendents *(cimarrones)* still live today. Subsequent waves of immigration coincided with the construction of both the Panama Railroad in 1850 and the Panama Canal – both the French effort in the late 1800s and the American completion in the early 1900s. During these times, thousands of workers were brought to Panama from the West Indies, particularly Jamaica and Trinidad.

Workers also came from the East Indies and from China to labor – and many to die – on these massive projects. The majority of the Chinese settled in Panama City, and today you can see two Chinatowns (one is near Casco Viejo, the other in El Dorado). In fact, there are two daily Chinese newspapers and even a private school for the Chinese. The term for Chinese Panamanians is 'Once' (pronounced '*awn*-say').

Torrijos helped end the historical monopoly of power by white Panamanians.

Mixed offspring – and mixed marriages – are increasingly common today. Among the East Indian community, Hindus complain that their culture is disappearing: where once it was common for young men to return to India to find a bride, this is no longer the case. This intermixing of races happens across the nation, although indigenous groups and whites – representing each end of the economic scale – are least likely to marry outside of their group.

Although Panama is a much more racially tolerant society than many other Latin American countries, there is distrust among groups, particularly between indigenous groups and mestizos. This stems largely from mestizo land grabs – by loggers, ranchers and settlers – that have pushed indigenous communities off their lands. Indigenous communities also view the government as corrupt and largely indifferent to their plight – to some extent, they are in fact correct.

Class distinctions also persist. While politicians from the president on down take pride in mingling with the public and maintaining some semblance of a classless society, the whites *(rabiblancos)* control the majority of the wealth and nearly all of the power. Within that group are several dozen wealthy families who are above the law – people able to escape arrest by mentioning the names of others who could complicate life for a lowly police officer.

In Panama, members of a certain class marry only members of that same class. And at the almighty Union Club (*the* social club of Panama City), memberships are rarely given to people with dark skin.

Racism is abhorrent no matter where it's found, but racism in Panama is mild compared to the brand found in many other countries. Panama has no counterpart to the Ku Klux Klan and there are no skinheads committing hate crimes. For all its inequities, Panama is closer to the ideal in this respect than most developed nations.

MEDIA

Panama has a number of daily newspapers – ranging from sensationalist rags to astute independents. However, in Panama City, the most popular form of mass media is television and some 75% of all homes own a TV set. Mainstream broadcast views tend to represent business and the oligarchy,

which is for the most part what urban viewers want to hear. Outside the capital however, radio is the most important medium. There are approximately 90 radio stations on the dial, though most Panamanians have two or three favorites – morning talk shows are particularly popular and represent a wide range of viewpoints.

Unfortunately, Panama still has some horrendous laws that make freedom of the press nothing more than a myth. Government officials who take offense from criticism directed against them can have the journalist imprisoned, for 'not showing them respect.' This is a legacy of Noriega, who used such laws to suppress the voices of critics. Furthermore, many international human-rights and press-advocacy organizations have decried Panama as supporting one of the most repressive regimes in the Americas because of the various 'gag laws' that bureaucrats can use to stifle opposition.

'Religion in Panama can best be observed by walking the streets of the capital'

In recent years, nearly 100 journalists and writers nationwide were facing potential prison sentences for publishing material that 'offended the honor' of one or another public figure. A typical incident occurred in August 2003 when two journalists from *El Panamá America* were sentenced to prison for one year (later commuted to a US$600 fine) for 'harming the dignity and honor' of supreme court justice Winston Spadafora. They were punished for an article which described Spadafora's use of public funds to build a road to Iturralde, which led almost exclusively to Spadafora's private estate.

In 2002 Victor Ramos of La Prensa was brought to justice for a political cartoon involving Pérez Balladares, the former president. After Balladares boasted publicly about all of the 'little toys' at his disposal – a private oceanfront residence, a plane and a helicopter among other things – Ramos' cartoon placed the former president's list next to another that itemized the scandals that had dogged his political career. Among the well-documented scandals was a US$51,000 campaign check that Balladares received in 1994 from a Colombian drug trafficker, as well as the mysterious disappearance of millions of dollars allocated for the construction of a bridge over the Panama Canal. Although prosecutors targeted Pérez Balladares in corruption investigations, they claimed there was insufficient evidence to prosecute him.

In spite of President Moscoso's pronouncement to repeal these laws during her term, she and her cronies used these 'gag laws' to suppress dissent. At the time of writing, it was still unclear whether the current administration under Torrijos will employ the same tactics.

RELIGION

Religion in Panama can best be observed by walking the streets of the capital. Among the scores of Catholic churches, you'll find breezy Anglican churches filled with worshippers from the West Indies, synagogues, mosques, a shiny Greek Orthodox church, an impressive Hindu temple and a surreal Baha'i house of worship (the headquarters for Latin America).

Freedom of religion is constitutionally guaranteed in Panama, although the preeminence of Roman Catholicism is also officially recognized, with 77% of the country filling its ranks. In fact, children in school have the option to study theology, though it is not compulsory. Protestant denominations account for 12%, Muslims 4.4% and Baha'i 1.2%. Additionally, the country has approximately 3000 Jews (many of them recent immigrants from Israel), 24,000 Buddhists and 9000 Hindus.

In addition to the mainstream world religions, the various indigenous tribes of Panama have their own belief systems, although these are fading

quickly due to the influence of Christian missionaries. As in other parts of Latin America, the evangelical movement is spreading like wildfire.

Although Catholics are the majority, only about 20% of them attend church regularly. The religious orders aren't particularly strong in Panama either – only about 25% of Catholic clergy are Panamanian while the rest are foreign missionaries.

WOMEN IN PANAMA

Women enjoy more opportunities in Panama than they do in most other Latin American countries. At the forefront of the country's political arena is the PNF (Feminist National Party), which was founded in 1923 and is one of the oldest feminist parties in Latin America. Historically, the PNF has been strongly critical of the male-dominated government and has secured numerous social reforms for women and children. In 1941, the PNF helped women secure the right to vote, while in 1981 they helped ratify the law that eliminated all forms of discrimination against women.

'Women enjoy more opportunities in Panama then they do in most other countries'

In spite of these advances, women still face many obstacles in Panamanian society. Machismo and gross stereotypes are more prevalent in rural areas than in urban ones, but even in the cities women have to face lower wages and sexual harassment, and are nearly twice as likely to be unemployed. Although women make up nearly half of the workforce, they make up only 10% of the country's legislature.

Overall, women are having fewer children and are having them later in life. Many postpone motherhood to enter the workplace – a pattern that exists in Europe and the USA. Panama also has a growing number of single mothers, particularly at the bottom income bracket. This problem is compounded by the facts that women have no right to an abortion (it's illegal in Panama) and that the teenage pregnancy rate is high.

In indigenous communities, women face many hardships, including poor access to health care and a low level of prenatal care. Prevailing stereotypes also means that girls are less likely to attend school – among indigenous populations, over half of women are illiterate compared to one-third of men. Women also enter motherhood at much younger ages and bear more children than their mestizo counterparts. At the same time, they are expected to work and help support the household.

One of the most positive signs that things are improving for indigenous women is the 2004 election of a female governor over the Comarca de Emberá–Wounaan. She was chosen by the general congress, made up of both Emberá and Wounaan in the Darién Province.

Of course, the single greatest accomplishment for women in the political area was the presidential election of Mireya Moscoso. When Moscoso left office in 2004, she was one of only 12 female heads of state in the world. This historic achievement places Panama ahead of many other countries in both the developed and the developing world.

ARTS

Panama's art scene reflects its ethnic mix. A slow spin on the radio dial or a close-up look at Panamanian nightclubs will reveal everything from salsa and jazz to reggae and rock 'n' roll.

The country has a few impressive painters and writers, some of whom are internationally recognized. There is also fair representation in dance, theater and other performance arts, which are managed by the Instituto Nacional de Cultura (INAC).

Traditional Panamanian products include woodcarvings, textiles, ceramics, masks and other handicrafts.

Literature

Inauguración de La Fe (Inauguration of La Fe), by Consuelo Tomás, is a collection of tales depicting the idiosyncrasies of the popular neighborhoods of Panama City.

Several of Panama's best novelists wrote around the midcentury. *El Ahogado* (The Drowned Man), a 1937 novel by Tristán Solarte (pen name for Guillermo Sánchez Borbón, a well-known poet, novelist and journalist), ingeniously blends elements of the detective, gothic and psychological genres, along with a famous local myth. *El Desván* (In the Garret), a 1954 novel by Ramón H Jurado, explores the emotional limits of the human condition. *Gamboa Road Gang*, by Joaquín Beleño, is the best work of fiction about the political and social events surrounding the Panama Canal.

Music

Salsa is the most popular music in Panama, and live salsa is easy to find, particularly in Panama City. Jazz, which was brought to Panama from the US, and calypso music from the West Indies can also be heard in clubs in Panama. Rock 'n' roll, in both English and Spanish, is played on most Panamanian FM radio stations, and some decent bands play it in Panama City clubs.

The country's most renowned salsa singer, Rubén Blades, is something of a national hero. Raised in Panama City, Blades has had several international hits, appeared in a few motion pictures and once even ran for president – he finished third. For more on Blades, see the boxed text, opposite.

For the lowdown on the Panamanian music scene as well as a guide to its most famous and greatest, take a look at www.panama1.com/Music_of_Panama.php

The jazz composer and pianist Danilo Pérez is widely acclaimed by American and European jazz critics. He has recorded with jazz greats from around the world and is currently serving on the faculty of the Berklee College of Music and the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, USA.

Los Rabanes is the most popular rock 'n' roll group in the country. Panamanian folkloric music *(típico)*, in which the accordion is dominant, is well represented by Dorindo Cárdenas, the late Victorio Vergara (whose band lives on as Nenito Vargas y los Plumas Negras) and the popular brother–sister pair of Sammy and Sandra Sandoval.

Handicrafts

Panama's handicrafts are varied and often of excellent quality. The Wounaan and Emberá in the Darién create some beautiful woven baskets. These indigenous groups also sell carvings of jungle wildlife from *cocobolo*, a handsome tropical hardwood, and tiny figurines from the ivory-colored *tagua* nut.

The Kuna of the Comarca de Kuna Yala are known worldwide for their *molas* – the blouse panels used by women in their traditional dress and sold

BUYING A MOLA

A *mola,* a traditional Kuna handicraft, is made of brightly colored squares of cotton fabric laid atop one another. Cuts are made through the layers, forming basic designs. The layers are then sewn together with tiny, evenly spaced stitches to hold the design in place. *Mola* means 'blouse' in Kuna, and Kuna women make *molas* in thematically matching but never identical pairs. A pair will comprise the front and back of a blouse.

Regardless of the design, Kuna believe the very best *molas* should always have the following characteristics:

- Stitches closely match the color of the cloth they are set against.
- Stitches are very fine and neatly spaced.
- Stitches are pulled evenly and with enough tension to be barely visible.
- Curves are cut smoothly and the sewing follows the curves of the cut.
- Outline strips are uniform in width, with no frayed edges.

GREAT PANAMANIANS: RUBÉN BLADES

Rubén Blades Bellido de Luna was born on July 16, 1948, and is a famous salsa singer, songwriter, lawyer, actor, politician and all-around Renaissance man. As a songwriter, Blades is often referred to as the 'Latin Bruce Springsteen' and is revered for bringing lyrical sophistication to salsa and creating intelligent dance music. Today, his music remains incredibly popular in Panama and is admired throughout Latin America and in the West. Despite his failed attempt at winning the Panamanian presidency in 1994, Blades is now serving as the Minister of Tourism under President Martín Torrijos.

Raised in a middle-class neighborhood in Panama City, Blades inherited his musical talents from his mother, a Cuban immigrant who played the piano and sang on the radio, and his father, a police detective who played the bongos. Inspired by the doo-wop singing of Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers, Blades began singing North American music in his early teens. However, influenced by the political upheaval in Panama during the mid-60s, Blades became increasingly patriotic and for a brief period refused to sing in any language other than Spanish.

While studying at the prestigious University of Panama, Blades continued to pursue his musical pursuits. He regularly performed with popular Panamanian groups such as Conjunto Latino and Los Salvajes del Ritmo, and recorded a best-selling album with Bush and the Magnificos in 1968. Shortly after, his reputation had spread to New York, and Blades was asked to join the legendary band of Joe Cuba, but he rejected the offer in order to complete his studies.

After graduating with degrees in political science and law, Blades worked as a lawyer at the Bank of Panama. In 1974, Blades abandoned his law career and moved to the US to pursue his music, staying temporarily with his exiled parents in Miami before relocating to New York City. Blades started out by taking a position in the mailroom at the Latin-orientated Fania Records and spent most of his spare time composing songs. One year later, he had replaced Tito Allen as featured vocalist in Ray Barretto's salsa band following a successful audition in the Fania Records mailroom.

Eventually, Barretto left the salsa band to start a Latin fusion project and Blades took control of the group, which he named Guarare. For their first project, Blades composed and sang lead on Barretto's recording 'Canto Abacua', which went on to become an international chart-topper. As a result, Blades was named Composer of the Year by *Latin New York* magazine. At the same time, Blades was also playing regularly with Willie Colón's band, and their collaboration reached its apex with the three-million-copy-selling album *Siembra*. This record-smashing LP included the song 'Pedro Navaja', which remains the biggest-selling single in salsa history.

Unfortunately, Blades' propensity to write politically charged lyrics was not universally accepted. In 1980 Blades became embroiled in a controversy over his song 'Tiburon', which railed against American political and military intervention in the Caribbean and was eventually banned from the radio in Miami. Shortly after, Blades tried to terminate his contract with Fania Records, though he was unable to break his contractual obligation. As a result, he recorded a number of self-proclaimed throw-away albums before going on to form his own band, Los Seis de Solar, in 1982. Over the next few years, Blades experimented with a fusion of Latin, rock, reggae and Caribbean music while simultaneously completing a master's degree in international law at Harvard University and breaking into Hollywood.

The same year he formed Los Seis de Solar, Blades got his first acting role in the film *The Last Fight*. Portraying a singer-turned-boxer, Blades' character seeks to win the championship against a fighter who was portrayed by the real life world champion boxer Salvador Sánchez. In the years to follow, Blades appeared in a string of movies including *The Milagro Beanfield War* (1988), *The Two Jakes* (1990), *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), *Devil's Own* (1997) and *Cradle Will Rock* (1999). However, his most memorable performances were in Paul Simon's Broadway musical *The Capeman* (1997) and in the cult movie *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* (2003).

In 2004, Blades ran an unsuccessful campaign for the presidency of Panama, though he did manage to finish in third place, with 20% of the vote. Since 2004 Blades has been serving as Panama's Minister of Tourism, though his tendency to favor foreign investment over environmental conservation has thus far garnered him mixed support.

as crafts. Molas symbolize the identity of the Kuna people to outsiders, and their colorful and elaborate designs often depict sea turtles, birds and fish. For more information on *molas*, see the boxed text on p40.

To learn about the Kuna as well as the culture, history and sewing of their world-famous *molas*, visit www.quiltethnic.com/kuna.html.

Ocú and Penonomé produce superior Panama hats. For more information on Panama's most famous fashion accessory, see the boxed text on p141.

Polleras (elaborate traditional outfits of Spanish origin) are handmade in Guararé and in other villages in Las Tablas Province. Also available on the Azuero Peninsula are handcrafted festival masks from Villa de Los Santos and Parita.

Painting

Trained in France, Roberto Lewis (1874–1949) became the first prominent figure on Panama's art scene. He painted portraits of the nation's leaders and allegorical images to decorate public buildings. Among his most notable works are those in the Palacio de las Garzas (p81) in Panama City. In 1913 Lewis became the director of Panama's first art academy, where he and his successor, Humberto Ivaldi (1909–47), educated a generation of artists. Among the school's students were Juan Manuel Cedeño and Isaac Benítez, as well as the painters who would come to the fore in the 1950s and 1960s. This group includes Alfredo Sinclair, Guillermo Trujillo, Eudoro Silvera and others. Most of these artists are still active today and their works are occasionally shown in local galleries.

Michel Perrin's *Magnificent Molas: The Art of the Kuna Indian* contains photographs of 300 fabric works of art. Perrin describes the vivid relationship between Kuna art and culture.

The largest Panamanian art exposition – the Bienal de Arte – is held every two years at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo (p87) in Panama City.

Photography

Panama has several gifted photographers, including Iraida Icaza, Stuart Warner and Sandra Eleta. Icaza, who lived for many years in Tokyo and now resides in New York, makes abstract art using photographic equipment. Her work is bold and innovative.

Warner, who has spent much of his life in Asia, the Middle East, Europe and the USA, captures the human spirit in beautiful landscapes and portraits.

Sandra Eleta's portraits of the black inhabitants of Panama's Caribbean coast (particularly of Portobelo, where she resides part of the year) have made her one of the most important photographers in Latin America.

Food & Drink

Panama's resplendent coastline and verdant interior produce a culinary bounty, from tropical fruits to *frutas del mar* (fruits of the sea). Throughout the country, bustling outdoor markets brim with such exotic specialities as mangoes, guavas and passion fruit, while fishers ply their catch of day, be it red snapper, spiny lobster, king crab or octopus. However, Panama remains fiercely true to its Latin roots by featuring rice and beans prominently at most meals. And of course, Panamanians love a good beef fillet, which isn't too hard to find given the abundance of cattle ranches throughout the country.

Despite its small size, Panama's culinary landscape varies considerably from region to region. Along the Caribbean coast, West Indian flavors are evident in Bocas del Toro, while traditional cooking methods of the Kuna people feature prominently in the Comarca. In the interior, hearty country-inspired cooking that's heavy on the beef and corn is usually on the menu, while indigenous groups in the Darién continue to subsist on rice, beans, yucca and plantains. The crown jewel in Panama's plate of gastronomic offerings, though, is its cosmopolitan capital, which is home to some of the finest restaurants in Latin America.

Owing to its rapidly growing international community, Panama City offers everything from French and Italian to Japanese and Chinese with a dash of Lebanese and African in the middle. While there's no shortage of cheap and cheerful neighborhood eateries, Panama City is the perfect place to lighten up the wallet, pack on a few extra kilos and wine and dine to your heart's (and stomach's) content.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

In most Latin American countries, the core of the Panamanian diet is rice and beans, a healthy and hearty staple that can be served a dozen different ways. In fact, a meal is not considered to be a meal unless there's rice, and it's not surprising that this versatile grain is seemingly served alongside everything. As for the beans, they're usually served lightly spiced with herbs, and also seem to be served with everything.

Panamanians have much love for the venerated plate of rice and beans, though most will secretly tell you that they'd prefer to eat meat three times a day. Urban dwellers can satisfy this carnivorous fix with *bistec* (steak) and *carne asado* (roast meat), though the working class are loyal to *ropa vieja* (literally 'old clothes'), a spicy shredded beef combination served over rice. Of course, Panamanians from all walks of life can agree that the national dish of *sancocho*, a fairly spicy chicken-and-vegetable stew, is simply delicious.

In restaurants, snack bars and just about anywhere food is sold, you'll undoubtedly come across empanadas, which are fried corn turnovers filled with ground meat. If you get them fresh, they're a fine treat. Another favorite is the *tamale,* which is cornmeal with a few spices and chicken or pork that's wrapped in banana leaves and boiled. Also keep an eye out for the Panamanian speciality known as *carimañola*, which is a roll made from ground and boiled yucca that is filled with chopped meat and then deep fried.

As in Costa Rica, *gallo pinto* (literally 'spotted rooster') is traditionally served at breakfast, and consists of a soupy mixture of rice and black beans. Although Westerners may be initially be put off by the idea of eating rice and beans for breakfast, a heaping plate of *gallo pinto* will start your day off right, and the stuff goes down well with *natilla* (a cross between sour cream and custard) and *huevos fritos/revueltos* (fried/scrambled eggs).

New World Kitchen: Latin American and Caribbean Cuisine, by Norman Aken, contains only one purely Panamanian recipe, but you'll find dozens of other 'Pan-Latin' and 'Pan-Caribbean' dishes that show culinary influences from the isthmus.

Another item you might see at breakfast is a side of *tortillas de maíz,* which is usually served alongside eggs or roast meat. Unlike those found in Mexico and Guatemala, Panamanian tortillas are much thicker, and are essentially deep-fried cornmeal cakes. If you have a sweet tooth, don't miss out on the *hojaldras*, which are deep-fried masses of dough that are served hot and covered with sugar – think of them as a Panamanian doughnut.

Dozens of Panamanian recipes (in Spanish) are listed on www.critica.com.pa/archivo/recetas.

At lunch, many Panamanians opt for a simple *comida corriente* (set meal), which is also known as a *casado* (literally 'married'). Known as the meal of the working class, this inexpensive set meal 'marries' either beef, chicken or fish to *arroz* (rice), *frijoles* (black beans), *plátano* (fried plantain), chopped *repollo* (cabbage) and possibly an egg or an avocado.

Since vegetables don't grow well in the tropics, yucca and plantains take the place of leafy greens at most Panamanian eateries. Yucca is most often served in fried cubes that are heavily salted and perfect for curing a hangover or preventing one in the morning. Plantains are usually served as either *patacones* (fried green plantains cut crossways) or *plátanos maduros* (ripe plantains baked or broiled with butter, brown sugar and cinnamon). Unlike vegetables, fruits are plentiful in Panama, and the climate is just right for nourishing a range of exotic tropical specialities including papayas, mangoes, *piñas* (pineapples), melons, *maracuyá* (passion fruit) and *guanábanas* (soursops, or custard apples).

You'll find excellent ceviche throughout the isthmus. To get a handle on preparing this delicious seafood dish, take a look at *The Great Ceviche Book,* by Douglas Rodriguez.

True to its moniker – Panamá means 'abundance of fish' in several indigenous languages – seafood is abundant along both coastlines. In the Caribbean, common everyday foods include shrimp, king crab, octopus, grouper and red snapper. Unfortunately lobster and grouper are heavily overfished, so you might want to skip these if they're out of season. In Bocas del Toro, you'll find a West Indian influence to the dishes – seafood is often mixed with coconut milk, and coconut rice and coconut bread are common staples. Further south in the Comarca de Kuna Yala, traditional cooking styles involve grating coconut over fresh fish that is cooked over hot coals.

Along the Pacific coast, *corvina* (sea bass) is the most sought-after catch of the day, and it's usually served either *a la parilla* (grilled) or as ceviche (raw fish marinated in lemon juice). In fact, ceviche is one of the most popular foods in the country – classic Panamanian ceviche includes sea bass or *conchas* (shellfish), chopped onion and *ají chombo* (one of the hottest chili peppers in the world). However, due to rapidly decreasing sea-bass stocks, ceviche is increasingly offered with *langostinos* (jumbo shrimp) or *pulpo* (octopus).

DRINKS

Alcoholic Drinks

The output of Panama's largest *seco* factory, Seco Herrerano, is 36,000 1L bottles every day.

The national alcoholic drink is *seco,* which is distilled, like rum, from sugarcane, and is popular in the rural areas. Order a *seco con leche* (*seco* with milk) in a martini lounge in Panama City and you'll likely receive some odd looks, but you'll make some new friends if you order one in the provinces.

By far the most popular alcoholic beverage in Panama is *cerveza* (beer), and the most popular local brands are Soberana and Panamá, as well as the higher-alcohol Balboa and Atlas. All of these beers fall somewhere between pilsner and lager, and although they're not overly flavorful, they do the trick when served ice cold on a hot day. A large Atlas at a typical cantina can cost as little as US$0.50; the same beer can cost you US$2.50 at a decent restaurant.

Interestingly enough, one beer company distributes Balboa and Panamá, while another distributes Soberana and Atlas – Panamanians often jest that

TRAVEL YOUR TASTE BUDS

Think you've got a strong palate, an iron gut and the will to travel your taste buds? Here's our top-five list of Panama's less than popular culinary oddities.

Mondongo (tripe soup) Unless you grew up eating the stuff, it's difficult for most people to dig into a hot, steamy bowl of boiled intestines. Assuming you can forget about what you're eating, where they came from and what used to pass through them, consistencies such as chewy, stringy and spongy don't exactly get the mouth watering and the stomach grumbling.

Ceviche de pulpo (octopus ceviche) Sushi aficionados the world over may disagree with us, but it takes a bit of mental preparation to put a piece of raw octopus in your mouth. Although the citric acid in the lemon juice arguably cooks the octopus, it's still rubbery and hard to chew, and it's difficult to describe the feeling of the suckers sliding down your throat.

Vino de Palma (Palm Wine) The preferred firewater of rural *campesinos* (country folk) throughout Panama, palm wine is the fermented sap of the *palma de corozo* tree. After burning your innards, inducing temporary blindness and killing a few million brain cells, you will be treated to one of the worst hangovers of your life, the likes of which has been known to last for up to two days.

Chicharrones (Fried Pig Skin) Although hot, salty and oily are usually good adjectives for describing a snack food, it's hard to eat pig skin if you've ever seen one rolling around in its own filth. Of course, 'pork rinds' are a popular snack food in the US, though the real thing is less like a pork-flavored potato chip and more like a greasy slab of pork-flavored fat.

Seco con leche (Rum-type liquor and milk) The prefered cocktail of rural *campesinos* across Panama, *seco con leche* is a cool and frothy mix of fresh milk and hard liquor. Sure, it goes down smooth enough, but don't even think about chasing it with beer lest you want to discover how quickly it can come up.

they're loyal to their favorite brands. We have our favorites too, though we'll let you decide which one quenches your thirst best!

Wines on offer in Panama generally come from Chile, Argentina, Spain and the USA, though the quality is poor and as a result wine isn't particularly popular. However, Panama City has a growing number of restaurants and bars where you can find good-quality wines.

Nonalcoholic Drinks

Panama sits firmly in the tropics, which means that there is no shortage of exotic juices on offer. Fresh fruit juices, sweetened with heaped tablespoons of sugar and mixed with water or milk, are known as *chichas* and are common throughout the country. Popular offerings include *piña* (pineapple), *sandía* (watermelon), *tamarindo* (tamarind), *guanábana* (soursop), *mango* (mango), *melón* (cantaloupe), *fresa* (strawberry), *zarzamora* (blackberry), *zanahoria* (carrot) and *cebada* (barley).

A nonalcoholic drink found in Panama and nowhere else is the *chicheme*. This delicious concoction consists of milk, sweet corn, cinnamon and vanilla, and is rumored to have health-giving properties.

Coffee is traditionally served very strong and offered with cream or condensed milk. Café Durán is the most popular of the local brands, and this being Central America, it's quite good. Cappuccinos are increasingly available in Panama City, David, Boquete and Bocas del Toro.

Tea (including herbal tea) is available in the cities, but is incredibly difficult to find in towns. Note that the milk in Panama is pasteurized and safe to drink.

Eating & Drinking in Latin America: A Menu Reader and Restaurant Guide, by Andy Herbach and Michael Dillon, is a sensible choice if you plan to travel in other parts of Latin America. The guide features local specialities and unusual dishes.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Panama has eating establishments to suit every budget. At the low end are *cafeterías* (simple eateries), where food is served either buffet-style or as

comida corriente. In either case, meals rarely cost over US$3, the atmosphere is informal and the service is courteous but to the point.

Panaderías are bakeries, and are a good choice for a quick bite. Most have a few tables and a countertop where you can peer at the goods. Coffee and other drinks are available at most bakeries.

Restaurante is a term that, like its English counterpart, covers a wide spectrum of dining options. Most restaurants open for lunch from noon to 3pm and dinner from 6pm to 10pm. On weekends, restaurants in Panama City stay open until midnight or even 2am, depending on their location. Not all places open for breakfast – those that do open at 7am or 8am. Even at the best places in Panama City, you rarely need reservations. If there's a wait, by the time you finish a cocktail at the restaurant-bar (or one nearby), your table will be ready.

The pain caused by the capsaicin in chili peppers causes the brain to produce natural endorphins to create a sense of wellbeing.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

As with the rest of Latin American, vegetarians and vegans traveling in Panama should have few problems subsisting on rice and beans – it may be dull, but this hearty staple packs in your daily protein requirements. Vegetarians will be happy to learn that eggs and local cheeses feature prominently on most menus, while vegans will be more than satisfied with the variety of fresh tropical fruits on offer.

The best places for vegetarians to eat are in Panama City, which has a handful of places where you can put together a meatless meal. Lebanese, Thai and Chinese places are good options. Also keep an eye out for supermarkets and vegetable stands, where you can get the ingredients to put your own meal together.

Be aware that Panamanian dishes often contain 'hidden' meat products – vegetable soups usually are made from meat stock, and *patacones* are often fried in lard.

EATING WITH KIDS

If you're traveling with the little ones, be advised that only a handful of Panamanian restaurants have high chairs or special kids' menus. All the same, most Panamanians are quite accommodating to diners with children.

Cities with the widest varieties of restaurants are Panama City, Bocas del Toro, Boquete and to a lesser extent David. In any of these towns, it's easy

PANAMA'S TOP FIVE EATS

- **René Cafe** (Casco Viejo, Panama City; p95) René Cafe is an alfresco charmer where you can dine on electic tapas while watching pedestrians pass through the Plaza de la Independencia.
- **Limoncillo** (Bella Vista, Panama City; p97) Limoncillo is one of the city's most stylish restaurants – the daily specials are almost as artistic as the original paintings that adorn the walls.
- **Palo Alto** (Boquete, Chiriquí Province; p208) A rustic restaurant where you can soak up the charm of the highlands while dining on the catch of the day (usually river trout) and listen to the sounds of the rushing Río Palo Alto.
- **La Casbah** (Isla Colón, Bocas del Toro Province; p228) This much-loved Bocas restaurant offers a wide variety of European-inspired dishes that are accented by fresh produce and exotic spices.
- **Roots** (Isla Bastimentos, Bocas del Toro Province; p234) This Isla Bastimentos institution is perched over the water, but the views shouldn't distract you too much from the seriously fresh seafood.

DOS AND DON'TS

- When you enter a restaurant, and when you sit down at a table, it's polite to say *'buenos dias,' 'buenas tardes' or 'buenas noches'* (depending on the time of day) to those near you.
- When you leave a restaurant, it's polite to say *'buen provecho'* (bon appetit) to those near you.
- It's customary to leave a 10% *propina* (tip), which is usually included in the bill. Always look to see if the tip has been added.
- Don't eat animals that are endangered or at risk of being endangered. These include *tortuga* (sea turtle), *huevos de tortuga* (turtle eggs), *cazón* (shark), *conejo pintado* (paca), *ñeque* (agouti), *venado* (deer) or iguana. *Langosta* (lobster) is heavily overfished, particularly in the Comarca de Kuna Yala. By eating lobster, you may be contributing to its extinction in these waters – this is especially important during the mating season from March to July.

to find something for even the most finicky child. And, of course, nearly every town has at least one pizzeria, which is where you're most likely to see Panamanian parents with little children or teenagers.

Supermarkets in Panama boast a wide range of products, and are great spots for loading up on snack items before a bus trip.

For loads of Panamanian recipes in English head to www.czbrats.com/Menus/recmenu.htm.

Very few visitors to Panama have a problem with sickness from food preparation, and that includes kids as well as adults. Cleanliness and hygiene are particularly high in Panama, and the tap water is safe to drink in most provinces (Bocas del Toro being a notable exception).

For more information on traveling with kids, see p293.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Urbanites in Panama tend to have a small repast at breakfast time – usually just coffee and a roll. In the countryside, however, it's not uncommon to start the day off with something bigger, such as eggs, *carne asado* and tortillas. Generally, lunch is the big meal of the day, often followed by a short siesta to beat the heat of the day. Dinner usually consists of soup or salad and bread.

Get some Latin culinary inspiration at www.boyds.org/recipes.htm.

Panamanians are open and informal, and treat their guests quite well. If you have the good fortune to be invited into a Panamanian's home, you can expect to be served first, receive the biggest portion and perhaps even receive a parting gift. On your part, flowers or wine are a fine gift to bring, though the best gift you can offer is extending a future dinner invitation to your hosts.

EAT YOUR WORDS

Don't know your *pipas* from your *patacones*? A *batido* from a *bolita*? Get beneath the surface of Panama's plentiful cuisine by learning the lingo. For pronunciation guidelines, see p320.

Useful Phrases

Another (beer) please.
Mas una (cerveza), por favor — mas *oo*·na ser·*ve*·sa por fa·*vor*

Do you have an English menu?
¿Hay una carta en inglés? — ai *oo*·na *kar*·ta en een·*gles*

I'd like ...
Quisiera ... — kee·*sye*·ra ...

I'm a vegetarian.
Soy vegetariano/a. (m/f) — soy ve·khe·te·*rya*·no/a

The bill, please.
La cuenta, por favor. — la *kwen*·ta por fa·*vor*

Menu Decoder

almojabanos (al·mo·kha·*ba*·nos) – similar to *tortilla de maíz*, except hand-rolled into small sausage-sized pieces
batido (ba·*tee*·do) – milkshake made with fresh fruit, sugar and milk
bocas (*bo*·kas) – savory side dishes or appetizers
bolitas de carne (bo·*lee*·tas de *kar*·ne) – snack of mildly spicy meatballs
carimañola (ka·ree·ma·*nyo*·la) – a deep-fried roll made from chopped meat and boiled yucca
carne ahumada (*kar*·ne a·oo·*ma*·da) – smoked, dried (jerked) meat
ceviche (se·*vee*·che) – marinated raw fish or shellfish
chichas (*chee*·chas) – heavily sweetened, fresh fruit drinks
chicheme (chee·*che*·me) – nonalcoholic drink consisting of milk, sweet corn, cinnamon and vanilla
comida corriente; casado (ko·*mee*·da ko·*ryen*·te; ka·*sa*·do) – set meal of rice, beans, plantains and a piece of meat or fish
corvina (kor·*vee*·na) – a flavorful white fish; Panama's most popular fish dish
empanada (em·pa·*na*·da) – corn turnover filled with ground meat, chicken, cheese or sweet fruit
gallo pinto (*ga*·lyo *peen*·to) – literally 'spotted rooster'; a soupy mixture of rice and black beans
hojaldres (o·*khal*·dres) – fried dough, similar to a doughnut; popular with breakfast
huevos fritos/revueltos (*we*·vos *free*·tos/re·*vwel*·tos) – fried/scrambled eggs
licuado (lee·*kwa*·do) – shake made with fresh fruit, sugar and water
mondongo (mon·*don*·go) – tripe
patacones (pa·ta·*ko*·nes) – fried green plantains cut in thin pieces, salted, pressed and then fried
pipa (*pee*·pa) – coconut water, served straight from the husk
plátano maduro (*pla*·ta·no ma·*doo*·ro) – ripe plantains baked or broiled with butter, brown sugar and cinnamon; served hot
raspados (ras·*pa*·dos) – shaved ice flavored with fruit juice
ropa vieja (*ro*·pa *vye*·kha) – literally 'old clothes'; a spicy shredded beef combination served over rice
sancocho (san·*ko*·cho) – a somewhat spicy chicken-and-vegetable stew; Panama's national dish
seco (*se*·ko) – alcoholic drink made from sugarcane
tajadas (ta·*kha*·das) – ripe plantains sliced lengthwise and fried
tamales (ta·*ma*·les) – spiced ground corn with chicken or pork, boiled in banana leaves
tasajo (ta·*sa*·kho) – dried meat cooked with vegetables
tortilla de maíz (tor·*tee*·lya de ma·*ees*) – a thick, fried cornmeal tortilla

Food Glossary

BASICS

a la parilla	a la pa·*ree*·lya	grilled
azúcar	a·soo·*kar*	sugar
cuchara	koo·*cha*·ra	spoon
cuchillo	koo·*chee*·lyo	knife
frito	*free*·to	fried
hielo	*ye*·lo	ice
mantequilla	man·te·*kee*·lya	butter
pan	pan	bread
plato	*pla*·to	plate
sal	sal	salt
servilleta	ser·vee·*lye*·ta	napkin
sopa	*so*·pa	soup
taza	*ta*·sa	cup
tenedor	te·ne·*dor*	fork
vaso	*va*·so	glass

MEAL TIMES

desayuno	de·sa·*yoo*·no	breakfast
almuerzo	al·*mwer*·so	lunch
cena	*se*·na	dinner

FRUITS & VEGETABLES

aguacate	a·gwa·*ka*·te	avocado
ensalada	en·sa·*la*·da	salad
fresa	*fre*·sa	strawberry
guanábana	gwa·*na*·ba·na	soursop
manzana	man·*za*·na	apple
maracuyá	ma·ra·koo·*ya*	passion fruit
naranja	na·*ran*·kha	orange
piña	*pee*·nya	pineapple
zanahoria	sa·na·*o*·rya	carrot
zarzamora	zar·za·*mo*·ra	blackberry

SEAFOOD

camarón	ka·ma·*ron*	shrimp
filete de pescado	fee·*le*·te de pes·*ka*·do	fish fillet
langosta	lan·*gos*·ta	lobster
langostino	lan·gos·*tee*·no	jumbo shrimp
pescado	pes·*ka*·do	fish
pulpo	*pool*·po	octopus

MEATS

bistec	*bis*·tek	steak
carne	*kar*·ne	beef
chuleta	choo·*le*·ta	pork chop
hamburguesa	am·boor·*gwe*·sa	hamburger
salchicha	sal·*chee*·cha	sausage

DRINKS

agua	*a*·gwa	water
bebida	be·*bee*·da	drink
café	ka·*fe*	coffee
cerveza	ser·*ve*·sa	beer
leche	*le*·che	milk
ron	ron	rum
vino	*vee*·no	wine

Environment

Although still largely undiscovered, Panama is slowly gaining fame for its vast tropical forests, hundreds of pristine islands and the astounding biodiversity stretching its full length. Although the country itself is only slightly bigger than Ireland or Austria, Panama is home to an incredible variety of landscapes. In the span of a few days, you can easily climb mountains and trek across valleys, hike through highland cloud forests and verdant jungles and take a dip in both the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean.

In April 2004 Panama, Costa Rica, Colombia and Ecuador signed an agreement creating a Pacific marine corridor to preserve the area's ecosystems.

As the secret about Panama's remarkable environment spreads, more and more visitors arrive on the isthmus with one thing in mind: experiencing the wildlife which the country has in spades. On land, Panama's rainforests support countless creatures from the tiny agoutis that scurry across the canopy floor to the mighty jaguars that prowl the forests by night. In the sea, shallow coral reef beds support countless varieties of tropical fish, while pelagic animals including hammerheads and manta rays search for food in deeper waters. In the air, over 900 avian species dart across the sky, making Panama one of the top birding destinations in the world.

Unfortunately, Panama also has grave environmental threats, coming from the hands of loggers, developers and indifferent or corrupt government agencies, who don't understand that the country's finest gem – its natural beauty – is rapidly disappearing. The principal threat to Panama's ecology is deforestation, which is picking up momentum throughout the country, most notably in the Darién. In addition, the balance between environmental conservation and infrastructure development is threatening to tip in favor of the latter, particularly in tourist hot spots such as Isla de Coiba and Bocas del Toro. Fortunately, the unexpected delay in the tourism boom may buy enough time for both sides to reach an agreement that is both sustainable and profitable.

THE LAND

Panama is both the narrowest and the southernmost country in Central America. The long S-shaped isthmus borders Costa Rica in the west and Colombia in the east. Its northern Caribbean coastline measures 1160km, compared to a 1690km Pacific coastline in the south, and its total land area is 78,056km. By comparison, Panama is roughly the same size as South Carolina.

Panama is just 50km wide at its leanest point, an impressive statistic given that it separates two great oceans. The Panama Canal, which is about 80km long, effectively divides the country into eastern and western regions. Panama is also home to two great mountain ranges, which run along Panama's spine in both the east and the west. The highest point in the country, Volcán Barú, is located in Chiriquí Province, and is also the country's only volcano.

Like all of the Central American countries, Panama has large, flat coastal lowlands, covered in places by huge banana plantations. There are about 480 rivers in Panama and 1518 islands near its shores. The two main island groups are the San Blás and Bocas del Toro archipelagos on the Caribbean side, but most of the islands are on the Pacific side. Even the Panama Canal has islands, including Isla Barro Colorado, which has a world-famous tropical rainforest research station.

WILDLIFE

The country's rich biodiversity owes a great deal to its geological history. Around 65 million years ago, North and South America were joined by a land bridge not unlike what exists today. Around 50 million years ago however, the continents split apart and remained separate from one another for millions of years.

During this time, unique evolutionary landscapes were created on both continents. In South America, there was an astonishing diversification of many species. The land soon gave rise to many bird families (toucans and hummingbirds included), unique neotropical rodents (agoutis and capybaras) and groups like iguanas, poison dart frogs and basilisks. In North America, which collided repeatedly with Eurasia, animal species that had no relatives in South America (horses, deer, raccoons, squirrels and mice) flourished.

A Neotropical Companion, by John Kricher, is an excellent book for learning about ecology, evolutionary theory and biodiversity in the New World tropics.

The momentous event that would change natural history for both continents occurred around three million years ago when the land bridge of Panama arose. Species from both continents mingled as northern animals went south and southern animals went north. Many found their homes in the lush forests and wetlands along the isthmus, where the great variety of plant species created ideal conditions for nourishing wildlife.

Today, the interchange of species between North and South America is limited to winged migrations, though this annual event can be breathtaking to behold.

Animals

Panama's biodiversity is staggering – the country is home to 218 mammal species, 226 species of reptile, 164 amphibian species and 125 animal species found nowhere else in the world. Panama also boasts 940 avian species, which is the largest number in Central America.

Bird-watchers consider Panama to be one of the world's best birding sights. Quetzals, macaws, amazons, parrots and toucans all have sizable populations here, as do many species of tanager and raptor. The best bird-watching site in the country is Cana (p286) in Parque Nacional Darién, where you can see four species of macaw, golden-headed quetzals and black-tipped cotingas. Another fantastic birding spot is Parque Nacional Soberanía (p110), where hundreds of species have been spotted along the famous 17km-long Pipeline Rd.

One of the most sought-after birds is the harpy eagle, the national bird of Panama. With a 2m wingspan and weights of up to 20lb, this raptor is the world's most powerful bird of prey and a truly awesome sight. The bird is recognized by its huge size, its broad, black chest band with white underneath, its piercing yellow eyes and its prominent, regal crests. The harpy's powerful claws can carry off howler monkeys and capuchins, and it also hunts sloths, coatis, anteaters and just about anything that moves. It's best spotted in the Parque Nacional Darién around Punta Patiño (p281).

More famous than the harpy eagle is the elusive, emerald-green quetzal, which lives in habitats throughout Central America, but some of the best places to see it are in Panama. The male has an elongated wing covert (train) and a scarlet breast and belly, while females have duller plumage. Parque Nacional Volcán Barú (p208) is a top spot for sighting them, as is Parque Internacional La Amistad (p213). They are best spotted in the breeding season from March to June when males grow their spectacular trains and start calling for mates.

Panama's geographical position also makes it a crossroads for migratory birds. Out of the country's 940 bird species, 122 occur only as long-distance migrants (ie they don't breed in Panama). From August to December, North American raptors migrate south into Central America by the millions – at

times, there are so many birds that they make a black streak across the sky. The canopy tower in Panama's Parque Nacional Soberanía (p110) is a particularly good vantage point for watching this migration.

In Bocas del Toro, keep an eye out for kettling hawk migrations – October is the best month to see them in large numbers. The migration of turkey vultures over the islands in early March and again in October is another striking sight. These big, black-bodied, red-necked birds can streak the sky and are able to soar for long periods without a single flap as they migrate between southern Canada and Tierra del Fuego.

Primate lovers are also drawn to Panama. Among the country's many species – including white-faced capuchins, squirrel monkeys, spider monkeys and howler monkeys – are some fascinating varieties. The Geoffroy's tamarin, for instance, is found nowhere else in Central America. These tiny, gregarious monkeys can live in groups of up to 40 in lowland forest, and many weigh less than a pound. They're identified by their whistles and chirps, mottled black-and-brown fur, white chests, and of course, their diminutive stature. They can be spotted in Parque Natural Metropolitano (p82), Monumento Nacional Isla Barro Colorado (p113) and in the Darién (p273).

Big cats prowl the jungles of Panama and although you'd be extremely fortunate to catch even a glimpse of one, their prints are easy to come across. Jaguars, pumas, ocelots, jaguarundis and margays are all found on the isthmus. The jaguar is the biggest of the bunch and is the largest cat in the Americas. Jaguars (and pumas) both need large tracts of land in order to survive. Without them the big cats gradually exhaust their food supply (which numbers 85 hunted species) and perish. They are excellent swimmers and climbers and are commonly spotted resting on sunny riverbanks.

Panama's offshore waters host a fascinating assortment of creatures. Reefs found off both coasts support a plethora of tropical fish, and visitors to the national marine parks might spot humpback whales, reef sharks, bottlenose dolphins, and killer or sperm whales. Underwater, whale sharks, black- and white-tip sharks and occasionally tiger sharks also visit.

One of Panama's biggest coastal draws is the sea turtle. Of the world's seven different species, five can be seen in Panama at various times throughout the year (see the boxed text, opposite). All sea turtles originally evolved from terrestrial species and the most important stage of their survival happens on land when they come to nest. Although you'll need a bit of luck and a lot of patience, the experience of seeing hatchlings emerge is unparalleled.

Monkey's Bridge: Mysteries of Evolution in Central America, by David Rains Wallace, tells of the colorful evolutionary unfolding of fauna and flora on the isthmus, beginning three million years ago and ending in the present.

Arribadas (arrivals) are rare events that occur when thousands of female sea turtles flood the beach to lay their eggs. This happens occasionally on Isla de Cañas (p173) when 40,000 to 50,000 olive ridleys come to nest at a single time. This chance event most likely occurs in the wet season (usually September to October) during the first and last quarter of the moon. Although scientists are not entirely sure why these mass arrivals occur, a common theory is that *arribadas* are a defense mechanism to overwhelm would-be predators.

Endangered Species

According to the World Conservation Monitoring Centre, there are over 100 species threatened with extinction within Panama. Among the animals appearing on its 'red list' for Panama are the jaguar, the spectacled bear, the Central American tapir, the American crocodile, all five species of sea turtle that nest on Panamanian beaches and dozens of birds, including several eagle species and the military and scarlet macaws.

The Panamanian legislature has implemented laws to curb illegal hunting and logging, but the laws are widely ignored due to an absence of enforce-

SEA-TURTLE NESTING

Turtle	Nesting season	Peak	Hot spots
leatherback	Mar-Jul (Caribbean) Oct-Mar (Pacific)	April-May (Caribbean) Nov-Jan (Pacific)	Isla Bastimentos Humedal de San-San Pond Sak
loggerhead	May-Sep (Caribbean)	no peak	Isla Bastimentos Humedal de San-San Pond Sak
green	May-Oct (Caribbean) Jun-Dec (Pacific)	Aug-Oct (Caribbean) no peak	Isla Bastimentos Humedal de San-San Pond Sak
hawksbill	Apr-Oct (Caribbean) Apr-Nov (Pacific)	Jun-Jul (Caribbean) Jun-Jul (Pacific)	Isla Bastimentos Humedal de San-San Pond Sak
olive ridley	year-round (Pacific)	Jun-Nov (Pacific)	Isla de Cañas

ment. For example, keeping a parrot, toucan or macaw in a cage is a fineable offense in Panama. However, not only can you see them in cages outside many residences, but many hotel managers apparently believe that tourists enjoy seeing large tropical birds in itty-bitty cages.

You can help reduce the threat to Panama's endangered species. If you see caged animals at a hotel, complain to the manager, take your business elsewhere and report the crime to **ANCON** (National Association for the Conservation of Nature; ☎ 314 0060), the country's largest private conservation organization. Although it should go without saying, please refrain from eating *tortuga* (sea turtle), *huevos de tortuga* (turtle eggs), *cazón* (shark), *conejo pintado* (paca), *ñeque* (agouti), *venado* (deer) or iguana.

Please remember that buying items such as jaguar teeth, ocelot skins or turtle shell products, directly contributes to these animals' extinction.

Plants

Humid, tropical rainforest is the dominant vegetation in the canal area, along the Caribbean coast and in most of the eastern half of the country – Parque Nacional Darién (p280) protects much of Panama's largest tropical rainforest region. Other vegetation zones include dry tropical rainforest and grassland on the Pacific coast, cloud forest in the highlands, alpine vegetation on the highest peaks and mangrove forest on both coasts and around many islands. Among the flora, Panama has over 10,000 species of plant including approximately 1200 orchid species, 675 fern species and 1500 species of tree.

NATIONAL PARKS

Today, Panama has around 40 national parks and officially protected areas, and about 25% of the country's total land is set aside for conservation. In many of the national parks and protected areas, you'll find mestizo and indigenous villages scattered throughout. In the most successful scenarios, the communities help protect and maintain the park and its wildlife.

A Field Guide to the Orchids of Costa Rica and Panama, by Robert Dressler, has 240 photos, and almost as many drawings, of orchids within its 274 pages.

To enter a national park, travelers must pay US$3 (US$10 if it's a national marine park) at ANAM (Autoridad Nacional de Ambiente; Panama's national environmental authority) headquarters in Panama City (p75), at a regional ANAM office or at an ANAM ranger station inside the park being visited. Permits to camp or stay at an ANAM ranger station (US$5 to US$10) can be obtained in the same places as well.

In Panama City, the 265-hectare Parque Natural Metropolitano (p82) protects vast expanses of tropical semideciduous forest within the city limits.

A short distance from the capital and situated in Panamá Province, Parque Nacional Soberanía (p110) is a birder's paradise – in a single day, you can see hundreds of different avian species. Lush rainforest abounds here, as it does on the nearby biological reserve of Monumento Nacional Isla Barro Colorado (p113), where scientists study the area's incredibly rich biodiversity.

In Coclé Province, Parque Nacional Omar Torrijos (p142) is a lovely national park that remains largely overlooked owing to its difficult access – you'll need a good 4WD, or plan on walking a bit (at least one hour) to reach the entrance. Once there you'll be rewarded with some prime bird watching through lovely forest, and the possibility of viewing both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

In contrast to many of Panama's other national parks, the small Parque Nacional Sarigua (p156), just outside of Chitré in Herrera Province, is not the place to encounter lush forests or abundant wildlife – which is precisely the point. The desertlike wasteland exists as a sad and potent reminder of the future of Panama if greed wins out over environmental responsibility.

Refugio de Vida Silvestre Cenegón del Mangle....26 D3
Refugio de Vida Silvestre Isla de Cañas....27 D3
Refugio de Vida Silvestre Isla Iguana....28 E3
Refugio de Vida Silvestre Peñón de la Honda....29 D3
Refugio de Vida Silvestre Playa Boca Vieja....30 B3
Refugio de Vida Silvestre Playa de La Barqueta Agrícola....31 B2
Refugio de Vida Silvestre Taboga y Urabá....32 E2
Reserva Forestal Canglón....33 G2
Reserva Forestal El Montuoso....34 D3
Reserva Forestal Fortuna....35 B2
Reserva Forestal La Laguna de La Yeguada....36 D2
Reserva Forestal La Tronosa....37 D3
Reserva Hidológica Serranía Filo del Tallo....38 G2
Reserva Natural Punta Patiño....39 G2

Nearby, the Refugio de Vida Silvestre Cenegón del Mangle (p158) is a mangrove forest and wildlife refuge that's a prime nesting ground for herons and other bird life. It also contains a series of pools said to have therapeutic properties.

Although the province of Los Santos has no national parks, there is an attractive wildlife refuge and a protected area frequented by nesting sea turtles. The Refugio de Vida Silvestre Isla Iguana (p170) near Pedasí offers some pristine snorkeling and if you're lucky you might spot some humpback whales in the area. Nearby, Isla de Cañas (p173) is a major nesting site for olive ridley sea turtles.

In Veraguas, Parque Nacional Coiba (p185) is one of the largest marine parks in the world. It contains Panama's largest island, the 493-sq-km Isla de Coiba, which is regarded by scientists as a biodiversity hotspot. Also in Veraguas is the 32,577-hectare Parque Nacional Cerro Hoya (p190), which protects some of the last remaining patches of dry tropical forest on the Península de Azuero. Unfortunately, the park has little infrastructure and getting there is a challenge.

The San Lorenzo Project protects the forests, wetlands and coastal regions surrounding former US military base Fuerte Sherman in Colón Province - visit www.sanlorenzo.org.pa.

In Chiriquí Province, along the coastline south of David, the impressive Parque Nacional Marino Golfo de Chriquí (p198) is a 14,740-hectare national marine park that protects 25 islands and numerous coral reefs – the aquatic life here is astounding. In the highlands, the 14,300-hectare Parque Nacional Volcán Barú (p208) surrounds Panama's only volcano – its fertile soil nourishes a wide variety of plant and animal life, making it a fine destination for hikers and bird watchers. At 3478m, Volcán Barú's summit is Panama's highest peak. Also in Chiriquí is the majority of the Panamanian side of the binational Parque Internacional La Amistad (p213). Although largely unexplored, La Amistad offers several excellent day hikes and you can easily hire local indigenous guides to lead you on overnight excursions.

In the Archipiélago de Bocas del Toro, Parque Nacional Marino Isla Bastimentos (p231) protects various areas of the archipelago and is an important nature reserve for many species of Caribbean wildlife. Turtles nest on its beaches and its abundant marine life makes for great snorkeling and diving. On the mainland is the other sector of Panama's share of the binational Parque Internacional La Amistad (p237). Wekso, as this sector of the park is called, is home to several different indigenous groups, pristine rainforest and abundant wildlife. Near the border with Chiriquí Province, the Bosque Protector Palo Seco (p239) contains several hiking trails through lush cloud forest high in the Talamanca range.

Panama's crown jewel is the Parque Nacional Darién (p280), which boasts 576,000 hectares of wildlife-rich rainforest. The heart of this Unesco World Heritage site is Cana, a former mining valley that is now regarded as one of the best birding spots in the world. The Darién is also home to the Reserva Natural Punta Patiño (p281), a 26,315-hectare wildlife reserve on the southern shore of the Golfo de San Miguel. This private reserve is one of the best places in the country to see the harpy eagle, Panama's national bird.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

According to 2003 figures published by the EIU Country Report, 44.4% of Panama is covered by forest and just over 25% of its land is set aside for conservation – this is more than any other Central American country. Panama's forests also contain the greatest number of species of all the New World countries north of Colombia.

Tropical rainforests cover just 7% of the earth's surface but account for 50% of the world's biodiversity.

Unfortunately, it is uncertain as to whether Panamanians will be able to live in harmony with their wilderness areas in the years to come. A little over 50 years ago, 70% of Panama's total land mass was covered by forest, which gives a quick indication of one of the country's gravest environmental problems: deforestation. Despite the presence of a growing environmental movement, the majority of Panamanians – especially the urban poor and rural farmers – are unconcerned with the rainforest's destruction. This is especially true in the Darién, which is currently serving as ground zero for the ongoing deforestation.

Additionally, Panama's national parks are staffed by few park rangers. Although their areas of coverage are colossal, many rangers aren't given patrol vehicles or radios. In Parque Nacional Darién for instance, there are usually no more than 20 rangers assigned to protect 576,000 hectares – an area larger than some countries. These rangers are generally unarmed and poorly paid, and spend most of their day trying to figure out what they are going to eat for dinner. Meanwhile illegal hunting, settling and logging take place in their park. Unless the Panamanian government gets serious, it may not be long before the country's protected areas are nothing more than national parks on paper.

In recent years, increased foreign investment coupled with the desire to improve tourist infrastructure have started to threaten several of Panama's most pristine ecosystems. For instance, on Isla de Coiba, environmentalists and developers are debating to what extent (if any) hoteliers should be allowed to develop the island as a commercial tourist destination. In addition, on Isla Bastimentos in Bocas del Toro, a massive luxury residential project aimed at foreign retirees will likely change the face of this once remote island. Unfortunately, money talks in Panama and the sad reality is that virgin rainforest is not nearly as profitable as all-inclusive resorts and oceanside condos.

Deforestation

To get an idea of Panama's ecological future, one need only glimpse at what happened (and what's continuing to happen) in the Darién. The region north of Yaviza – the town where the Interamericana presently ends – was covered with virgin forest just over three decades ago. Unfortunately, everything changed when the highway was extended from Chepo to Yaviza.

The loggers initially sought big trees within easy reach, felling all the giants near the highway and trampling young trees with their machinery. Once the giant trees were gone, the loggers cut roads perpendicular to the highway, which led into tall stands of hardwoods. After those stands were chopped down and removed, more roads were cut and yet more stands were leveled.

Right behind the loggers were thousands of settlers looking to eke out a living by turning the trampled vegetation left by the loggers into cropland. With the mature trees gone, all that was required to create cropland was an ax and a match. After some crackling, sizzling and a lot of smoke, the would-be subsistence farmers had fields for planting. Of course, all of this is not only legal, but actively encouraged by Panamanian law.

However, the story doesn't end here. In a healthy rainforest ecosystem, huge, exposed tree roots prevent heavy rains from washing away the thin layer of nutrient-rich topsoil found in tropical forests. But, if you take out the trees, a big storm over a denuded area will quickly carry the topsoil into rivers and out to sea, leaving only the nutrient-deficient lower soil where the vibrant jungle once stood. In the span of only two to three years, the soil in the Darién couldn't support a decent harvest and little more than grass grew on it. Since grass is what cattle eat, the ranchers stepped in and bought fields that frustrated farmers could no longer use.

Today the succession of loggers, farmers and ranchers continues in northern Darién Province, although now the loggers must drive far up the side roads they've made to find trees. The farmers are still a step behind the loggers, unintentional nomads employing the slash-and-burn method so widespread in the developing world. And everywhere the settler-farmers go, ranchers move in behind them. Worse yet, as if bent on speeding the Darién's destruction, the Panamanian government is currently paving the Interamericana all the way to Yaviza.

A good website to help you learn about the astounding natural riches of Isla de Coiba is www.coibapanama.com, which contains photographs as well as links to conservation organizations in Panama.

Isla de Coiba

Currently, one of the hottest environmental topics in Panama is the fate of Isla de Coiba (p188). This rainforest-covered island and Unesco World Heritage site is set in one of the largest marine parks in the world – scientists often compare Coiba to the Galapagos Islands.

Owing to the presence of a penal colony, this island and its surrounding waters remained untouched, but now that the prison is being phased out, developers and members of the government see glorious tourism possibilities for this ecological gem. What they have in mind is building a few hotels, perhaps a megaresort or two on the island and in nearby Santa

SAVE THE RAINFOREST

Why should we as humans start getting more serious about saving the rainforest? Even though most of us don't encounter one in our daily lives, rainforests and their future survival affect each and every one of us in more ways than we realize. Here's why.

Carbon Sink Effect

Some of the most common media buzzwords these days are 'climate change' and 'global warming,' and particularly to what extent we are negatively impacting the health and sustainability of the planet. As developing nations around the world continue to modernize, global carbon emissions are on the rise, and evidence of the greenhouse effect can already be felt across the planet.

One of the best defenses humans have against rising carbon dioxide levels is the tropical rainforest. Specifically, tropical rainforests limit the greenhouse effect of global warming by storing carbon and hence reducing the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. But our best defense against climate change is rapidly being destroyed the world over. In a frightening example of the interconnectedness of human societies, the deforestation of Latin America rainforests is impacting global ecosystems, such as the increasing desertification of the Sahel in Africa.

Unfortunately, the total picture is even bleaker. In 2004, scientists announced that the world's tropical forests may become less able to absorb carbon dioxide. In areas of the forest where there was no human activity such as logging or burning, scientists discovered that bigger, quicker-growing species were flourishing at the expense of the smaller ones living below the forest canopy. Since plant growth is dependent on carbon dioxide, the team hypothesized that tropical rainforests are getting an extra boost from rising levels of global emissions.

As a result of changing rainforest dynamics, specifically the decline of densely wooded subcanopy trees, the ability of tropical rainforests to act as a carbon sink is in jeopardy. This reality, however frightening it may be, affects each and every one of us.

Bioprospecting

In October 2003 the scientific journal of the Ecological Society of America published an article on one of the most fascinating scientific research projects ever undertaken in Panama – one that could have long-lasting implications for rainforest conservation around the globe.

Several US scientists developed a program in Panama of 'bioprospecting' or scouring the rainforest for compounds that may one day become new drugs. They set up six labs and hired Panamanian cell biologists and chemists to develop and run experiments. Although the labs have funding far below those in the USA and Europe, researchers have already starting producing remarkable results and have published their findings in a number of academic journals.

The results of all this places a great deal of importance on the rainforest's biodiversity, especially since further research – and by necessity conservation – potentially equals cures for widespread diseases. It is also slowly attracting the attention of large pharmaceutical companies, and could lead to a huge investment in helping to both unlock the mysteries of the rainforest and consequently preserve them. Ultimately this would make conservation both the end and the means.

Intrinsic Value

Climate change and bioprospecting aside, a simple argument for saving the rainforest is simply that its intrinsic value is enough to warrant increased conservation efforts. Panama's natural vegetation was originally almost all forest, though much of this has been cleared during the past few generations to create pastures and agriculture land. As a result, the destruction of rainforest has already wiped out countless flora and fauna species that will never be known again. Even beyond the plants and animals that actually inhabit the forests, deforestation negatively impacts migratory animals that pass through the forests annually, such as bats, butterflies and birds.

Deforestation and habitat destruction have also threatened the traditional cultures of the Emberá and Wounaan, who have lived in the rainforest for generations. While humans the world over lament the destruction of this crucial ecosystem, it is the original denizens of the rainforests that have already lost the most.

Catalina, plus a cruise-ship dock and so on. Former President Mireya Moscoso signed a law in 2002 allowing developers to exploit the island, though progress has been delayed due to the opposition imposed by ANCON, the country's largest private conservation organization.

Red Frog Beach Club

Foreigners have been buying up real estate on the islands of Bocas del Toro for decades, but nothing has alarmed Panamanians quite like the planned community of the Red Frog Beach Club (RFBC) on Isla Bastimentos. This massive luxury residential complex will be comprised of ocean-side condos and villas, an all-inclusive resort hotel, three marinas and an 18-hole golf course. More importantly, it will completely transform the face of the island that was formerly home to working-class West Indians and nesting sea turtles.

Despite protests from concerned residents, local expats, environmentalists and marine biologists, nothing seems to be slowing down the progress of construction. Unfortunately, there is little evidence to suggest that the RFBC will be anything other than a total environmental disaster.

For more information on the precarious future of Isla Bastimentos, see the boxed text on p232.

ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

In spite of the majority of Panamanians being indifferent to the environmental devastation occurring within the country, there are a few organizations striving to protect the country and its biodiversity, which cannot always be said for ANAM, the largely useless national environment authority. The following resources are good places to learn about Panama's natural (and threatened) riches:

The Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute's website, www.stri.org, contains information about current research in the rainforest labs and upcoming seminars, and recent publications about tropical ecology and biodiversity topics.

ANCON (☎ 314 0060; www.ancon.org in Spanish) Founded in 1985 by academic and business leaders, ANCON has played a major role in the creation of national parks and on many occasions has spurred ANAM into action. Ancon Expeditions, although no longer part of the nonprofit organization, still leases land from the conservation organization and employs some of the top naturalist guides in the country; see also p89.

Associación Napguana (☎ 227 5886; napguana@pty.com) An NGO founded and run by the Kuna working on preserving the ecology of the islands and other development issues.

Conservación del Parque Nacional Volcán Barú (☎ 263 4963; www.volcanbaru.cjb.net, http://usuarios.lycos.es/quetzales, in Spanish) A conservation organization dedicated to safeguarding the future of Parque Nacional Volcán Barú.

Corredor Biológico Mesoamericano del Atlántico Panameño (☎ 232 6601; www.cbmap.org) This Panamanian-focused conservation organization is allied with the Central American Environment and Development Commission.

Dobbo Yala (☎ 261 7229; www.dobboyala.org.pa) This NGO is run by indigenous professionals, who work in conservation and development projects in indigenous communities.

Institute for Tropical Ecology and Conservation (ITEC; ☎ 352-367-9128 in USA; www.itec-edu.org) In addition to offering courses and research grants on tropical ecology, ITEC works with marine turtles and promotes local environmental education and antipollution awareness in the Bocas del Toro area.

PEMASKY (Project for the Study & Management of Wild Areas of the Kuna Yala; ☎ 316 1236; geodisio@yahoo.com) This grassroots movement, led by the Kuna, has helped keep settlers and loggers out of the mainland rainforests of Kuna Yala.

Panama Outdoors

There's no shortage of reasons why Panama is one of the top outdoors destinations in the Americas. For starters, the abundance and variety of Panama's neotropical wildlife is simply astounding – primates swing from trees, whales breach offshore and butterflies dart across the forest floor. Of course, Panama's rich birdlife is a shining example of its biodiversity, with everything from parrots and macaws to toucans and trogons. With over 900 avian species found within its borders, Panama is arguably one of the greatest birding destinations in the world.

Of course, to fully appreciate Panama's wildlife, you're going to have to get out of Panama City and head straight for the country's forests, rivers and seas. Whether you opt for a mountain ascent or a cross-jungle trek, Panama's rainforests are ripe for independent or guided exploration. If you're looking to make a splash, you can navigate raging rapids in either a kayak or a white-water raft, or simply take a relaxing jungle cruise and spot wildlife along wooded banks. If you fancy a face-to-face encounter with an enormous hammerhead shark (or merely a school of rainbow-colored reef fish), both the Pacific and Caribbean are brimming with diving and snorkeling destinations.

'Panama is arguably one of the greatest birding destinations in the world'

If we still haven't piqued your interest, fear not as Panama's outdoor pursuits don't stop here. Whether you're an aspiring angler or a seasoned fisher, Panama rivers and oceans teem with tropical fish. Or, if you prefer to use a little self-propelled power to explore the countryside, Panama's small size and modern infrastructure are the perfect combination for cyclists. And of course, let's not forget about Panama's legendary surf breaks, which span both the Pacific and the Caribbean coastlines, and offer everything from barreling beach breaks to 4m-high walls.

BOAT TRIPS

River Trips

Nearly 500 rivers carve the rugged landscape of Panama, the majority of which are lush, jungle-shrouded waterways. Whether you're looking to unwind on a relaxing jungle cruise or take a motorized dugout upriver to a remote indigenous village, there are several recommended tour operators that can help fulfill your wildest *Heart of Darkness* fantasies.

Ancon Expeditions of Panama (☎ 269 9414; www.anconexpeditions.com), located in Panama City (p89), offers an excellent day trip, the 'jungle boat adventure,' which consists of a cruise up the Panama Canal and a trip around some of the pristine islands of Lago Gatún. This journey passes close to the shoreline to allow for maximum wildlife viewing and is a great choice for kids. Ancon Expeditions is also the exclusive tour operator in the Darién (p273).

Canal & Bay Tours (☎ 314 1339; www.canalandbaytours.com in Spanish) offers partial canal transits every Saturday morning. Boats depart from Panama City, travel through the Miraflores Locks to Lago Miraflores and back, and then cruise out into the bay for scenic views of the city. This is by far the best way to appreciate the canal, and one of the highlights of any trip to Panama.

Panama Jet Boat Explorer (☎ 720 4054; www.panamajetboatexplorer.com) operates a variety of day trips in Chiriquí and Bocas del Toro Provinces, which involve cruising up jungle rivers and stopping in Ngöbe Buglé villages. It's owned by a safety-conscious American expat, and comes well recommended by readers.

For those looking for more off-the-beaten-path adventure, there are loads of opportunities in the Darién (p273). With the help of guides from Ancon

Expeditions, you can cruise up the Río Mogué to visit the indigenous village of Mogué, where you can interact with the Emberá people and, with a little luck, spot a rare harpy eagle. More independently minded travelers can also arrange transit up the Río Sambú, though this ambitious expedition is best reserved for truly intrepid spirits.

Finally, in the Wekso sector of the Parque Internacional La Amistad (p237), wanderlust-ridden travelers can penetrate the rugged mainland of Bocas del Toro. By traveling upriver on motorized dugouts, you'll pass by several indigenous villages perched on the edge of the jungle.

The Panama Guide, by Nancy Schwalbe Zydler and Tom Zydler, is the best cruising guide to the isthmus of Panama. It offers piloting directions, charts, anchorages, history, and even instructions for transiting the Panama Canal.

Ocean Trips

Bordering the Pacific and the Caribbean, Panama is a seafarer's dream of tropical seas, deserted islands and far-flung remote destinations. Whether you relax on a palm-fringed Caribbean isle of white sands and cool breezes, or wind down the day with a cold beer and a Pacific sunset, chances are you'll find peace of mind and an open ocean in Panama.

Barcos Calypso (☎ 314 1730; US$10 roundtrip) has daily departures from the Causeway in Panama City to the nearby Pacific island of Isla Taboga. This flower-ringed tropical island is a popular weekend escape for beach-starved urban dwellers, though the ocean trip itself is one of the highlights, especially if you get lucky and spot a pod of whales.

In Bocas del Toro, the *taxis marinos* (water taxis) ply the waters of the archipelago, and can whisk you away to remote beaches and snorkeling sites for a few dollars. This is one of the best ways to travel, particularly if you're in search of a secret surf break or fishing spot.

MV Coral Star (in USA ☎ 800-215-5169; www.coralstar.com) is a 115ft live-aboard ship that offers first-class passage to the Unesco World Heritage Site of Parque Nacional Coiba. Centered on the former penal colony of Isla de Coiba, this national park is a veritable lost world of unique flora and fauna. Ancon Expeditions (p89) also runs ocean trips to the island, which emphasize naturalism and ecology. Note that although it is possible to hire local fishers and boat captains to take you out to Coiba, this is not recommended as the seas can get extremely rough in these parts.

Stretching from the Golfo de San Blás to the edge of the Colombian border, the 226km-long Archipiélago de San Blás (p258) is arguably the best destination in Panama for ocean explorers. Run as an independent *comarca* (autonomous region) by the Kuna, the archipelago consists of hundreds of coconut-fringed islands and islets surrounded by turquoise waters. Independent travelers can travel by small boat between the islands, though anyone with more time on their hands shouldn't pass up the opportunity to travel by yacht to Colombia (see p263).

HIKING

Hiking opportunities abound in Panama, and it's simply impossible to list everything that awaits you in one place. However, whether you're looking for a walk in the park or a multiday trek, Panama will certainly deliver, especially since the country offers everything from dry tropical rainforests and highland cloud forests to humid jungles and blistery mountain peaks.

Starting near the capital on the shores of the canal, the Parque Nacional Soberanía (p110) contains a section of the old Sendero Las Cruces (Las Cruces Trail), which was used by the Spaniards to cross between the coasts. Closer to Panama City, the Parque Nacional Metropolitano (p82) boasts a number of short but rewarding hikes in plush rainforest that literally skirts the edge of the capital.

HOW TO HIKE SAFELY & RESPONSIBLY

Before embarking on a hiking trip, consider the following points to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience:

- Pay any fees and possess any permits required by local authorities.
- Be sure you are healthy and feel comfortable walking for a sustained period.
- Obtain reliable information about physical and environmental conditions along your intended route.
- Be aware of local laws, regulations and etiquette about wildlife and the environment.
- Walk only in regions, and on trails, within your realm of experience.
- Be aware that weather conditions and terrain vary significantly from one region to another, or even from one trail to another. Seasonal changes can significantly alter any trail. These differences influence the way walkers dress and the equipment they carry.
- Before you set out, ask about the environmental characteristics that can affect your walk and how local, experienced walkers deal with these considerations.

To help preserve the ecology and beauty of Panama, consider the following tips when hiking:

Rubbish

- Carry out all your rubbish. Don't overlook easily forgotten items, such as silver paper, orange peel, cigarette butts and plastic wrappers. Make an effort to carry out rubbish left by others.
- Never bury your rubbish: digging disturbs soil and ground cover and encourages erosion. Buried rubbish will likely be dug up by animals, who may be injured or poisoned by it. It may also take years to decompose.
- Minimize waste by taking minimal packaging and no more food than you will need. Take reusable containers or stuff sacks.
- Sanitary napkins, tampons, condoms and toilet paper should be carried out despite the inconvenience. They burn and decompose poorly.

Human Waste Disposal

- Contamination of water sources by human feces can lead to the transmission of all sorts of nasties. Where there is a toilet, please use it. Otherwise, bury your waste – dig a small hole 15cm (6in) deep and at least 100m (320ft) from any watercourse and cover the waste with soil and a rock.

Washing

- Don't use detergents or toothpaste in or near watercourses, even if they are biodegradable.

If the urban grind of Panama City is a little too much to handle, do what most of the capital dwellers do and head for the hills. Within a few hours' drive of Panama are two popular highland retreats, namely El Valle (p130), which is nestled into the extinct volcano now known as Valle de Antón; and Santa Fé (p179), which is surrounded by rivers, waterfalls and cloud forests. Both towns serve as rural retreats for stressed-out Panamanians, and offer abundant walking and hiking in a pristine mountain setting.

Chirquí Province is home to two of Panama's most famous hikes, namely Volcán Barú and the Sendero Los Quetzales (Quetzals Trail), both of which are located in Parque Nacional Volcán Barú (p208). Ascents up Barú, which is Panama's highest peak, provide successful trekkers with views of both oceans on a clear day. The trek typically begins in the highland town of Boquete (p201), which also offers numerous walks and hikes up and down slopes

- For personal washing, use biodegradable soap and a water container (or even a lightweight, portable basin) at least 50m (160ft) away from the watercourse. Disperse the waste water widely to allow the soil to filter it fully.
- Wash cooking utensils 50m (160ft) from watercourses using a scourer, sand or snow instead of detergent.

Erosion

- Hillsides and mountain slopes, especially at high altitudes, are prone to erosion. Stick to existing trails and avoid short cuts.
- If a well-used trail passes through a mud patch, walk through the mud so as not to increase the size of the patch.
- Avoid removing the plant life that keeps topsoils in place.

Fires & Low-Impact Cooking

- Don't depend on open fires for cooking. Cook on a lightweight kerosene, alcohol or Shellite (white gas) stove and avoid those powered by disposable butane gas canisters.
- If you are trekking with a guide and porters, supply stoves for the whole team.
- If you patronize local accommodation, select those places that do not use wood fires to heat water or cook food.
- Fires may be acceptable below the tree line in areas that get very few visitors. If you light a fire, use an existing fireplace. Don't surround fires with rocks. Use only dead, fallen wood. Remember the adage 'the bigger the fool, the bigger the fire.' Use minimal wood, just what you need for cooking. In huts, leave wood for the next person.
- Ensure that you fully extinguish a fire after use. Spread the embers and flood them with water.

Wildlife Conservation

- Do not engage in or encourage hunting. It is illegal in all parks and reserves.
- Don't buy items made from endangered species.
- Avoid attracting wildlife by not leaving food scraps behind you. Place gear out of reach and tie packs to rafters or trees.
- Do not feed the wildlife as this can lead to animals becoming dependent on hand-outs, to unbalanced populations and to diseases.

Camping & Walking on Private Property

- Always seek permission to camp from landowners.

that are dotted with coffee plantations. The cross-mountain trek known as the Sendero Los Quetzales typically starts in the town of Guadalupe, and winds through virgin cloud forest that is riddled with resplendent quetzals, the Mayan bird of paradise.

For a truly off-the-beaten-path adventure, hikers should head to the Las Nubes sector of the Parque Internacional La Amistad (p213), the Panamanian side of this binational park and biological corridor. The hiking trails in La Amistad are scarcely developed and only accessible with a guide, and there are few places in Panama as rugged and unchartered as this enormous national park.

The crown jewel of Panama's wilderness offerings is undoubtedly the Darién, which is centered on the Unesco World Heritage Site of Parque Nacional Darién (p280). Often regarded as one of the last great wildernesses in the Americas, this sprawling expanse of primary and secondary forests

forms a virtually impenetrable frontier with Colombia. Despite concentrated security problems along the border, the national park is not only accessible but highly recommended for anyone with young hearts and intrepid spirits. To truly experience the wonders of the Darién, arrange a tour through Ancon Expeditions (p89), which is the exclusive operator in the province.

CYCLING

Owing to its compact size and modern infrastructure, Panama is the perfect country to unleash a little pedal power. As with all long-distance cycling, you need to prepare yourself both physically and mentally for the rigors of the road, though these helpful tips will have you on the road in no time.

Generally speaking, the roads in Panama are the best in Central America, though this doesn't mean much once you leave the Interamericana. Fortunately, the highway is in good condition from the Costa Rican border to Panama City. Although it does get narrow in spots, you can cycle between most major destinations with relative ease. When it comes to the intersecting roads, however, they range from recently paved and paved with potholes to dirt roads and full-on mud bogs – bring plenty of spare parts and always be prepared for the worst.

The Darkest Jungle: The True Story of the Darién Expedition and America's Ill-Fated Race to Connect the Seas, by Todd Balf, tells the harrowing tale of the 1854 expedition that ended in tragedy in the untamed jungle.

The major factor when considering a lengthy bike ride is the weather. No matter what bike you're on, it's not entirely safe to ride in the rain. Throughout much of the country, the rains are confined to mid-April to mid-December, though on the Caribbean side you can expect rain virtually year-round. If the rains do start to fall however, in Panama you're never more than a few hours' away from the nearest accommodations.

There is one decent biking store in the country, namely **Bicicletas Rali** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 263 4136; www.rali-carretero.com in Spanish; Via España) in Panama City where you can buy bikes and accessories and have repairs done. Beyond the capital, you're essentially on your own, but never underestimate the prowess of the village mechanic.

DIVING & SNORKELING

Panama's underwater world spans two great oceans, and abounds with colorful coral gardens, towering rock shelves, sunken wrecks and a rich diversity of marine life. Fans of multicolored reef fish and bathtub-warm water should head for the Caribbean, while more advanced divers in search of enormous pelagic animals and remote dive sites should head to the Pacific.

Listing all of Panama's diving and snorkeling spots is an exercise in futility – there are literally thousands of spots along both coastlines that are ripe for underwater exploration. In fact, if you have snorkeling gear and you're near the ocean, chances are you'll come across something of interest. With that said, there are three major spots in Panama that have a deserved reputation for fine scuba diving: the archipelago of Bocas del Toro (p219), the Caribbean town of Portobelo (p250) and the Pacific island of Isla de Coiba (p188).

Owing to its status as Panama's top tourist destination, the Caribbean islands of Bocas del Toro are home to a thriving dive community. Unfortunately, Bocas diving leaves something to be desired, and it's a far cry from other Caribbean diving destinations such as the Bay Islands or Belize. The main problem is that the underwater visibility is extremely poor – nearly 40 rivers deposit silt into the seas around the islands, which turn the water a murky green. However, things tend to clear up a bit during the dry season, and it's worth remembering that a bad day of diving is still better than a good day of work. Local dive shops include **Starfleet Eco-Adventures** (☎ 757 9630; www.explorepanama.com/starfleet.htm) and **Bocas Water Sports** (☎ /fax 757 9541;

HOW TO DIVE SAFELY & RESPONSIBLY

Before embarking on a scuba diving, skin diving or snorkeling trip, carefully consider the following points to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience:

- Possess a current diving certification card from a recognized scuba diving instructional agency (if scuba diving).
- Be sure you are healthy and feel comfortable diving.
- Obtain reliable information about physical and environmental conditions at the dive site (eg from a reputable local dive operation).
- Be aware of local laws, regulations and etiquette about marine life and the environment.
- Dive only at sites within your realm of experience; if available, engage the services of a competent, professionally trained dive instructor or dive master.
- Be aware that underwater conditions vary significantly from one region, or even site, to another. Seasonal changes can significantly alter any site and dive conditions. These differences influence the way divers dress for a dive and what diving techniques they use.
- Ask about the environmental characteristics that can affect your diving and how local trained divers deal with these considerations.

Please consider the following tips when diving and help preserve the ecology and beauty of reefs:

- Never use anchors on the reef, and take care not to ground boats on coral.
- Avoid touching or standing on living marine organisms or dragging equipment across the reef. Polyps can be damaged by even the gentlest contact. If you must hold on to the reef, only touch exposed rock or dead coral.
- Be conscious of your fins. Even without contact, the surge from fin strokes near the reef can damage delicate organisms. Take care not to kick up clouds of sand, which can smother organisms.
- Practice and maintain proper buoyancy control. Major damage can be done by divers descending too fast and colliding with the reef.
- Take great care in underwater caves. Spend as little time within them as possible as your air bubbles may be caught within the roof and thereby leave organisms high and dry. Take turns to inspect the interior of a small cave.
- Resist the temptation to collect or buy corals or shells or to loot marine archaeological sites (mainly shipwrecks).
- Ensure that you take home all your rubbish and any litter you may find as well. Plastics in particular are a serious threat to marine life.
- Do not feed fish.
- Minimize your disturbance of marine animals. Never ride on the backs of turtles.

Warning: as there are only four decompression chambers in the entire country – one in Colón, one at Lago Gatún and two in Panama City – divers should avoid taking unnecessary risks. If you stay down too long or come up too fast, you'll be in serious trouble.

www.bocaswatersports.com) on Isla Colón and the **Dutch Pirate** (☎ 6567 1812; www.thedutchpirate.com) on Isla Bastimentos.

Another popular dive center is the historic town of Portobelo – here, you'll find 16 major dive sites in the adjacent Caribbean waters. Although

the visibility here is also poor, there is an excellent variety of underwater attractions including a 110ft cargo ship, a C-45 twin-engine plane, soft coral-laden walls, off-shore reefs and rock gardens. Local dive shops include **Scubaportobelo** (☎ 448 2147; www.scubapanama.com) and **Twin Oceans Dive Center** (☎ 448 2067) as well as **Jimmy's Caribbean Dive Resort** (☎ 682 9322; www.caribbeanjimmysdiveresort.com) in the nearby town of Nombre de Dios.

The best diving in Panama, hands down, is around Isla de Coiba, which is the centerpiece of a national marine park. Here, divers are on the lookout for enormous sharks including schools of hammerheads, black-tips and white-tips as well as the occasional tiger or whale shark. **Scuba Coiba** (☎ 263 4366; www.scubacoiba.com), on the coast in the town of Santa Catalina, can arrange equipment rental and transport.

It's also worth mentioning that the Comarca de Kuna Yala (p258) is studded with fine coral reefs, though the Kuna prohibit dive operators from working in the archipelago. As a result, visitors will have to be content with snorkeling, though it's some of the best on offer in Panama.

And, in case you've been wondering, the answer is yes – it is in fact possible to dive the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans in one day. **Scubapanama** (☎ 261 3841; www.scubapanama.com; cnr Av 6a C Norte & Calle 62 C Oeste, El Carmen, Panama City) offers bicoastal dives, as well as personalized tours around the country.

When you're making travel plans, bear in mind that the Caribbean Sea is calm during the dry season (mid-December to mid-April), though it can be fairly treacherous due to high winds and strong currents during the rainy season (mid-April to mid-December). On the Pacific side, ocean temperatures are warmest during the dry season, though strong winds are common during February and March.

In the Darién's Bahía Piña, more International Game Fish Association world records have been broken than anywhere else on the planet.

FISHING

Panamá means 'abundance of fish' in several indigenous languages – with 1518 islands, 2988km of coastline and 480 major rivers, there's no problem finding a fishing spot. Freshwater anglers usually set their sights on trout and bass, while serious sportfishers ply the seas for trophy fish including tarpon, sailfish and marlin.

The majority of freshwater angling in Panama can be pursued independently, especially in the highlands of Chiriquí and Veraguas, which are home to several fish-filled rivers and streams. However, one recommended operator is **Panama Canal Fishing** (☎ 6678 2653; www.panamacanalfishing.com), which runs organized tours in the Canal Zone. Its signature tour involves fishing for peacock bass in Lake Gatún and the Chagres River.

For deep-sea fishing, Panama offers three world-class areas – Bahía Piña, the Pearl Islands and Isla de Coiba – all of which are served by extremely professional fishing outfits. Bahía Piña, which has produced more International Game Fish Association (IGFA) world records than any other body of water in the world, is served exclusively by the Topic Star Lodge (p289). Although you have to pay to play at this millionaire's retreat, Piña is sportfishing at its best, and the chance to break a world record is clearly worth the price of admission.

On the private island of San José in the Archipiélago de las Perlas, the all-inclusive Hacienda del Mar (p121) resort offers chartered fishing trips along this stunning stretch of the Pacific. This exclusive luxury lodge is one of the most remote destinations in Panama, though it offers unparalleled professionalism and the opportunity to catch some enormous trophies.

The seas around Isla de Coiba are home to several species of sport-fish including yellow-fin tuna, wahoo, dolphin, Spanish mackerel, jacks and

rooster fish. Although it's difficult (and expensive) to access, the chance to fish the waters around this far-flung ecological jewel should not be missed. **Coiba Adventure** (☎ 999 8108; www.coibadventure.com) is one of Panama's top sport-fishing operations, and offers a variety of tours that combine deep-sea fishing with island exploration.

SURFING

Isla Bastimentos and Santa Catalina boast the best surfing in the country. On good days you can find waves with 4m faces. If there's a strong swell, you can expect 5m.

While everyone (and their mothers) seems to have discovered Costa Rica, Panama is still garnering popularity among the international surfing community. Of course, Panamanian surfers and a few knowledgeable foreigners have always known about the great breaks that lie off both coasts of this relatively undiscovered surfers' paradise.

Although the joy of Panama is riding some of the lesser known surf breaks – or even discovering your own – the country is home to two world-class spots, namely Santa Catalina (p183) and the archipelago of Bocas del Toro (p224). Of course, even these are significantly less crowded than similar spots in neighboring Costa Rica.

The best months for Santa Catalina are February and March, but the surf breaks here year-round. The face of a typical wave at Santa Catalina is 2m, though during February and March, waves with 4m faces are fairly common.

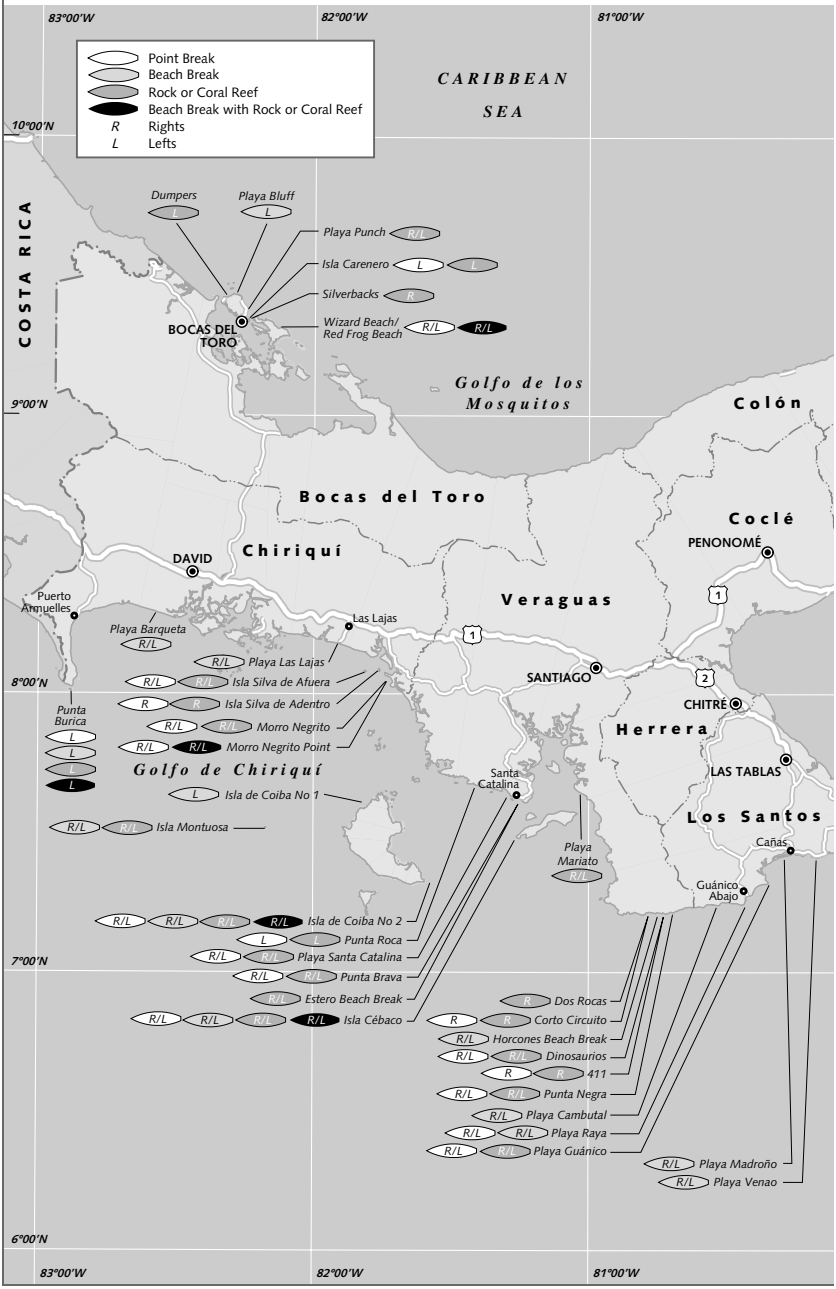
TOP 10 SPOTS TO GET YOUR SURF ON

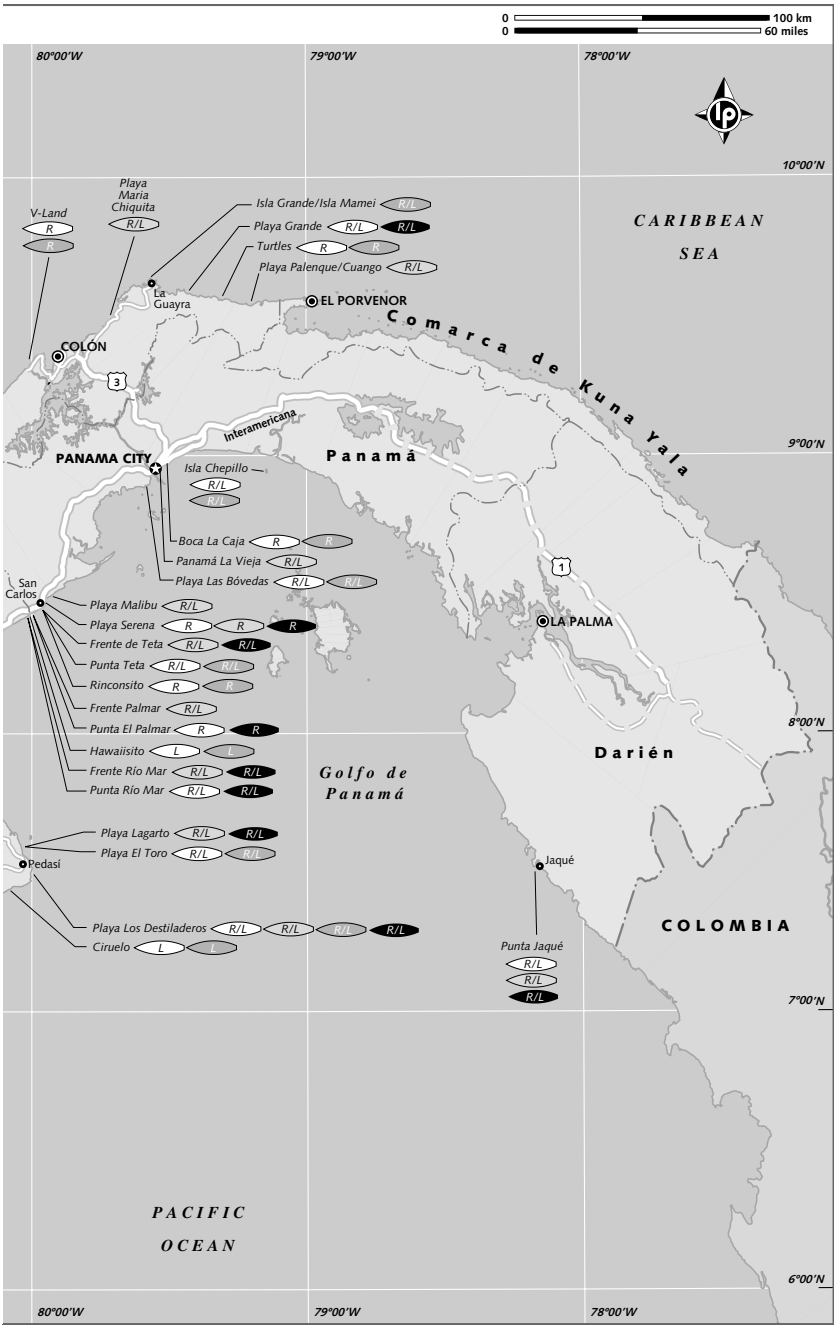
Think you've got what it takes to paddle into Panama's sickest waves? The following is a list of the country's 'Top 10' legendary surf spots:

1. **Punta Teta (Panamá Province)** Point break over rocks to the south of the Río Teta mouth. Lefts and rights with good tubes, especially at medium tide going up.
2. **Playa Venao (Los Santos Province)** South Venado. Sand-bottom beach break popular with local surfers. This spot catches just about any swell. Best surfed at medium to high tide.
3. **Playa Santa Catalina (Veraguas Province)** Sharp rock bottom right and left break. Main wave is the right. Incredible tubes, long rides with lots of power. Surfed mostly medium to high tide.
4. **Punta Brava (Veraguas Province)** Just west of Estero. Point breaks at low tide over sharp rock bottom. Has lefts and rights, but the lefts are the best. Very powerful. Has a great tube section.
5. **Morro Negrito (Chiriquí Province)** Near Morro Negrito town. About five breaks, variety of lefts and rights with occasional tubes.
6. **Dumpers (Bocas del Toro Province)** Isla Colón. Reef-bottom left break with a very steep drop, big tube and short ride. Reef is sharp and tricky.
7. **Playa Bluff (Bocas del Toro Province)** Isla Colón, road's end. Long beach renowned for board-breaking powerful surf. The tubes here are incredible.
8. **Carenero (Bocas del Toro Province)** Isla Carenero, five-minute boat ride from Bocas town. Reef break with 200m peeling lefts, with great tubes. Boat drop-off, pickup at reef. Booties recommended.
9. **Silverbacks (Bocas del Toro Province)** Isla Bastimentos. Reef bottom with waves up to 5m on good swells. Large right with big drop, big tube, but relatively short ride. Not for beginners.
10. **Playa Grande (Colón Province)** Mainland, east of Isla Grande. Beach break with some reef. Waves break left and right.

If you're ready to hit the surf, see the Panama Surfer's Map on pp68–9.

SURFER'S MAP


83°00'W
82°00'W
81°00'W
10°00'N
9°00'N
8°00'N
7°00'N
6°00'N
Point Break
Beach Break
Rock or Coral Reef
Beach Break with Rock or Coral Reef
R Rights
L Lefts
CARIBBEAN SEA
COSTA RICA
Dumpers
Playa Bluff
Playa Punch
Isla Carenero
Silverbacks
Wizard Beach/ Red Frog Beach
BOCAS DEL TORO
Golfo de los Mosquitos
Colón
Bocas del Toro
Coclé
PENONOMÉ
Chiriquí
DAVID
Puerto Armuelles
Playa Barqueta
Las Lajas
Veraguas
SANTIAGO
CHITRÉ
Herrera
Playa Las Lajas
Isla Silva de Afuera
Isla Silva de Adentro
Morro Negrito
Morro Negrito Point
Punta Burica
Golfo de Chiriquí
Isla de Coiba No 1
Isla Montuosa
Santa Catalina
LAS TABLAS
Los Santos
Cañas
Playa Mariato
Guánico Abajo
Isla de Coiba No 2
Punta Roca
Playa Santa Catalina
Punta Brava
Estero Beach Break
Isla Cébaco
Dos Rocas
Corto Circuito
Horcones Beach Break
Dinosaurios
411
Punta Negra
Playa Cambutal
Playa Raya
Playa Guánico
Playa Madroño
Playa Venao


0 100 km
0 60 miles
80°00'W
79°00'W
78°00'W
10°00'N
9°00'N
8°00'N
7°00'N
6°00'N
CARIBBEAN SEA
Comarca de Kuna Yala
Panamá
Darién
Golfo de Panamá
PACIFIC OCEAN
COLOMBIA
COLÓN
PANAMA CITY
EL PORVENOR
LA PALMA
Pedasí
Jaqué
La Guayra
San Carlos
Interamericana
3
1
V-Land R R
Playa Maria Chiquita R/L
Isla Grande/Isla Mamei R/L
Playa Grande R/L R/L
Turtles R R
Playa Palenque/Cuango R/L
Isla Chepillo R/L R/L
Boca La Caja R R
Panamá La Vieja R/L
Playa Las Bóvedas R/L R/L
Playa Malibu R/L
Playa Serena R R R
Frente de Teta R/L R/L
Punta Teta R/L R/L
Rinconsito R R
Frente Palmar R/L
Punta El Palmar R R
Hawaiisito L L
Frente Río Mar R/L R/L
Punta Río Mar R/L R/L
Playa Lagarto R/L R/L
Playa El Toro R/L R/L
Playa Los Destiladeros R/L R/L R/L R/L
Ciruelo L L
Punta Jaqué R/L R/L R/L

Generally speaking, waves here are at their best during medium to high tide when rides approaching 150m are possible.

On the Caribbean side, the islands of Bocas del Toro offer some of the best and most varied surfing in Panama, especially from December to March. The top breaks in Bocas are Isla Carenero and Silverbacks. Isla Carenero is a reef break near Bocas town, which often presents 200m-long peeling lefts with great tubes. It breaks over shallow reef and is comparable to the well-known Restaurants break in Tahiti. Silverbacks, off Isla Bastimentos, is known for its large, powerful right with a big drop and big tube; it offers a relatively short ride, breaking over reef and is comparable to Hawaii's big-wave spots.

For surfing tours, contact **Panama Surf Tours** (☎ 672 0089; www.panamasurftours.com). This company is run by Panama native Jon Hanna, a former national champion who knows Panama's surf scene better than anyone else.

Jon also prepared the surf reports that appear throughout this book. Detailed lists of surfing spots in each of the provinces can be found on the following pages: Panamá Province (p126), Los Santos Province (p172), Veraguas Province (p183), Chiriquí Province (p199) and Bocas del Toro Province (p224).

WHITE-WATER RAFTING & KAYAKING

Whether you take to the water by raft or kayak, Panama boasts some excellent opportunities for river running. The country's most famous white-water runs are the Ríos Chiriquí and Chiriquí Viejo, though there are also opportunities for sea kayaking in both Bocas del Toro and Chiriquí Provinces.

The unofficial river-running capital of Panama is the highland town of Boquete (p201). Located near the Ríos Chiriquí and Chiriquí Viejo, Boquete is home to the country's top rafting outfits, namely **Chiriquí River Rafting** (☎ 720 1505; www.panama-rafting.com) and **Panama Rafters** (☎ 720 2712; www.panamarafters.com).

If you'd rather tackle these rivers by kayak, **Kayak Panama** (☎ /fax 993 3620), based at XS Memories hotel and sports bar (p137) in Santa Clara, runs trips during the rainy season (April to November). The world famous US-based kayaking school, the **Nantahala Outdoor Center** (in US ☎ 800-232-7238; www.noc.com), also offers several highly rated kayaking adventures in Panama every year.

If you'd rather take to the high seas, **Exploration Panama** (☎ 720 2470; www.explorationpanama.net) works in conjunction with Chiriquí River Rafting to offer guided sea kayaking excursions in the Golfo de Chiriquí. On the Caribbean coast, independently minded travelers can rent kayaks at **Cap 'n Dons** (☎ 757 9248) on Isla Coĺón.

The Tapir's Morning Bath: Mysteries of the Tropical Rainforests and the Scientists who are Trying to Solve Them, by Elizabeth Royte, is a fascinating introduction to tropical ecology and a travelogue documenting Royte's 'education' on Isla Barro Colorado.

WILDLIFE WATCHING

The bio-rich terrain of the isthmus boasts some astounding animal life – you might see everything from spider monkeys and sloths to capybaras (rodents) and crocodiles (just to name a few!). Panama also offers magnificent bird-watching due to its location relative to two continents and its narrow girth.

Unlike the savannahs of Africa, wildlife-watching in the neotropical rainforest is an exercise in patience and stealth – a little luck doesn't hurt either. However, the good news is that Panama's wildlife reaches high densities in the national parks. Although it's unlikely you'll come across top predators like jaguars and pumas, primates and lesser mammals are commonly sighted.

Panama's top national parks for watching wildlife include La Amistad (p237), Volcán Barú (p208) and the Darién (p280). Closer to the capital,

Parque Natural Metropolitano (p82) and Parque Nacional Soberanía (p110) are easily accessible.

Bird-watching

With more than 900 species of birds in Panama, all you need to do to spot feathered-friends is to get a good pair of binoculars and hit the trails. Two popular spots include Pipeline Road (p110) in Parque Nacional Soberanía and the Sierra Llorona Panama Lodge (p247) in Colón Province.

Panama's avian species are at their best in the legendary Cana Valley, which is regarded as one of the top birding destinations in the world. This phenomenal wildlife preserve can only be accessed via organized tour with the highly recommended Ancon Expeditions (p89).

The **Panama Audubon Society** (☎ 224 9371; www.panamaaudubon.org), located in Panama City, organizes the annual Christmas bird count on Pipeline Road, and runs birding expeditions throughout the country.