

# Panama City



Undoubtedly the most cosmopolitan capital in Central America, Panama City is both a gateway to the country's natural riches and a vibrant destination in its own right. As a thriving center for international banking and trade, Panama City sports a sultry skyline of shimmering glass and steel towers that is reminiscent of Miami. Not surprisingly, the city residents often joke that Panama City is the 'Miami of the south,' except that more English is spoken.

Although there's no shortage of fine dining and chic dance clubs, visitors are often drawn to Casco Viejo, a dilapidated neighborhood of historic buildings and cobbled streets reminiscent of old Havana. Abandoned in favor of more stylish neighborhoods, Casco Viejo lay crumbling on the edge of the sea for decades. However, following an ambitious reclamation of this colonial district in recent years, it is priming itself to charm and enchant visitors once more.

The city's architectural diversity is rivaled only by its cultural diversity. Urbanites here hail from all over Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia and, increasingly, North America and Europe. Given the ethnic diversity, it's no surprise that the capital boasts a wide array of restaurants, with everything from Panamanian-style ceviche and bluefin tuna sushi to tikka masala and chicken kebabs. Not far from the city, you'll also find some impressive adventure opportunities, from hiking through tropical rainforests to skirting along the jungle on a train ride to Colón.

Whether you measure the pulse of the city by the beat of the salsa clubs on Calle Uruguay or by the staccato of the street vendors' voices in Casco Viejo, chances are you'll slip into the rhythm of this Latin playground

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Exploring historic **Casco Viejo** (p78), a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood of colonial buildings, soaring churches and grand plazas
- Reconnecting with the past at the ruins of **Panamá Viejo** (p82), the original Panama City c1519
- Hiking through **Parque Natural Metropolitano** (p82), 265 hectares of rainforest just 10 minutes from downtown
- Dining on Spanish tapas, Italian pastas and Panamanian specialities at any of the capital's fine assortment of **restaurants** (p94)
- Partying like a rock star on **Calle Uruguay** (p100), home to the city's most sophisticated nightlife



■ POPULATION: 450,000

■ AREA: 2561 SQ KM

■ ELEVATION: SEA LEVEL

## HISTORY

Panama City was founded in 1519 by the Spanish governor Pedro Arias de Ávila (Pedrarias) not long after Balboa first saw the Pacific. Although the Spanish settlement quickly became an important center of government and church authority, the city was ransacked and destroyed in 1671 by the English pirate Sir Henry Morgan, leaving only the stone ruins of Panamá Viejo.

Three years later, the city was reestablished about 8km to the southwest in the area now known as Casco Viejo. Although the city's peninsular location meant that it was well defended, the destruction of the Caribbean port at Portobelo in 1746 dealt a heavy blow to the Spanish overland trade route. Panama City subsequently declined in importance, though it returned to prominence in the 1850s when the Panama Railroad was completed, and gold seekers on their way to California flooded across the isthmus by train.

After Panama declared its independence from Colombia on November 3, 1903 in the Parque de la Independencia, Panama City was firmly established as the capital of the new nation. Since the Panama Canal was completed in 1914, the city has emerged as a center for international business and trade.

The city's only major setback in recent times occurred in 1989, when it was invaded by the USA to oust dictator Manuel Noriega from power. The capital suffered damage both from the invasion itself and from the subsequent looting, and several residential blocks of the El Chorrillo district were destroyed by combat-ignited fire.

Today, Panama City is by far the wealthiest city in Central America, and residents are wholly optimistic about the future – and with good reason. Following the handover of the Canal in 1999, and the subsequent closure of American military bases in the country, Panama City is finally in charge of its own destiny. Furthermore, a spate of foreign investment and the recent referendum to expand the Panama Canal means that the capital is likely to continue its remarkable boom.

## ORIENTATION

Panama City stretches about 20km along the Pacific coast, from the Panama Canal at its western end to the ruins of Panamá Viejo to the east.

Near the canal are Albrook airport, the Fort Amador Causeway and the wealthy Balboa and Ancón suburbs built for the US canal and military workers. The Puente de las Américas (Bridge of the Americas) arches gracefully over the canal.

The colonial part of the city, Casco Viejo (also called San Felipe and Casco Antiguo), juts into the sea on the southwestern side of town. From here, two major roads head east through the city.

The main drag is Av Central, which runs past the cathedral in Casco Viejo to Parque Santa Ana and Plaza Cinco de Mayo; between these two plazas, the avenue is a pedestrian-only shopping street. At a fork further east, the avenue becomes Av Central España; the section that traverses the El Cangrejo business and financial district is called Vía España. The other part of the fork becomes Av 1 Norte (José D Espinar), Av Simón Bolívar and finally Vía Transistmica as it heads out of town and across the isthmus toward Colón.

Av 6 Sur branches off Av Central not far out of Casco Viejo and undergoes several name changes. It is called Av Balboa as it curves around the edge of the bay to Punta Paitilla, on the bay's eastern point; it then continues under various names past the Centro Atlapa to the ruins of Panamá Viejo.

Generally, *avenidas* (avenues) run east–west, while *calles* (streets) run north–south. Av Central and Vía España form the boundary – *avenidas* south of Vía España are labeled *sur* (south) while *calles* east of Vía España are labeled *este*.

## INFORMATION

### Bookshops

**El Hombre de la Mancha** (Map p79; ☎ 263 6218; Calle 52; ☏ 10am–9pm Mon–Sat) A Spanish-language bookstore favored by Panamanians.

**Exedra Books** (Map p79; ☎ 264 4252; Vía España at Vía Brasil; ☏ 9:30am–9:30pm Mon–Sat, 11am–8:30pm Sun) Easily one of Central America's best bookstores.

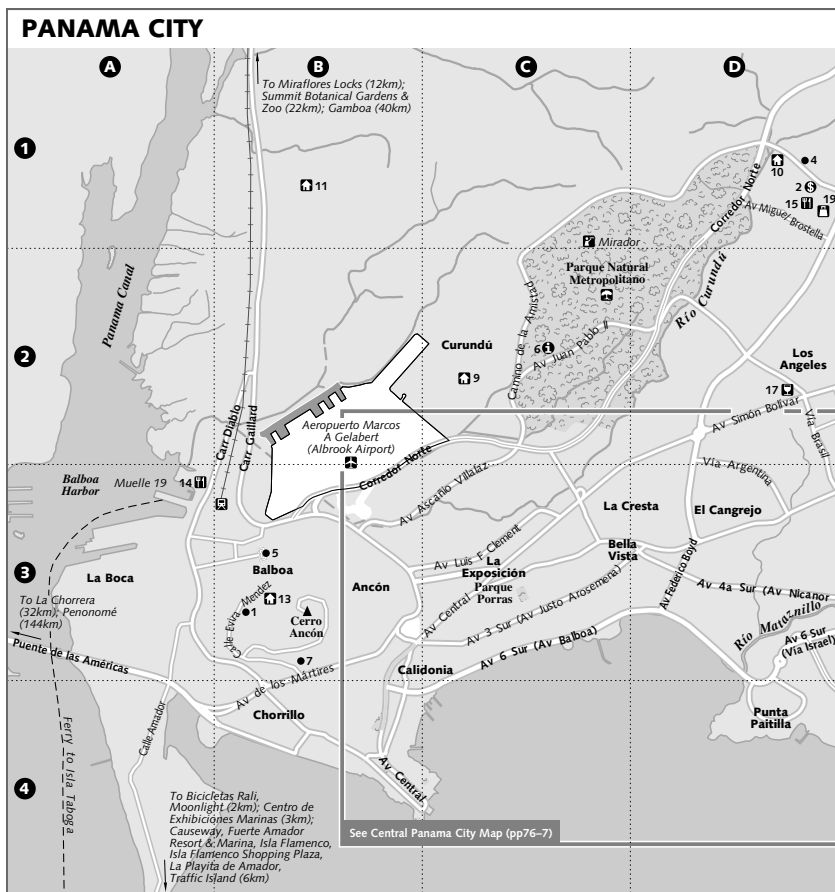
**Librería Argosy** (Map p79; ☎ 223 5344; Vía Argentina near Vía España) A bookstore and cultural institution owned by a cheerful Greek immigrant.

### Emergency

**Ambulance** ☎ 228 2187, 229 1133

**Fire** ☎ 103

**Police** ☎ 104



## Internet Access

Internet cafés are plentiful in Panama City, especially in the El Cangrejo banking district.

**Evolution Planet** (Map p79; Av 1a A Norte; per hr US\$1; ☎ 9am-4am)

**La Red** (Map pp76-7; per hr US\$1; ☎ 10am-midnight) In Casco Viejo, facing Parque Santa Ana.

## Libraries

**Earl S Tupper Tropical Sciences Library** (Map pp76-7; ☎ 212 8113) A world-class resource for information on tropical biology and conservation.

## Maps

**Instituto Geográfico Nacional** (Tommy Guardia; Map pp76-7; ☎ 236 2444; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) Just off Av

Simón Bolívar opposite the Universidad de Panamá. Has an excellent collection of maps for sale.

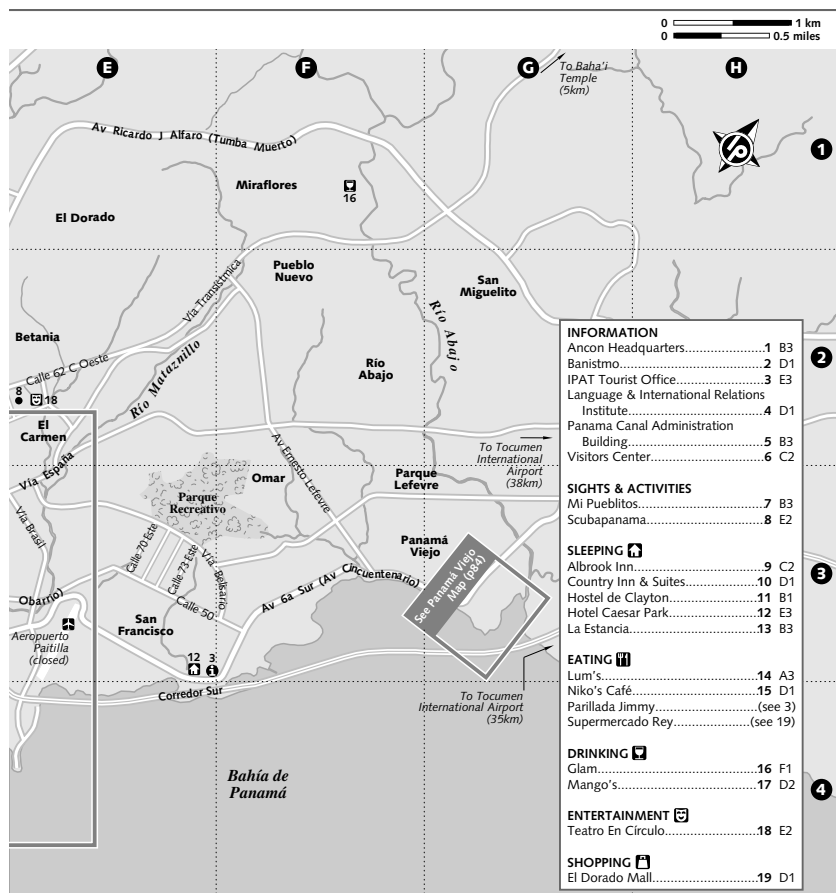
## Medical Services

Medicine in Panama, especially in Panama City, is of a high standard.

**Centro Médico Patilla** (Map pp76-7; ☎ 265 8800, 265 8883; cnr Calle 53 & Av Balboa) Has well-trained physicians who speak both Spanish and English.

## Money

ATMs are abundant throughout the city. The Banco Nacional de Panamá counter at Tocumen International Airport is one of the few places in Panama City that exchanges foreign currency.



**Banistmo** (Map p79; Vía España) Changes Amex traveler's checks with no fee; US\$5 transaction for other types.

**Panacambios** (Map p79; ☎ 223 1800; Ground fl, Plaza Regency Bldg, Vía España; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Buys and sells international currencies.

## Post

Many hotels sell stamps and some will mail guests' letters.

**Main Post Office** (Map pp76-7; Ave Balboa btwn Calles 23 & 24; 🕒 7am-5:45pm Mon-Fri, 7am-4:45pm Sat)

Holds poste restante items for 30 days.

## Telephone

*Tarjetas* (phonecards) valued at US\$3, US\$5 and US\$10 can be purchased at pharmacies for local and regional calls at any card phone.

## Tourist Information

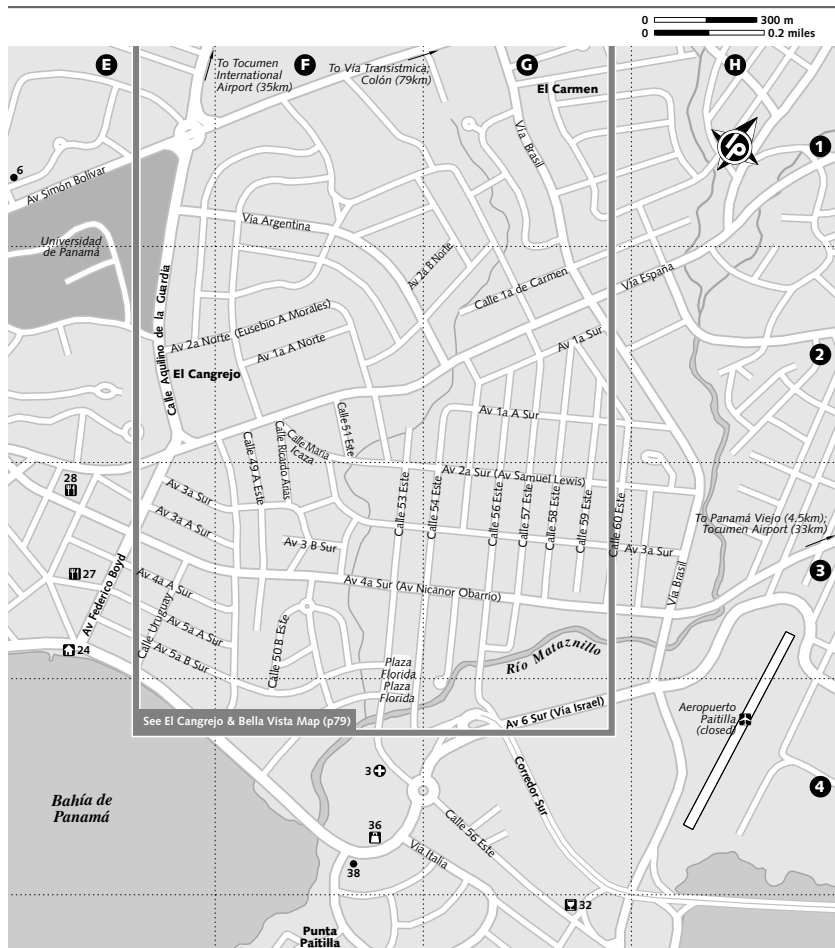
All the IPAT offices give out free maps. The usefulness of a given office depends on the individual employees. Note that few IPAT employees speak English.

**Autoridad Nacional del Ambiente** (ANAM; Map pp76-7; ☎ 315 0855; 🕒 8am-4pm) ANAM can occasionally provide maps and information on national parks. However, they are not organized to provide much assistance to tourists. Located inside Building 804 of the Albrook district.

**IPAT** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 226 7000; www.panamainfo.com; Vía Israel, San Francisco; 🕒 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) Panama's tourism bureau is headquartered at the Centro Atlapa in the San Francisco neighborhood. Enter at the rear of the large building. IPAT gives out free maps and information on things to see and do.

## CENTRAL PANAMA CITY





Bahía de Panamá

Punta Paitilla

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## GETTING INTO TOWN

### From the Airports

Tocumen International Airport is 35km northeast of the city center. The cheapest way to get into the city is to exit the terminal, cross the street (to the bus shelter) and catch a bus to the city. Buses are marked 'España-Tocumen' (US\$0.25, two hours). Much faster and costlier, taxis can be hired at the Transportes Turísticos desk at the airport exit. Beside it is a taxi stand, with posted prices. Unlicensed taxi drivers will assail you, offering rides at ridiculously high prices, but you can take a *colectivo* (shared taxi) for US\$10 per person (for three or more passengers) or US\$12 per person (for two passengers).

Buses to Tocumen depart every 15 minutes from the bus stop north of the Plaza Cinco de Mayo near the corner of Av Central and Av Justo Arosemena. They cost US\$0.75 and take one hour to reach the airport. A taxi from downtown to the airport should cost no more than US\$12 for one, US\$15 for two or more people.

The Albrook airport north of Cerro Ancón handles domestic flights. Buses (\$0.25) to the airport depart from the bus stop in front of the Legislative Palace. However, the easiest way to get to/from the airport is by taxi, and the ride should cost between US\$2 and US\$4.

### From the Bus Terminal

All long-distance buses arrive at the Albrook bus terminal; from here there are connections throughout the city. Routes (such as Vía España, Panamá Viejo) are displayed in the front window and cost US\$0.25. If you arrive after dark, it is recommended that you take a taxi (US\$2 to US\$4) to your destination.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Casco Viejo is currently the focus of an ambitious urban renewal program, though it's still very much a work in progress. Generally speaking, the tip of the peninsula south-east of the Iglesia de la Merced is safe for tourists, especially since the area is heavily patrolled by police officers on bicycles. However, you should always exercise caution, and stay where it's well lit and where there are plenty of people around. Always take taxis at night.

Casco Viejo gets an undeserved bad rep, though you should not underestimate how quickly the neighborhood can change. As you move away from the tip of the peninsula, you will be entering high-density slums and plenty of tourists have been the target of criminal activity. Other high-crime areas include Cúrrundú, El Chorrillo, Santa Ana, San Miguelito and Río Abajo.

There are occasional reports of robbery near the ruins of Panamá Viejo – don't go after sunset, and always keep an eye out.

When walking the streets of Panama City, be aware that drivers do not yield to pedestrians. Sometimes it's best to approach intersections like Panamanians – look both ways then run like hell.

## SIGHTS

Panama's major sights are found to the west in Casco Viejo, which is home to the last remnants of the city's colonial heritage. Further east on the way to the airport is Panamá Viejo, where the ruins of Spain's first settlement lie. To the north is Parque Natural Metropolitan, an enormous tract of rainforest that serves as welcome refuge from the hustle and bustle of the city. In the south, the Causeway has numerous restaurants, bars and fine vantage points on the edge of the ocean.

### Casco Viejo

Following the destruction of the old city by Henry Morgan in 1671, the Spanish moved their city 8km southwest to a rocky peninsula on the foot of Cerro Ancón. The new location was easier to defend as the reefs prevented ships from approaching the city except at high tide. The new city was also easy to defend as it was surrounded by a massive wall, which is how Casco Viejo (Old Compound) got its name.

In 1904, when construction began on the Panama Canal, all of Panama City existed where Casco Viejo stands today. However, as population growth and urban expansion pushed the boundaries of Panama City further

## EL CANGREJO &amp; BELLA VISTA

0 200 m  
0 0.1 miles

## INFORMATION

1 Banistmo.....	1 B4
2 Canadian Embassy.....	(see 11)
3 Dutch Embassy.....	2 B5
4 Edificio Banco Nacional de Panamá.....	(see 1)
5 El Hombre de la Mancha.....	3 A5
6 Evolution Planet.....	4 B4
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8 German Embassy.....	(see 11)
9 Librería Argosy.....	6 C3
10 Ministerio de Economía y Finanzas.....	7 B4
11 Panacambios.....	8 B4
12 Post Office.....	9 B4
13 UK Embassy.....	10 C6
14 World Trade Center.....	11 C6

## SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES

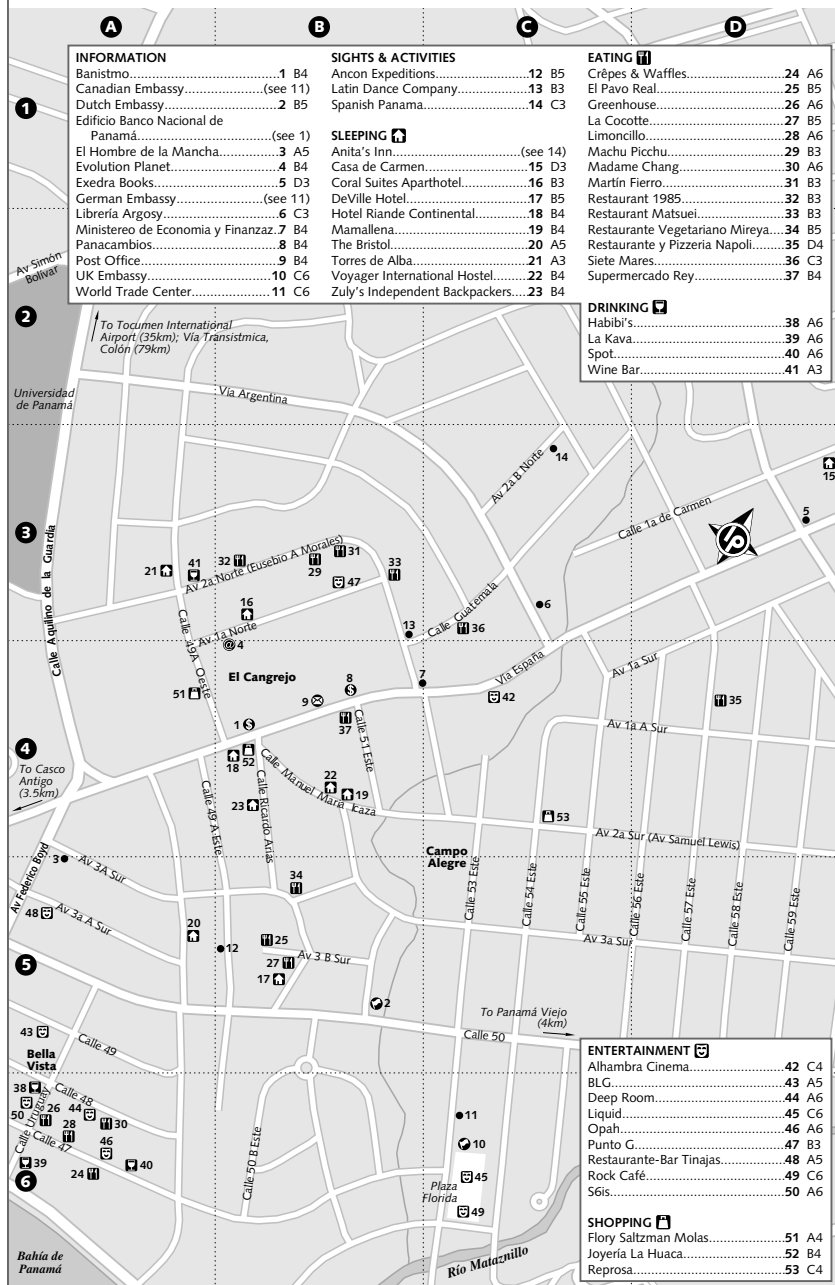
1 Ancon Expeditions.....	12 B5
2 Latin Dance Company.....	13 B3
3 Spanish Panama.....	14 C3
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6 Casa de Carmen.....	16 B3
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5 Limoncillo.....	28 A6
6 Machu Picchu.....	29 B3
7 Madame Chang.....	30 A6
8 Martín Fierro.....	31 B3
9 Restaurant 1985.....	32 B3
10 Restaurant Matsuei.....	33 B3
11 Restaurante Vegetariano Mireya.....	34 B5
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2 La Kava.....	39 A6
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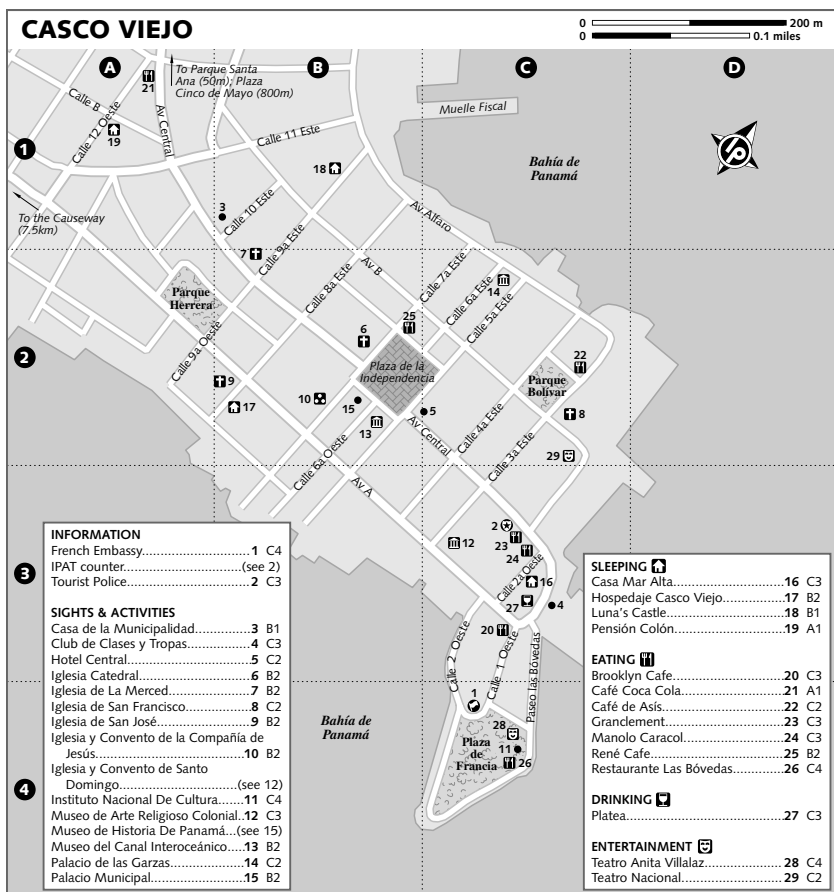
## ENTERTAINMENT

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2 Joyería La Huaca.....	52 B4
3 Reprosa.....	53 C4





east, the city's elite abandoned Casco Viejo, and the neighborhood rapidly deteriorated into an urban slum.

Today, Casco Viejo is gradually being gentrified, and the buildings that have already been restored give a sense of how magnificent the area must have looked in past years. International recognition of these efforts by the community resulted in the area being declared a Unesco World Heritage Site in 2003. However, part of the allure of strolling along Casco Viejo's cobbled streets is the dilapidated charm of the crumbling buildings, abandoned houses and boarded-up ruins.

The restoration of Casco Viejo is still a work in progress, so please be aware of your

surroundings and exercise caution while exploring this fascinating neighborhood.

The following places are located on map p80.

### PLAZA DE LA INDEPENDENCIA

This **plaza** is the heart of Casco Viejo, and was the site where Panama declared its independence from Colombia on November 3, 1903.

### IGLESIA DE SAN JOSÉ

This **church** (Av A) protects the famous *Altar de Oro* (Golden Altar), which was about the only thing of value salvaged after Henry Morgan sacked Panamá Viejo. According to

local legend, when word came of the pirate's impending attack, a priest attempted to disguise the altar by painting it black. The priest told Morgan that the famous altar had been stolen by another pirate, and even convinced Morgan to donate handsomely for its replacement. Morgan is said to have told the priest, 'I don't know why, but I think you are more of a pirate than I am.' Whatever the truth, the baroque altar was later moved from the old city to the present site.

### TEATRO NACIONAL

Built in 1907, the interior of this ornate **theater** (☎ 262 3525; Av B) has been completely restored, and boasts red and gold decorations, a once-magnificent ceiling mural by Roberto Lewis (one of Panama's finest painters) and an impressive crystal chandelier. Performances are still held here – to find out about them, or just to have a look at the theater, go around to the office door at the side of the building.

### PLAZA DE FRANCIA

At the tip of the southern point is this **plaza**, which displays large stone tablets and statues dictating the story (in Spanish) of the French role in the construction of the canal. The plaza is dedicated to the memory of the 22,000 workers, most of them from France, Guadeloupe and Martinique, who died trying to create the canal. Most were killed by yellow fever and malaria, and among the busts is a monument to the Cuban doctor Carlos J Finlay, who discovered how mosquitoes transmit yellow fever. His work led to the eradication of the disease in Panama.

On one side of the plaza are nine restored **dungeons** that were used by the Spaniards and later by the Colombians. Although they're now home to some rather upscale art galleries and restaurants, you can still see the dungeons' original stonework. Also on the plaza are the **Teatro Anita Villalaz** and the **Instituto Nacional de Cultura** (INAC; ☎ 211 4034; 🕒 8:30am–4pm Mon–Fri). INAC is responsible for maintaining the country's museums and other cultural institutions. There is a small gallery on the 1st floor that displays works by Panamanian artists.

### PASEO LAS BÓVEDAS

This **esplanade** runs along the top of the sea wall built by the Spanish to protect the city. From here, you can see the Puente de las

Américas arching over the waterway and the ships lining up to enter the canal.

### PALACIO DE LAS GARZAS

The **presidential palace** (Av Alfaro) is named after the great white herons that reside here. The president of Panama lives on the upper floor.

### CLUB DE CLASES Y TROPAS

This abandoned **ruin** (Calle 1a Oeste) was once the favorite hangout of General Noriega, though it was virtually destroyed during the 1989 invasion. Some fresh paint was selectively applied in early 2000, when scenes from the movie *The Tailor of Panama* were filmed here.

### PARQUE BOLÍVAR

In 1826, in a schoolroom opposite this park, Simón Bolívar held a meeting urging the union of the Latin American countries. After many struggles against Spanish domination, Bolívar succeeded in liberating Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela, and he created Gran Colombia, which encompassed all these states. Although Bolívar was unable to keep Gran Colombia together, he is nonetheless venerated as a hero throughout Latin America.

### MUSEO DE ARTE RELIGIOSO COLONIAL

Housed beside the ruins of the Iglesia y Convento de Santo Domingo, this **art museum** (☎ 228 2897; cnr Av A & Calle 3; admission US\$1; 🕒 8am–4pm Tue–Sat) has a collection of colonial-era religious artifacts, some dating from the 16th century.

Just inside the doorway of the ruins is the **Arco Chato**, a long arch that had stood here, unsupported, for centuries. It reportedly played a part in the selection of Panama over Nicaragua as the site for the canal since its survival was taken as proof that the area was not subject to earthquakes. Sadly, it collapsed in 2003.

### MUSEO DEL CANAL INTEROCEÁNICO

This impressive **museum** (☎ 211 1995; Calle 6a Oeste; admission US\$2; 🕒 9:30am–5:30pm Tue–Sun) is housed in a beautifully restored building that once served as the headquarters for the original French canal company. The Panama Canal Museum (as it's more commonly known) presents excellent exhibits on the famous waterway, framed in their historical and political context. Signs are in Spanish,

but English-speaking guides and audio tours (US\$5) are available.

### MUSEO DE HISTORIA DE PANAMÁ

This modest **museum** (☎ 228 6231; Calle 6a Oeste; admission free; 🕒 8:30am-3:30pm Mon-Fri) has a small selection of exhibits covering Panamanian history from the colonial period to the modern era.

### Parque Natural Metropolitano

Up on a hill to the north of downtown, this 265-hectare national park protects vast expanses of tropical semideciduous forest within the city limits, and serves as an incredible wilderness escape from the trappings of the capital. It has two main walking trails, the **Nature Trail** and the **Tití Monkey Trail**, which join to form one long loop. The loop is also home to a 150m-high *mirador* (look-out) that offers panoramic views of Panama City, the bay and the canal all the way to the Miraflores Locks.

Mammals in the park include *tití* monkeys, anteaters, sloths and white-tailed deer, while reptiles include iguanas, turtles and tortoises. More than 250 known bird species have been spotted here, and there are fish and shrimp living in the Río Curundú, which runs along the eastern side of the park.

The park was the site of an important battle during the US invasion to oust Noriega. Also of historical significance are the concrete structures just past the park entrance, which were used during WWII as a testing and assembly plant for aircraft engines.

The park is bordered on the west and north sides by Camino de la Amistad and to the south and east by Corredor Norte; Av Juan Pablo II runs right through the park. Pick up a pamphlet for a self-guided tour in Spanish and English at the **visitors center** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 232 5516; admission US\$1; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat), 40m north of the park entrance. Rangers offer one-hour tours to groups of five or more (US\$6 per person), but you need to call in advance.

Additionally, the **Panama Audubon Society** (☎ 224 9371; www.panamaaudubon.org) holds its monthly meeting at the visitors center from 7:30pm to 9:30pm on the second Thursday of every month. The meetings are open to the public and often feature interesting speakers. Both English and Spanish are spoken here. These meetings provide an excellent

opportunity to get to know some Panamanian birders and to learn more about tropical bird species.

An international team of scientists from the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI) have set up a **crane** in the park to study the forest canopy, which is home to a complete ecosystem 30m to 50m up from the ground. Although the crane was previously off-limits to the public, **Ancon Expeditions** (see the boxed text on p89) was recently awarded permission to take tourists up to the treetops. This is a highly recommended experience that will provide you with an entirely different view of the rainforest, though you will need to book in advance as the number of tourists allowed up on the crane per day is limited.

### Panamá Viejo

Founded on August 15, 1519, by Spanish conquistador Pedro Arias de Ávila, the city of Panamá was the first European settlement along the Pacific. For the next 150 years it profited mainly from Spain's famed bullion pipeline, which ran from Peru's gold and silver mines to Europe via Panamá. Because of the amount of wealth that passed through the city, the Spaniards kept many soldiers here, and their presence kept the buccaneers away.

In 1671, 1200 pirates led by Henry Morgan ascended the Río Chagres as far as Venta de Cruces and then proceeded overland to Panamá. Although the city was not fortified, it was protected on three sides by the sea and marshes, and on the land side was a causeway with a bridge in its middle to allow tidal water to pass underneath. But to the bewilderment of historians, when Morgan and his men neared the city, the Spanish soldiers left this natural stronghold and confronted the buccaneers in a hilly area outside town.

It was the first of their many mistakes. When the two forces met in battle, the Spanish infantry left their ranks after mistaking a repositioning of some of Morgan's men for a retreat. The Spanish soldiers ran after the pirates, leaving a high position for a gully. French sharpshooters within Morgan's band were delighted by the development and opened fire on the Spaniards from nearby knolls. The first volley of musket fire dropped about 100 soldiers, and the Spanish force fell to pieces. Soon after, nearly everything of value was either plundered and divvied up or destroyed by fire.

## LOCAL VOICES: MAYOR NAVARRO & THE FUTURE OF TOURISM IN PANAMA

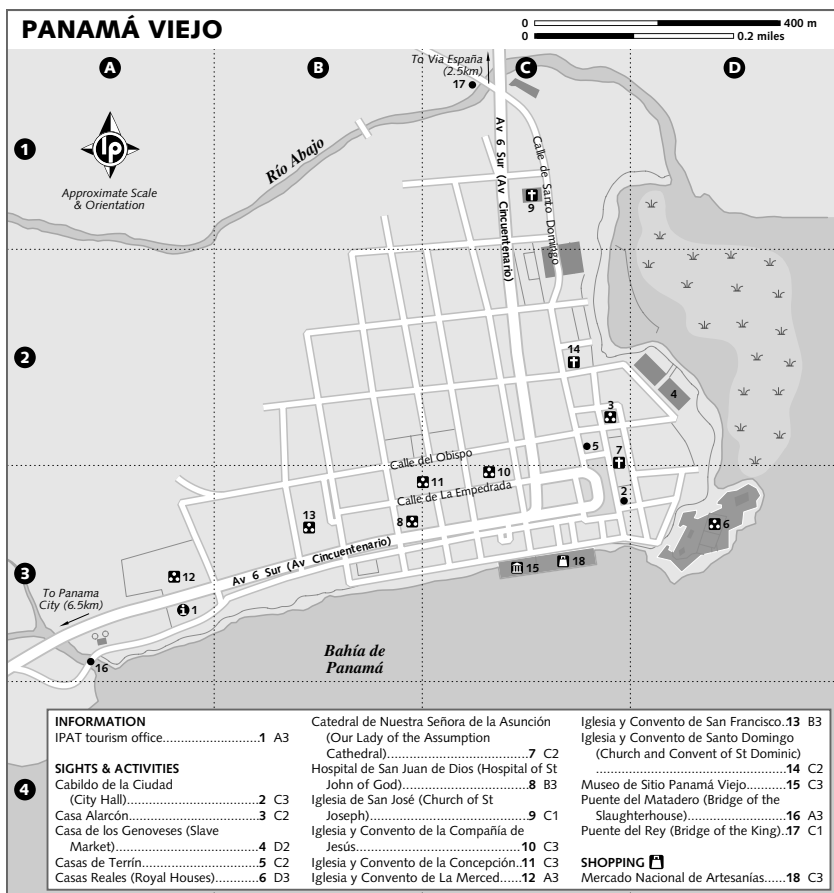
Juan Carlos Navarro is the founding director of ANCON, the country's most prominent private conservation organization. Harvard-educated, and renowned for his sharp wit and piercing intellect, he is currently serving his second term as the mayor of Panama City.

- **What makes Panama a unique tourist destination?** For a long time, Panama has been one of the world's best kept secrets. You know, all of us who live here, especially those folks who appreciate and respect our natural and cultural heritage, have always known that Panama was fantastic. And then suddenly, just a few years ago, word started getting around that Panama has a lot to offer and people started getting interested in the country for the first time. So now, I think we're currently undergoing a phase of intense interest and scrutiny from the international tourism industry.
- **What is your vision for the future of tourism in Panama?** Currently, a lot of Americans, Canadians and Europeans are coming to Panama to buy second homes. And, because of the canal expansion and the climate of general well-being and safety in Panama, our country is attracting a lot of international and local investment. So, when you put all that together in a pot and stir it, you have a lot of interest and pressure for us to develop tourism in Panama. This of course has a very good side and a very bad side. The good side is that tourism is one of the few opportunities we have in hand to generate foreign revenue, income and jobs in a relatively short period of time. The difficult part of the equation is that in order for tourism to be sustainable, it has to take into account the culture, the environment and other intangibles. As an example, you can build massive hotels to promote beach tourism almost anywhere in the world. But, if you want to build long-term value, there must be more than that.
- **What model of tourism would work well in Panama?** The model I like is one of heritage tourism. It is important to develop Panama as a destination for people who seek extraordinary landscapes, be it coastlines, mountains or tropical rainforests. But, I am also interested in developing Panama as a destination for people who want to learn about our history, our indigenous cultures and our natural heritage. I think that if we manage to achieve this in an intelligent way, then we can build sustainable tourism in Panama. In my opinion, quality tourism in Panama would be low volume and preferably high income so that we can receive the greatest possible economic impact and the least possible environmental and cultural shock. For me, that would be my ideal and my vision for where we should go. However, how do you achieve this model within a high pressured environment of tremendous capital investment by both local and international investors? That's our challenge!
- **What makes Panama City unique in Latin America?** What I like about my city is that it is fast paced and cosmopolitan, and that we were born open to the world. We were founded in 1519, and we are the oldest city on the Pacific in the Americas. Although Panama City has evolved since its founding, it has always been an extremely dynamic and diverse place. Today there are very few places on Earth where you can have an authentic Chinese dim sum in the morning, fried fish with cold beer at noon, and world-class Italian pasta in the evening. You see, the one thing that Panamanians have is our *joie de vivre*. We are a joyful, smart and creative people, and we just love to share our country with the world.

For the next three centuries, what remained of the abandoned city – mostly beams and stone blocks – served as a convenient source of building materials. Yet most of the remnants of the one-time metropolis were still intact as recently as 1950, when the limits of modern Panama City reached the ruins in the form of a squatter settlement.

Unfortunately, by the time the government declared the ruins a protected site in 1976 (Unesco followed suit in 1997), most of the old city had already been dismantled and overrun.

Today much of Panamá Viejo lies buried under a poor residential neighborhood, though the ruins are a must-see, even if only



to stand on the hallowed grounds of one of Central America's greatest cities.

### ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The ruins of Panamá Viejo are not fenced in, so you can visit them anytime, though for safety reasons it's probably best to explore the area during the daylight hours. So little of the original city remains that its size, layout and appearance are the subjects of much conjecture.

The city was founded on a coastal bar alongside a shallow cove. The primary government buildings were at the mouth of the cove, which was rather spacious at the time and could be used as a port. Panamá was also home to all of the major Catholic religious

orders – the Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits and Augustines – all of which had churches and convents in town. The best houses and most of the convents were built on the narrow strip of land along the beachfront.

The colonial city seems to have followed a grid plan, with blocks of various sizes and a main square (the visible remains of Panamá Viejo are certainly laid out that way). The lots tended to be narrow, and the houses often consisted of two or three stories. The suburbs that developed to the north and northwest lacked planning, and there are foundations of common houses and hovels scattered along crooked lanes.

It requires a fertile imagination to visualize the city before the arrival of Captain Morgan

and his men. The churches, some of which faced the sea, were the most outstanding buildings. All were rectangular, with stone outer walls, timber roofs, internal wooden supports and a lack of towers. The adjoining convents had inner courts surrounded by wooden galleries, and the larger ones had enclosed gardens and orchards.

Most of the better houses were built of timber and placed wall to wall, with small inner courts, open-air kitchens and separate wings for the servants. Some had ground-floor galleries and balconies, and most had plain exterior walls. A few of the fancier homes were built of stone and their ruins remain. The poor had far simpler dwellings, usually thatched huts built with inexpensive materials such as reeds.

The following sites are featured on Map p84.

## RUINS

The center of power resided at the **Casas Reales** (Royal House), a complex ringed by timber ramparts and separated from the city proper by a moat. Within the complex were the customs house, the royal treasury, a prison and the governor's house. Despite the obvious historical importance of the site, past governments have allowed sections of the property to be used as a landfill and for horse stables. Only scattered walls remain of the once impressive structures.

The **Catedral de Nuestra Señora de la Asunción** (Cathedral of Our Lady of Asunción), built between 1619 and 1626, is the best-preserved building of the ruins. In traditional fashion, it was designed so that its two side chapels gave the cathedral a crosslike shape when viewed from the heavens. The bell tower was at the back of the church and may have served double duty as a watchtower for the Casas Reales. The main facade, which faced the Plaza Mayor (Grand Plaza), is gone – only the walls remain.

Also facing the Plaza Mayor were the **Cabildo de la Ciudad** (City Hall) and the **Casas de Terrín**, houses built by one of the city's wealthiest citizens, Francisco Terrín.

Immediately north of the cathedral are the massive ruins of **Casa Alarcón**, the town's best-preserved and largest known private residence, which dates from the 1640s. Just north of the former residence is the **Iglesia y Convento de Santo Domingo** (Church & Convent

of St Dominic), the best-preserved church of the ruins. The convent dates from the 1570s, though the church was built 20 or more years later.

Arriving a decade or so after the Dominican friars were the Jesuits, who built the **Iglesia y Convento de la Compañía de Jesús** (Church & Convent of the Company of Jesus), whose stone ruins are likewise visible today. Just west of the Jesuits' facilities are the spacious ruins of a church and convent, the **Iglesia y Convento de la Concepción**, which were erected by the nuns of Nuestra Señora de la Concepción (Our Lady of the Conception). Most of the ruins, which cover the better part of two blocks, were part of the church – little remains of the convent.

Between the nuns' church and the sea was the city's sole hospital, the **Hospital de San Juan de Dios**. Unfortunately, much of the hospital's remains were scattered when Av Cincuentenario and a side road were put in not long ago. Also bordering the avenue, two blocks west of the hospital's ruins, are the remains of the **Iglesia y Convento de San Francisco**, the facilities erected by the Franciscans. The church faced the sea and stood on a massive base.

Continuing two blocks west along Av Cincuentenario, you'll arrive at the ruins of the **Iglesia y Convento de La Merced**. Erected by the Mercedarian friars in the early 17th century, the buildings actually survived the fire that swept the city following Morgan's assault. However, the church's facade is missing because the friars dismantled it and moved it to Casco Viejo, where it can be seen today.

Further west and paralleling the modern bridge is the **Puente del Matadero** (Bridge of the Slaughterhouse), a horribly over restored stone bridge that took its name from a nearby slaughterhouse, and which marked the beginning of the Camino Real to Portobelo. A much more significant bridge is the **Puente del Rey** (Bridge of the King), which is visible from Av Cincuentenario near the northern edge of town. Built in 1617, it may be the oldest standing bridge in the Americas.

About halfway between Puente del Rey and the Iglesia y Convento de Santo Domingo lies the **Iglesia de San José** (Church of St Joseph), which belonged to the Augustine order. Marking this building as special were its vaulted side chapels, an architectural feature seldom seen in Panama.

**MERCADO NACIONAL DE ARTESANÍAS**

Panamá Viejo buses (\$0.25) coming from Plaza Cinco de Mayo will drop you off at this **artisans market** (☎ 9am-6pm), which lies beside the bulk of the ruins.

**MUSEO DE SITIO PANAMÁ VIEJO**

Adjacent to the artisans market is this **museum** (admission US\$2; ☎ 9am-5pm), which contains a rather impressive scale model of Panamá Viejo prior to 1671 as well as a few surviving colonial artifacts. All signs are in Spanish, though a brochure and tape recording recount the site's history in English.

**The Causeway**

At the Pacific entrance to the Panama Canal, a 2km palm tree-lined *Calzada* (Causeway) connects the four small islands of Naos, Culobra, Perico and Flamenco to the mainland. The Causeway is the popular place to be in the early morning and late afternoon when residents head here to walk, jog, skate and cycle, or simply escape the noise and pollution of the city. The Causeway also offers sweeping views of the skyline and the old city, and you can see flocks of brown pelicans diving into the sea here most times of the year. Others arrive here simply to savor the pleasant breeze at one of the Causeway's many restaurants and bars.

At the Causeway entrance, **Bicicletas Rali** (☎ 8am-6pm Sat & Sun) operates a booth where you can rent a bicycle for US\$3 per hour or rollerblades for US\$1 per hour.

If you don't have your own vehicle, it's most convenient to take a taxi to the Causeway (US\$4 to US\$6) and to hail another when you're ready to return to town – any of the restaurants or bars can call one for you.

**FLAMENCO SHOPPING CENTER & FUERTE AMADOR RESORT & MARINA**

At the end of Isla Flamenco, you'll find one of the city's newest attractions, the **Fuerte Amador Resort & Marina** (☎ 314 0932; www.fuerteamador.com). This complex contains a two-story shopping center, a marina, a cruise ship terminal and a number of restaurants and bars. At night, these open-air spots are a big draw, providing a fine setting for cocktails or a decent meal.

At the marina, daily boats leave for the nearby resort island of **Isla Taboga** (p115).

**CENTRO DE EXHIBICIONES MARINAS**

The **Marine Exhibitions Center** (☎ 212 8000, ext 2366; admission US\$1; ☎ 1-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun), operated by the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI), includes an informative marine museum with signs in English and Spanish, two small aquariums and a nature trail through a patch of dry forest containing sloths and iguanas.

There are many exhibits at the center, including a small six-sided building with sweeping views of the Bahía de Panamá, which was built by Noriega for intimate gatherings. Today it houses a museum containing exhibits on the history of Panama's indigenous cultures.

At the museum you can also learn about the role that Panama's marine resources play in the country's economy, and the destructive and wasteful effects of harvesting fish and shrimp by net. All of the text is illustrated with high-quality photos.

Outside the museum is something to thrill ship enthusiasts: large, intelligent illustrations of vessels that allow visitors to glance out at the ocean and identify the types of ships waiting to transit the canal. There's a telescope that you can use free of charge to peer onto the boats and get an idea of what it's like to be a crew member on these tankers.

Two large aquariums, also part of the marine center, are 50m from the museum. One contains fish from the Pacific, the other fish from the Caribbean, allowing you to compare the two sets. You'll be struck by the difference – fish from the Caribbean are much more colorful, and much larger than fish from the Pacific. Staff on hand can explain to you the reasons for the differences.

Dry forests once lined Central America's Pacific coast. Relatively easy to clear and burn for agriculture, these forests have now all but disappeared. However, the forest that you can see from the center, which lines the shore just south of the Puente de las Américas, is a surviving patch of dry forest. There's even some dry forest near the aquariums – keep your eyes open for three-toed sloths as well as other wildlife.

**Museums**

Sadly, the establishment and preservation of museums is not a governmental priority in Panama City. Those that do exist are mostly

## THE SECRET LIFE OF THE CAUSEWAY

All four of the Causeway islands once comprised Fort Grant, which was established in 1913 to guard the southern entrance to the canal. Between 1913 and WWII, the USA made Fort Grant into the most powerful defense complex in the world.

In 1928, two 14-inch guns with ranges up to 44km were brought to Panama. Mounted on railway carriages, they could be moved across the isthmus via the Panama Railroad to defend either entrance to the canal (the Pacific-side emplacement for the railroad guns was on Culebra). You can still see the tracks today on the driveway leading up to the Centro de Exhibiciones Marinas. The concrete rooms nearby, now used by marine-center staff, once housed the guns' ammunition.

In 1941 the Japanese assault on Pearl Harbor showed that carrier-based aircraft could attack successfully far beyond the range of artillery. Suddenly obsolete, many of the big guns were retired from service even before the end of WWII. However, in 1942 the US military was still determined to bulk up their defenses, and paid the enormous cost of US\$400,000 to build a command post on Isla Flamenco.

The Causeway, its four islands and a chunk of the peninsula leading to the Causeway, were turned over to Panama in October 1979 in compliance with the Torrijos-Carter Treaty of 1977. Today, part of the Fuerte Amador shopping center is built on a massively protected bombproof structure that was needed 'for use in case of emergency and vital to the security of important data,' according to the US general who ordered its construction. Even today, the US military will not disclose what data was so important that it needed to be stored at the center of a rock island.

the products of extraordinary efforts by individuals who took it upon themselves to move a bureaucratic mountain and create institutions in which Panama's human and natural histories could be preserved.

Foremost among this select group of individuals was the late Reina Torres de Araúz, the country's most distinguished anthropologist. Before she passed away in 1982 at age 49, she successfully battled for the creation of seven museums – including the anthropology museum that bears her name.

The strength of Panama City's museums lies not in a single institution or two but in their variety. In the capital city there are museums devoted to religious colonial art, natural science, Panamanian history, contemporary art, the Panama Railroad and the canal. Unfortunately, signs at all the museums are in Spanish only, and literature in other languages generally is not available.

In addition to those listed in the Casco Viejo section (p81), Panama City is home to several other interesting museums.

The **Museo Antropológico Reina Torres de Araúz** (Map pp76-7; ☎ 262 8338; Av Central near Plaza Cinco de Mayo; admission US\$2; 🕒 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) shows the rich cultural heritage of Panama with a collection of pre-Columbian artifacts and exhibits.

The small **Museo Afro-Antilleano** (Map pp76-7; ☎ 262 5348; cnr Av Justo Arosemena & Calle 24 Este; admis-

sion US\$1; 🕒 8:30am-3:30pm Tue-Sat) has exhibits on the history of Panama's West Indian community, particularly their work building the railroad and later the canal.

**Museo de Arte Contemporáneo** (Map pp76-7; ☎ 262 8012; near Av de los Mártires, Ancón district; admission free; 🕒 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat, to 3pm Sun) is a privately owned museum with an excellent collection of works on paper by Latin American artists, and the occasional temporary exhibition by a foreign or national artist.

**Museo de Ciencias Naturales** (Map pp76-7; ☎ 225 0645; Av Cuba, btwn Calles 29 Este & 30 Este; admission US\$1; 🕒 9am-3:45pm Tue-Sat) has sections on geology, paleontology, entomology and marine biology, as well as an impressive display of taxidermy.

At the time of publication, construction on the **Museo de la Biodiversidad** (Museum of Biodiversity; www.biomuseopanama.org), designed by world-renowned architect Frank Gehry, was well underway. This much-anticipated museum will be located at the tip of the Causeway.

## Panama Canal Murals

The story of the monumental effort to build the Panama Canal is powerfully depicted in murals mounted in the rotunda of the **Panama Canal Administration Building** (Map pp74-5; Balboa Heights; admission free; 🕒 7:30am-4:15pm Mon-Fri).



The murals tell the story of the canal's construction through four main scenes: the digging of Gaillard Cut at Gold Hill, where the canal passes through the Continental Divide; the building of the spillway of the Gatún Dam, which dammed the Río Chagres and created Lago Gatún; the construction of one of the giant lock gates (the canal uses some 80 of these gates); and the construction of the Miraflores Locks near the Pacific entrance to the canal. A frieze located immediately below the murals presents a panorama of the excavation of Gaillard Cut.

The murals were created by William B Van Ingen of New York, an outstanding artist who had achieved considerable fame for his murals in the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, and those in the US Mint in Philadelphia. Van Ingen agreed to produce the murals for US\$25 per sq ft; the finished murals cover about 1000 sq ft.

According to a leaflet at the administration building, Van Ingen and two assistants first made charcoal sketches of canal construction activities during two visits to Panama in 1914. Van Ingen then painted the murals on separate panels in his New York studio. The panels were shipped to Panama and installed during a three-day period in January 1915 under the artist's personal supervision. The paintings have the distinction of being the largest group of murals by an American artist on display outside the USA.

The building is closed on weekends, but guards will usually let you in between 10am and 2:30pm if you ask them politely.

### Mi Pueblito

At the foot of Cerro Ancón, on the western side of town, **Mi Pueblito** (My Little Village; Map pp74-5; Av de Los Mártires; admission US\$1; ☎ 9am-9pm Tue-Sun) features life-size replicas of rural villages found on the Península de Azuero, in Bocas del Toro and in the Darién. It also features extensive shops selling handicrafts from throughout the country and a handful of decent restaurants. Folk dances accompanied by live music are staged on Friday and Saturday at around 6pm – they're touristy but still worth a look.

### Baha'i House of Worship

On the outskirts of Panama City, 11km from the city center on the Transisthmian Hwy, the

### DAY TRIPS FROM PANAMA CITY

Looking to get out of the city for the day? Here are some author-tested suggestions.

- Laying eyes on the awe-inspiring **Panama Canal** (p107)
- Spotting feathered friends along Pipeline Rd in **Parque Nacional Soberanía** (p110)
- Visiting the world-famous tropical biology center on **Isla Barro Colorado** (p113)
- Escaping to the flower-dotted island of **Isla Taboga** (p115)
- Surfing gnarly breaks along the **Pacific Coast** (p122)

white-domed **Baha'i temple** (☎ 231 1137; ☎ 10am-6pm) looms like a giant egg atop the crest of a hill. The inside is surprisingly beautiful, with a fresh breeze always present. The Baha'i House of Worship serves all of Latin America.

Information about the faith is available at the temple in English and Spanish; readings from the Baha'i writings (also in English and Spanish) are held Sunday mornings at 10am. Any bus to Colón can let you off on the highway, but it's a long walk up the hill. A taxi from Panama City costs around US\$10.

### COURSES

#### Dance

Located one block from Vía España near the Hotel Riande Continental, the **Latin Dance Company** (Map p79; ☎ 265 7964) offers classes in salsa, merengue and hip-hop for students aged five to 65. Three classes are held in the evenings starting at 5:30pm, and there are several Saturday classes as well. Classes cost US\$5 plus the US\$5 enrolment fee. Or if you plan on sticking around for a while, sign up for 10 days (US\$50) or one month (US\$80) of unlimited classes.

#### Language

Located in the suburban El Dorado neighborhood, the **Language & International Relations Institute** (ILERI; Map pp74-5; ☎ 260 4424; [isls.com/panama/schools/ileri.html](http://isls.com/panama/schools/ileri.html); Camino de la Amistad) offers four hours of one-on-one instruction per day, five days a week. Costs start at US\$300 for the first week (with lodging, meals, trips

and activities), and then decreases with each subsequent week. The weekly rate without lodging starts at US\$200.

The immensely popular language school, **Spanish Panama** (Map p79; ☎ 213 3121; www.spanishpanama.com; Av 2a B Norte), gets rave reviews from travelers. It has a similar structure to ILERI's: four hours of one-on-one classes daily and homestays with meals for US\$375 per week (long-term discounts are available). They also offer a 'backpacker special,' which includes classes with dorm stay for US\$275 per week.

## PANAMA CITY FOR CHILDREN

Panama City has a variety of attractions that are suitable for kids. With excellent rainforest nearby, consider a day tour with Ancon Expeditions (see below). Some of the best options for kids include visiting an **Emberá village** (p112), touring the old cannon-lined forts in **Portobelo** (p250), cruising along **Lago Gatún** (p123) on a jungle boat or taking a moderate hike through **Parque Nacional Soberanía** (p110).

The **Panama Canal Railway** (p246) that links the two oceans provides a lovely journey along the canal and through rainforest. Kids might also enjoy a visit to the **Miraflores Locks** (p107), especially since the new museum there has lots of eye-catching multimedia exhibitions and is touch-friendly in parts. And of course, if you need a respite from the heat (or the rain), head to **Multicentro** (p102) – this mall

has dozens of shops and restaurants, a movie theater and an internet café.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Although not as famous as the celebrations in Rio de Janeiro or New Orleans, Carnival in Panama City is celebrated with the same level of unrestrained merriment and wild abandon during the four days preceding Ash Wednesday. From Saturday until the following Tuesday, work is abandoned and masks, costumes and confetti are brought to the fore. For 96 hours, almost anything goes.

The festivities formally begin with a coronation ceremony on Friday, during which a Carnival queen and her attendants are chosen from candidates representing a variety of social clubs, volunteer organizations, neighborhoods and private groups. Throughout her reign, the queen presides over all official receptions and is the center of attention in the daily parades scheduled each afternoon.

Officially, the craziness starts slowly, with a small parade on Saturday that consists of little more than the queen and her court. Unofficially, the cork is way out of the bottle by then. Via España fills with people, and everyone is in high spirits and partying in an atmosphere that is sexually charged and free of class distinctions. Music pours from all directions and spontaneous dancing breaks out everywhere. Masquerade characters cavort among the crowd. Colorful street vendors

### ANCON EXPEDITIONS OF PANAMA

**Ancon Expeditions of Panama** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 269 9415; www.anconexpeditions.com; El Dorado Bldg, Calle Elvira Mendez) is the for-profit arm of ANCON (Asociación Nacional para la Conservación de la Naturaleza; National Association for the Conservation of Nature). It enables a portion of all proceeds from ecotours to be used in the ongoing fight to protect Panama's natural heritage.

Because of its conservationist aims, Ancon Expeditions has been able to recruit the country's foremost nature guides, all of whom are avid birders, speak flawless English and are extremely enthusiastic about the environment. They are excited about their occupations and offer a level of service that is simply superb. In Panama, the standard for nature guides and tours is set by Ancon Expeditions.

Ancon Expeditions' tour offerings are extensive, and they have regularly scheduled departures to every corner of the country, from the Chiriquí Highlands (p201), Bocas del Toro (p217) and Isla de Coiba (p188) to the Canal Zone (p107) and Kuna Yala (p258). The company is also the exclusive tour operator for the Darién (p278), and manages the world-famous Cana field station popular with bird-watchers, and the Punta Patiño lodge.

If you're interested in arranging a daytour around the city or to the Canal Zone, it is sometimes possible to stop by the office and book everything on-site. However, due to the popularity of Ancon Expedition's tour offerings, it's recommended that you book prior to your arrival in Panama, especially if you're planning on joining a multiday tour.

wander through the throngs of people, and improvised entertainment abounds. The party moves indoors at night – into cantinas, private clubs and hotels – where combos play Afro-Cuban and typical Panamanian music, and the dancing and drinking continue till dawn.

The celebration, the origins of which have been obscured with the passage of time, kicks into a higher gear on Sunday, when folk dance groups decked out in Panama's national costumes join the queen and her attendants in the afternoon parade down Vía España, traveling from near Vía Brasil to near Av Federico Boyd (the exact beginning and ending points vary from year to year). To cool the sunbaked masses, fire and garden hoses are turned on the crowd at every opportunity. The amount of water sprayed on party-goers during Carnaval in Panama City during these four festive days equals the amount the city uses during the previous four *months*.

The madness peaks on Shrove Tuesday with the biggest parade of all. Floats of all sizes rule the avenue, separated by bands of gaily dressed people walking slowly in themed formations – not the least conspicuous of which is the traditional entourage of transvestites. Most of them carry a razor in each hand as a warning to macho types that a punch thrown at them will not go unanswered.

Carnaval officially closes with the first rays of sunlight on Wednesday morning, when the hardest celebrants appear on the beach of the Bahía de Panamá to bury a sardine in the sand – a symbolic gesture intended to convey the end of worldly pleasures for the Lenten season.

## SLEEPING

There are dozens of hotels in Panama City with guest rooms ranging from dimly lit concrete cells to luxurious high-rise suites.

In the past, accommodations in Casco Viejo were best avoided – that is of course unless you were looking to rent a place by the hour. Today however, this rapidly changing neighborhood is home to a handful of recommended accommodations, and bedding down in Casco Viejo is a great way to soak up its Old World charm.

The neighborhoods of La Exposición and Bella Vista are home to a number of fairly standard budget and midrange hotels. Although the districts are newer than Casco

Viejo, they're not quite as new and shiny as the banking district.

The fast-paced vibe of modern Panama City is best experienced in El Cangrejo, the modern banking district that's chock-full of soaring steel and glass. Most of the hotels in this neighborhood are pricey affairs, though you can't beat the views from high up.

The final option is the former US-occupied neighborhoods of Clayton, Albrook, Cerro Ancón and Amador, which are located in the Canal Zone adjacent to the Miraflores Locks. Although you're a taxi cab away from the downtown, staying out here is a welcome respite from the noise and congestion of Panama City.

## Casco Viejo




The following accommodations are featured on Map p80.

**Hospedaje Casco Viejo** (☎ 211 2027; www.hospedaje.cascoviejo.com; Calles 8a Oeste; dm US\$7, s without/with bathroom US\$10/12; (P) (Q)) A welcome addition to the Casco Viejo scene, this warm and inviting colonial-mansion-turned-hospedaje is arguably the best deal in town. Whether you bed down in the dormitory or splurge on a private bathroom, it's hard to beat these prices, especially since guests can take advantage of the communal kitchen, free wi-fi and the open-air courtyard. The *hospedaje* is located down a quiet side street next to the Iglesia de San José and is just a few blocks away from the quarter's trendiest bars and restaurants.

**Pensión Colón** (☎ 228 8506; cnr Calles 12 Oeste & B; s/d US\$9/10, s/d with private bathroom US\$10/11; (P)) Originally built to house Panama Canal workers, this handsome hotel has an impressive lobby complete with the original ornate Spanish tile work. On the exterior, the Pensión Colón evokes the Casco Viejo of old. Unfortunately, the place has seen many years of neglect, though a sagging mattress and a leaky sink are offset by the incredible views from the balcony.

**ourpick Luna's Castle** (☎ 262 1540; www.lunascastle.com; Calle 9; dm/d incl breakfast US\$9/22) From the same twisted minds that brought you Mondo Taitu and Hostel Heike in Bocas del Toro (p226), Luna's Castle is, bar none, the best backpacker spot in Panama City. Housed in a creaky, colonial mansion near the water's edge, Luna's Castle masterfully blends historic Spanish colonial architecture with funky, laid-back backpacker vibes. Although it's the newest



accommodation in the capital, the owners' winning formula of professional service, international atmosphere and shoestring prices are sure to make this a legendary stop on the Gringo Trail. In the evenings, the attached 9th Avenue Bar is the best pick-up joint in the city for anyone smitten with an incurable case of wanderlust.



**Casa Mar Alta** (☎ 211 3427; www.casamaralta.com; Calle 2a, Casco Viejo; master bedroom/2nd bedroom US\$95/125;   ) Located at the core of Panama City's most atmospheric neighborhood, Casa Mar Alta is a beautifully restored 19th-century mansion with two lavish guest rooms. The finest feature of this penthouse apartment – and the reason it's often favored for magazine photo shoots – is the exquisite tile work throughout. Guests also have access to the dining room where breakfast is served each morning, as well as the stunning rooftop terrace, which has unspoiled views out to the sea. There really is no substitute for the exquisite penthouse, but you will need to book in advance as it's extremely popular.

## La Exposición

The following accommodations are featured on Map pp76–7.



### BUDGET

**Residencial Jamaica** (☎ 225 9870; cnr Av Cuba & Calle 38 Este; d with private bathroom US\$20;  ) This coral-pink palace offers secure, clean rooms in a mellow corner location. The light-filled rooms are a good deal at this price, especially since they come with air-con and private hot-water bathrooms. What makes this place worth considering is how well it's maintained – the management cares and it shows.




**Hotel Acapulco** (☎ 225 3832; Calle 30; s/d with private bathroom US\$20/22;  ) A discernible step up from the standard hotel fare that runs chockablock in this part of town, the Acapulco combines professionalism with a certain no-nonsense style. This is reflected in the spotless rooms complete with air-con, private hot-water bathroom and French-door laden balconies. There is a simple recipe for success here: low prices, decent standards and a friendly staff.




**Hotel Andino** (☎ 225 1162; Calle 35; s/d with private bathroom US\$22/25;  ) Rooms at the Hotel Andino lack charm, but they're big, clean and equipped like a start-up apartment. Request a king-size for extra play space, and you can also




get a two-burner stove for some self-catering adventures. If you don't feel like leaving the hotel at all, there's a bar and restaurant here, making it a convenient choice if you just have to crash overnight between bus departures.

**Hotel Marparaíso** (☎ 227 6767; Calle 34 Este; s/d US\$22/28;  ) Travelers in the know choose Hotel Marparaíso, simply because they'll pick you up at the airport for free, which will save you some serious cash. The rooms themselves are fairly unremarkable, though at least you can take a hot shower, watch some satellite TV and blast the air-con while recuperating from a long flight. Growing in popularity, the downstairs bar and restaurant is a great place to chat up other travelers.

### MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Hotel Venecia** (☎ 227 7881; Av Perú near Calle 35 Este; s/d/ff/executive rooms US\$25/30/35/40;   ) The Venecia is one of the newer hotels in this rapidly aging neighborhood, and its cheerily painted exterior is subtle compared to the over-the-top Venetian theme inside. If you can look past all the Roman tapestries, replica urns, fake artwork and stock tourist photos, the Venecia is actually good value for the money. Brightly lit rooms are adorned with modern furnishings, and the downstairs restaurant serves up some good spaghetti.

**Hotel Caribe** (☎ 225 0404; cnr Calle 28 & Av Perú; s/d with private bathroom US\$28/34;   ) Psychedelic and slightly retro – by default rather than design – this 250-room hotel has an intrigue that grows on you. Lurid orange and brown dominate the color scheme and the lighting is terrible, but there's something surreal about the rooftop pool overlooking the city. Summer days in the capital are stifling and sticky, so there's something to be said for the cheapest room in town with a pool.

**Hotel Costa Inn** (☎ 227 1522; www.hotelcosta.inn.com; Av Perú near Calle 39 Este; s/d US\$40/45;   ) A discernible step up in quality and service, the Hotel Costa Inn offers non-nonsense rooms in a part of town famous for surprises. However, the real perk of the Costa Inn is paying a midrange price for upscale amenities, including a gym and pool. Airport shuttle and city tours are available, and there's a reputable travel agency on the premises.

**Hotel Roma** (☎ 227 3844; www.hotelromaplaza.com; Av Justo Arosemena at Calle 33; d from US\$60, ste US\$100;



**P**     Another top pick for high quality and service, the Roma offers sparkling rooms with modern accents that are a world beyond the drab interiors of its neighboring hotels. If you're travelling with the little ones, the family-style suites are great value and the rooftop pool will keep everyone's temperatures down. A pleasant restaurant and bar on the 1st floor serves up a good mix of Panamanian favorites and Western standards.

**Miramar Inter-Continental** (☎ 214 1000; www.miramarpanama.com; Av Balboa near Av Federico Boyd; d from US\$165; **P**   ) This Panama City landmark hotel has hosted the likes of Hillary Clinton, Mick Jagger, Jimmy Carter, Alberto Fujimori, Sting, Ernesto Zedillo, Andres Pastrana and Def Leppard – not at the same time of course. Gorgeous guest rooms brimming with all the creature comforts face either the gleaming expanse of the Bahía de Panamá or the shimmering towers of the financial district. The Miramar is also home to an impressive list of amenities including an informal marina-side restaurant, a fine-dining restaurant, a piano lounge, an upscale dance club, spa and workout center, beauty salon, tennis courts and an enormous pool complete with its own island.



## El Cangrejo & Bella Vista



All of the following accommodations are featured on Map p79, unless otherwise noted.

### BUDGET

**Zuly's Independent Backpackers** (☎ 6605 4742; www.geocities.com/zulys\_independent\_backpacker; Calle Ricardo Arias 8; s/d within dm US\$7/11;  ) The cheapest dorm bed in the city can be yours at this low-key spot, which occupies the original premises of Voyager International Hostel. Zuly's is brand new and still working out the kinks, so it has a long way to go yet. But the warm, friendly atmosphere is likely to make it a popular choice amongst backpackers.


**Voyager International Hostel** (☎ 260 5913; www.geocities.com/voyagerih/english.html; Calle Maria Icaza; dm/d US\$8/17;  ) Panama City's original hostel boasts incredible wraparound views of the city in its new location, and it's worth mentioning that Voyager essentially invented the idea of a hostel in Panama. Unfortunately, its reputation amongst backpackers has dropped in recent years and the management doesn't seem intent on reinvesting any money into the property.

**Mamallaena** (☎ 6538 9745; www.mamallaena.com; Calle Maria Icaza; dm US\$10;  ) Literally next door to Voyager, Mamallaena is one of the newest hostels in Panama City, and offers clean and comfortable air-conditioned dorm rooms and basic shared facilities. This is a good deal for your money and unfussy travelers looking to save a buck or two will leave here feeling satisfied. Unfortunately, the atmosphere is as sterile as a hospital waiting room, which means that the quality of your time at Mamallaena depends on the company.

**Casa de Carmen** (☎ 263 4366; www.lacasadecarmen.com; Calle 1a de Carmen 32, El Carmen; dm/tr per person US\$10/13.50, d US\$20-30, apt US\$45; **P**  ) Located in a beautiful converted colonial home near Vía Brasil in the district of El Carmen, this festive hostel is undoubtedly Panama City's loveliest budget accommodation – lovely to the point of being hard to get into, so book ahead. All of the rooms here are painted a different shade, but share the same detailed forethought of high ceilings, slung-up hammocks, warm incandescent light and tiled bathrooms with scalloped sinks. Guests of all ages congregate in the cosy communal kitchen, lounge area or on the lush patio. The friendly owners, who have a wealth of knowledge of the city and countryside, add to the familial atmosphere.

**Anita's Inn** (☎ 213 3121; www.hostelspanama.com; Av 2a B Norte; dm US\$10, s from US\$15;  ) Affiliated with Spanish Panama (p89), this cozy guesthouse is conveniently located in the same building as the language school. If you're brushing up on your Spanish, you couldn't ask for a better place to call home. Even if you're just passing through and happy to speak English, the communal atmosphere, comfortable rooms and relaxing location make Anita's an excellent choice.

### MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Coral Suites Aparthotel** (☎ 269 3898; www.coral-suites.net; Calle D; ste from US\$80; **P**    ) This handsome all-suites hotel is a good choice for traveling executives who require their amenities, or long-term visitors to the capital in need of more than a hotel room. Simple and functional suites feature spacious bathrooms, luxury mattresses and a fully equipped kitchen for all your culinary needs. Coral Suites really stands out at this price range when you consider the full gym, rooftop pool and business center.

**Torres de Alba** (☎ 269 7770; www.torresdealba.com.pa; Av Eusebio A Morales; ste from US\$90; (P) (♿) (♿)) One of the newest hotels in El Cangrejo, the suites at Torres de Alba are expertly designed and outfitted with spacious living and dining areas, marble bathrooms with fine American-made fixtures and hot-water showers boasting hydrotherapy-style pressure. If you're looking to stay in shape, you can also do a few laps in the rooftop pool or pump some iron in the well-stocked workout center. Despite all of this, suites at Torres de Alba are under US\$100 a night, and there are discounts for long-term stays.

**Hotel Riande Continental** (☎ 265 5114; www.hotel.esriande.com; Calle Ricardo Arias & Via España; d from US\$110; (P) (♿) (♿)) This well-located upscale hotel has that swinging, tropical style more common to Havana than Panama, thanks to the open architecture, cool breezes and abundance of fresh-cut flowers. The rooms themselves have four-poster federalist-style beds and enough space to do somersaults, though you'll be disappointed if you get a room in the old tower. If you can afford it, upgrade to a suite and you'll be treated to eye-popping skyline views from the sitting area, the bed and even the walk-in closet. Of course, the real action at the Riande happens at the poolside – grab a cocktail and watch it all swirl by.

**Hotel Caesar Park** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 270 0477; www.caesarpark.com; Calle 77 Este near Via Israel, San Francisco; ste from US\$125; (P) (♿) (♿)) This gigantic hotel is like a slice of Vegas transplanted to Panama City: flashy, rococo, bodacious and stacked with facilities, amenities and services – it even has the casino, but is short an Elvis impersonator. Part of the Westin Hotels and Resorts chain, this is where heads of state usually stay when they visit Panama, so you never know who you may bump into in the athletic club and spa, swimming pool, business center, dance club or mall. There are 361 suites on offer here, each of varying shape and size, though all of them boast great views of the soaring skyline.

**DeVille Hotel** (☎ 206 3100; www.devilhotel.com.pa; Av Beatriz Cabal near Calle 50; ste from US\$175; (P) (♿) (♿)) The boutique concept is executed impeccably at this sweetheart of a hotel that has won a devoted clientele for its classy, tasteful digs and sterling service. While it's comfortable and functional enough for the most distinguished executive travelers, it's also undeniably romantic – a hard balance to strike. All

of the 33 rooms are suites and offer luxury par excellence. Among the features in your beautifully appointed room, expect to find an antique dresser from Thailand, glistening with inlaid mother of pearl; a marble-topped antique table set with Louis XV chairs; and the finest-quality US-made mattresses with custom bed linen made of Egyptian cotton and goose-feather pillows.

**The Bristol** (☎ 265 7844; www.thebristol.com; Calle Aquilino de la Guardia; d US\$295, ste from US\$335; (P) (♿) (♿)) An impossibly intimate, elegant hotel with marble at every turn, you'll sense the difference at the Bristol the moment the door is swept open for you. Oriental carpets, flamboyant orchids and lots of precious woods abound, and that's just the lobby. There are only 56 rooms at this 'Leading Small Hotel of the World', which, coupled with the 24-hour butler service, means you'll be scrupulously looked after.

## Canal Zone

All of the following accommodations are featured on Map pp74-5.

**Hostel de Clayton** (☎ 317 1634; www.hosteldeclynton.com; Calle Guanabana edificio 605B; dm US\$11.50, tw without/with private bathroom US\$13.50/15; (P) (♿) (♿)) Reminiscent of an army barracks (well, it was!), this unique hostel is located on the site of the former US army base of Clayton, though today it's one of the city's up and coming residential areas. The rooms and amenities here are perfectly suited to the budget traveler, and it's definitely cool to close your eyes for the night in the former belly of the beast. But the real reason you're staying here is to explore the area's quiet, suburban setting and attractive gardens.

**La Estancia** (☎ 314 1417; www.bedandbreakfastpanama.com; Casa 35, Quarry Heights, Ancón Hill; d/ste US\$55/85; (P) (♿)) Perched atop Cerro Ancón and surrounded by tropical flora and fauna, La Estancia is a small apartment building converted into a tranquil B&B that boasts some great views from its lofty locale. Pastels and clean lines abound, and the quaint rooms exemplify functional simplicity with no knickknacks to clutter things up. Breakfasts (included in the room cost) are excellent here, and best enjoyed on the patio while gazing upon the Puente de las Américas.

**Albrook Inn** (☎ 315 1789; www.albrookinnpanama.com.pa; Calle Hazelhurst 14, Albrook; d/ste US\$60/80; (P) (♿)) Set amid lush greenery in a tranquil

area removed from the chaos of downtown, the new Albrook Inn near Albrook airport is a fine choice if you're trying to make an early morning domestic flight. Bright rooms with picture windows make the most of the ample sunlight and surrounding gardens, and are far removed from the congestion and pollution of the downtown area. The 2nd-floor suites are well priced, especially considering they come with three beds, a fully equipped kitchen and a cozy lounge area.

**Country Inn & Suites, Panama Canal** (☎ 211 4500; www.countryinns.com/panamacanalpan; Amador Av & Pelicano Av; d/ste US\$110/125; (P) (♿) (♿)) In a peaceful setting on the water overlooking the canal, this Panamanian installment of the American-owned Country Inn is reminiscent of a retirement community in Panama City, Florida. Cookie-cutter architecture aside, all of the rooms here are outfitted with all the trimmings and the private balconies overlooking the Puente de las Américas are a nice touch. There's also an enormous swimming pool complete with hot tub, which casts a resort-like ambience on the whole property.

## EATING

Panama City has literally hundreds of places to eat, from the gritty working-class hole in the wall to the garden bistro, with everything in between. Reflecting its large immigrant population, Panama City also offers an enticing palette of cuisines from every corner of the globe.

In the past, the district of Casco Viejo was the best place in the city for budget travelers

to find a cheap plate of rice and beans and whatever meat was cooking out back. Today however, the urban renewal of the district has attracted a number of boutique eateries and European-inspired cafés.

The neighborhood of La Exposición reflects its working-class roots, though there are a number of good spots hidden along its back streets. On the other hand, Bella Vista, the self-proclaimed restaurant district, is the best spot in the city for lightening the wallet and satisfying the tastebuds.

With so many salaried earners on their lunch break, the banking district of El Cangrejo is home to a number of pricey eateries. They also tend to be slightly more conservative and less trendy than the Bella Vista offerings.

Owing to the wealth of city denizens and the popularity of dining out, Panama City is the only place in the country where reservations are a good idea. Although you can probably get a table most days of the week, don't even think about just showing up on Friday or Saturday night without phoning ahead.

For groceries and self-catering, stop by the 24-hour Supermercado Rey, which has several locations throughout the city. Panama City is also home to a number of street vendors selling everything from shaved ices to empanadas.

## Casco Viejo

All of the following eateries are featured on Map p80.

### EL DONALDO

With nightlife to rival Miami and an old city with European airs, Panama City unabashedly has it all, not to mention the fact that it's less than one hour away from mountains, beaches and rainforests. Not surprisingly, some seriously swish high-rise apartments are going up by the dozen, and it's not just Panamanians that are getting in on the real estate action.

In 2005 the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) ranked Panama as the No 4 place in the world to retire, dubbing Panama City the 'Dubai of the Western Hemisphere.' This is in part due to the government's generous pension program, which enables foreigners who can prove a guaranteed income of \$500 per month to cash in on everything from discounted medical expenses to home-closing costs.

In fact, the real-estate boom is so lucrative that even 'The Donald' himself is getting in on the action. Invigorated by the success of his absurd reality TV show, Donald Trump has already begun construction of the Trump Ocean Club, a US\$220 million project that will boast a 65-story condominium tower, an international casino and a private beach club.

Although it will still be years before the flock of American retirees transform Panama into another West Palm Beach, how The Donald can be stopped is anyone's guess.

**Café Coca Cola** (Av Central; plates US\$1-3; ☎ 7:30-11pm) A neighborhood institution near Plaza Santa Ana, Café Coca Cola is an old-school diner, complete with chess-playing senoras and no-nonsense waitresses. It's also air-conditioned and chock-full of TVs playing the latest Latin American football matches, which makes Coca Cola something of a hang-out spot for Casco Viejo's working class. Of course, all of this shouldn't distract you from the real reason you're here, namely to fill the stomach without breaking the bank on hearty platefuls of rice, beans and the featured meat of the day.

**Grandement** (Av Central; gelato US\$2.50-3.50; ☎ noon-8pm) Nothing beats the tropical heat like a cool scoop of mango gelato and there's no better gourmet spot in the city than this European-style ice cream shop. With French owners who refuse to skimp on quality or authenticity, Grandement serves up the perfect accompaniment to a leisurely stroll through the old streets of Casco Viejo or along the waterfront. If you want to speed things up a bit however, there's also a real Italian espresso machine on the premises that will get you exactly where you need to go.

**Brooklyn Cafe** (Calle 1a Oeste; coffee & pastry US\$2-3, meal US\$5-6; ☎ 7:30am-7pm daily) Owned by a warm Panamanian woman who fondly recalls her time in the States, this NYC-style café is the perfect spot to linger over a frothy cappuccino and a buttery muffin. Of course, those with bigger appetites should stop by for the daily *plato ejecutivo* (US\$5), a slightly upscale version of the traditional Panamanian lunch that is served in restaurants throughout the country. Although it's only been around for a short while, the Brooklyn Cafe is fixing to become the neighborhood coffee shop and it's already won a mountain of praise from scores of devotees.

**Café de Asís** (☎ 262 9304; Calle 3a Este; mains US\$7-12; ☎ from 6pm) Located on the ground floor of a beautifully restored 19th-century building, Café de Asís is perhaps the most charming spot in Panama City. With outdoor tables spilling out into the Parque Bolívar and overlooking the soaring spires of the Iglesia de San Francisco, the Old World atmosphere here is Casco Viejo at its best. The food at Asís can easily hold its own, and the fresh Peruvian-style ceviche and the house *sangría* pretty much complements everything on the menu perfectly.

**Manolo Caracol** (☎ 228 4640; cnr Av Central & Calle 3 Oeste; mains US\$10-17; ☎ noon-3pm & 7-10:30pm Mon-Fri, 7-11pm Sat) Arguably the most famous restaurant in Panama City, Manolo Caracol offers fixed-price five-course lunches (US\$10) and seven-course dinners (US\$17) that change daily. The menu emphasizes seasonal produce, locally raised meats and freshly caught fish, but it's the imaginative recipes and flawless presentation that have helped vault the restaurant's reputation. Manolo is also located in a historic colonial mansion complete with the original tiling, historic tapestries and hewn-wood furniture, which completes the restaurant's warm and intimate atmosphere.

**René Cafe** (☎ 262 3487; Calle 7a Este; mains US\$12-16; ☎ noon-3pm & 7-10:30pm Mon-Fri, 7-11pm Sat) With an unbeatable location underneath the shadows of the Iglesia Catedral and overlooking the Plaza de la Independencia, this relative newcomer is primed to become one of the most popular restaurants in the city. Drawing on the successes of Manolo Caracol, René Cafe also offers fixed-price five-course lunches (US\$12) and seven-course dinners (US\$16) that change daily. However, the difference is that René emphasizes the international nature of the capital by infusing traditional Panamanian favorites with influences as broad as Pan-Asian and Continental cuisine to create some truly unique tapas.

**Restaurante Las Bóvedas** (☎ 228 8058; Plaza de Francia; mains US\$16-22; ☎ from 6pm, closed Sun) This utterly unique French restaurant is set in the vaults of a 300-year-old fort that housed political prisoners for most of the 19th century – fortunately for the crowds who converge here on the weekends, the ghosts of the past haven't had a deleterious effect on the cooking. Specializing in local seafood with a French twist, the menu varies daily, subject to the catch of the day, but always includes a fish fillet, mixed seafood and a cut of steak just to round things out a bit. A guitarist performs in the last vault nightly except Friday and Saturday, when there's jazz; the music usually starts around 9pm.

## La Exposición & Bella Vista

### BUDGET & MIDRANGE

**Restaurante Vegetariano Mireya** (Map p79; cnr Calle Ricardo Arias & Av 3a Sur; items US\$2-3; ☎ 6am-10pm Mon-Sat) Mireya is a budget traveler's delight, especially if you're a vegetarian on a desperate search for



nutrition in this meat-lover's paradise. Tasty cruelty-free offerings include eggplant parmesan, soy burgers and freshly squeezed tropical juices, and there's no shortage of healthy snacks available for purchase. Even if you're not a vegetarian, skip on the cow for a day and mix things up a bit – your body will thank you.

**El Rincón Tableño** (Map pp76-7; cnr Calle 27 Este & Av Balboa, La Exposición; meals US\$2-4; ☎ 7:30-11pm) The menu changes daily at this open-air cafeteria-style eatery, but the type of food never does: it's always 100% working-class Panamanian. Typical items include *sopa de carne* (meat soup), *camarones guisados* (shrimp in tomato sauce), and *ropa vieja* (literally, 'old clothes'; marinated shredded beef served as a stew), and there's a choice of a half-dozen or so natural fruit juices, each priced under US\$1. Panama City has no shortage of upscale international eateries, but sometimes it's refreshing to simply stick to your roots.

**Crêpes & Waffles** (Map p79; ☎ 269 1574; Calle 47 Este, Bella Vista; mains US\$4-7; ☎ noon-11pm) Crepe and waffle lovers rejoice at this popular spot in nightlife-rich Bella Vista, which is an ideal place to grab a quick bite before hitting the bars and clubs. Spinach, ricotta and tomato are good standbys, though the truly hungry should opt for the more filling *lomito á la pimienta* (strips of roast beef with pepper sauce). Owing to its increasing popularity, Crêpes & Waffles franchises are popping up all over the city, which is a good thing – there's nothing quite like wrapping your dinner up in a thin and savory pancake package.

**Masala Indian Cuisine** (Map pp76-7; ☎ 225 0105; Calle 42 Este, Bella Vista; mains US\$5-9; ☎ noon-11pm) Nothing complements hot and humid tropical climes quite like a fiery plate of Indian curry and an ice-cold Kingfisher lager. Housed in a historic Bella Vista mansion that's been redecorated with colorful textiles and Indian art, Masala offers a full complement of traditional dishes from the subcontinent. Although nonadventurous eaters can stick to more Westernized dishes like tikka masala and tandoori chicken, iron-stomach masochistic types should pile on the heat with dishes like lamb vindaloo.

**El Pavo Real** (Map p79; Av 3 B Sur near Calle Ricardo Arias, Bella Vista; plates US\$5-9; ☎ noon-midnight Mon-Sat) A mix of Panamanians and expats gather over games of darts or pool at this British pub-restaurant made famous by John le Carré's

thriller *The Tailor of Panama*. (The British Foreign Service employee/best-selling novelist spent a lot of time here while conducting research for his book. The pub-restaurant's owner, Sarah Simpson, is also an ex-BFS employee. Coincidence?) The pub grub here is tasty and filling, and offerings include burgers, chicken-breast sandwiches and fish 'n' chips. There is also occasional live music and there's never a cover charge.

**Lum's** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 317 6303; Corozal Oeste off Carretera Diablo, Bldg 340, Ancón; mains US\$6-10; ☎ from 11am Mon-Sat) Occupying an old cavernous hangar that once housed machinery for the Panama Canal, Lum's has a long history of serving up ribs, steaks and other hot-off-the-grill mains. Today it's the expat's restaurant of choice, especially since its satellite TV, pool table, foosball and healthy offering of tap beers packs in the crowds on weekends. Located just west of La Exposición in Ancón on the edge of the canal, Lum's is one of the most of the popular restaurants in the Canal Zone.

**Gasthaus Bavaria** (Map pp76-7; ☎ 265 6772; Calle 50, Bella Vista; mains US\$7-12; ☎ noon-11pm Mon-Sat) Hands down the best German restaurant in the capital, Gasthaus Bavaria serves up all of your favorite dishes from the motherland, as well as enough traditional beers to inspire your own mini-Oktoberfest any time of the year. Although you're welcome to try anything on the menu, the favorite is the Jaeger Schnitzel, a breaded sausage with a mushroom cream sauce – definitely not for the weak of heart. Of course, even if you were foolish enough to leave your appetite behind, don't pass up the complimentary cheesy puffs served alongside pints of rich, fragrant Warsteiner beer.

**Ali Baba** (Map pp76-7; ☎ 225 0159; Panama Yacht Club, Av Balboa near Calle 40 Este, La Exposición; mains US\$10-15; ☎ lunch & dinner) This landmark restaurant capitalizes on its stunning location on the 2nd floor of the Panama Yacht Club. The views of the bay here are stunning and it's easy to pass away the hours just staring at the boats bobbing up and down on the sea. Popular with the business crowd during lunch hours and with romantic couples at night, Ali Baba features an eclectic menu including Spanish paellas, thin-crust pizzas and, befitting the name, an ample selection of Middle Eastern dishes. There's live music on the weekends.

**Restaurante Matsuei** (Map p79; ☎ 264 9562; Calle Eusebio A Morales, Bella Vista; mains US\$11-15; ☎ noon-

11:30pm Mon-Sat, 6-11:30pm Sun) Although Japanese restaurants come and go in Panama City with the same frequency as transiting ships, Matsuei has a long and proud history stretching back over a quarter of a century. True to its Japanese roots, the sushi bar stretches across the entire restaurant and is easily one of Panama's finest raw fish experiences – much of the fish is imported from Miami, so you can expect to see everything from *unagi* (eel) to *maguro* (tuna) on offer. Even if you're not tempted by fresh sushi, Matsuei is known for its piping hot *sukiyaki* and lightly fried *tempura*, as well as countless other Japanese standards.

#### TOP END

**Martín Fierro** (Map p79; ☎ 264 1927; Calle Eusebio A Morales; steaks US\$12-20; 🍷 noon-3pm & 6-11pm Mon-Sat, noon-9:30pm Sun) For top quality sirloins, porterhouse cuts and *filet mignon*, there is only one name in Panama City, and it's Martín Fierro. The quality of meat served here is unparalleled – top selections include the best in US-imported New York rib steaks, grass-fed Argentinean fillets and locally raised Panamanian cuts. And of course, nothing washes down braised beef quite like a deep and bold glass of red wine, and Martín Fierro has no shortage of Chilean standards to round out your meal.

**Madame Chang** (Map p79; ☎ 269 1313; Calle 48, Bella Vista; mains US\$14-18; 🍷 noon-3pm & 6-11pm Mon-Sat, noon-11pm Sun) The top Chinese restaurant in town offers Oriental opulence in the center of a historic Bella Vista home. Although Western palates fearful of Asian cuisine will find familiar favorites, serious aficionados should choose any of the traditional offerings including *pato al estilo Pekin* (Peking duck), *filete 'tit pang'* (sizzling sliced beef with oyster sauce) and *pichón en pétalos de lechuga* (a combination of duck, chicken and pigeon, served on a bed of crispy rice noodles). In a country where Chinese food is often a sorry excuse to serve up day-old fried rice, Madame Chang is a breath of fresh lotus-scented air.

**Eurasia** (Map pp76-7; ☎ 264 7859; Calle 48, Bella Vista; mains US\$15-20; 🍷 noon-3pm Mon-Fri, 7-10:30pm Mon-Sat) Dining at Eurasia is a rich, sensory experience, starting with the lavishly adorned restaurant complete with marble floors and hanging original artwork. The experience continues with impeccable service and daring fusion cuisine including Vietnamese shrimp rolls with orange sauce, and onion

soup with tofu and duck breast. Entrées similarly range across the continents with dishes such as jumbo shrimp in tamarind sauce and coconut milk with rice pilaf or tuna breaded with *ajonjolí* (sesame) seeds and caramelized in honey.

**Limoncillo** (Map p79; ☎ 263 5350; Calle 47 near Calle Uruguay, Bella Vista; mains US\$15-20; 🍷 noon-3pm & 7-10:30pm Mon-Fri, 7-11pm Sat) Panamanian chef Clara Icaza Angelini cooked at some of the best restaurants in New York before returning to her roots and opening one of Panama City's top restaurants. The menu changes every few months, but you can always count on a fresh and creative assortment of plates with delicate spices, such as pan-roasted grouper with grilled asparagus or sautéed sea scallops with Thai red curry sauce. Incredibly stylish and decorated with an eye for detail, Limoncillo benefits from Angelini's family of artists – many of the paintings, photographs and sculptures in the restaurant were made by her relatives (some are for sale).

**La Cocotte** (Map p79; ☎ 213 8250; Av 3 B Sur, Bella Vista; mains US\$15-25; 🍷 lunch Mon-Fri, dinner Mon-Sat) Fine Parisian cuisine reigns supreme under the stewardship of Chef Fabien Migny, who studied at the Ecole Hotellière Belliard while simultaneously training at the renowned Restaurant Jamin de Joel Robouchon in Paris. Appetizers like *pâté de canard* (duck pâté) meld nicely with mains of *confit de canard* (roasted duck) or fresh salmon in a red wine sauce, and everything is expertly topped off with *crêpes soufflées au chocolat* (chocolate soufflé crepes). The fixed-price lunch (US\$13) is a good way to sample Migny's cuisine without breaking the bank, though there are certainly less enjoyable ways to spend your hard-earned money.

**Restaurante 1985** (Map p79; ☎ 263 8541; Chalet Suizo, Calle Eusebio A Morales; plates from US\$20; 🍷 11:30am-midnight Mon-Fri, 5:30pm-midnight Sat & Sun) Restaurant goers with very large expense accounts should consider a meal of unparalleled decadence at Restaurante 1985, one of the city's most highly regarded culinary institutions. Located inside the Chalet Suizo (Swiss Chalet), this French restaurant provides impeccable service, elegant decor and an extensive wine list. *Steak morilles* (steak with morel mushrooms), lobster Provençal, shrimp cognac and the many changing daily specials highlight the talents of Chef Willy Diggelmann.

## El Cangrejo & Bella Vista

**Niko's Cafe** (Map pp74-5; Calle 51 Este near Vía España; mains US\$2-4; ☎ 24hr) Spawned from the dreams of a Greek immigrant who once sold food from a cart, Niko's has become one of Panama City's most successful restaurant chains, with several locations throughout the city. The secret is simple: serve fresh, hearty portions of inexpensive food in a laid-back cafeteria-style ambience and the crowds will file in. Open 24 hours to serve all of your late-night snack attacks, Niko's serves up everything from made-to-order breakfasts, Panamanian staples, Greek gyros, Italian pastas and every kind of meat from grilled chicken and fried cutlets to greasy burgers to T-bone filets.

**Restaurante y Pizzeria Napoli** (Map p79; ☎ 262 2446; Calle Estudiante at Calle 16; pizzas US\$4-8; ☎ 11am-11pm Wed-Mon) Panama's oldest pizzeria serves up delicious, wood-fired pizzas at a no-nonsense speed. Although they're piping hot and extra cheesy, the pizzas aren't the only thing on the menu, and you can't go wrong with any of the past offerings such as ravioli or a hearty dish of fettuccine alfredo. Of course, no matter what you choose, you'll enjoy the classic atmosphere of open-air tables with red-checked tablecloths and rapidly moving waiters shuffling between the tables.

**Machu Picchu** (Map p79; ☎ 264 9308; Calle Eusebio A Morales 16, El Cangrejo; mains US\$7-10; ☎ 11am-3pm & 6-11pm) Machu Picchu is a low-key but traditional restaurant where blue-vested waiters make the rounds among a mix of Peruvian expats and in-the-know Panamanians. True to its roots, the authentic menu has a long list of Peruvian specialities including pan-fried sea bass served with cream sauce, topped with shrimp or a half-a-dozen other ways. And of course, nothing quenches your thirst and cleans your palate quite like a pisco sour, Peru's sometimes sweet and sometimes tart national drink.

**Parillada Jimmy** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 226 1096; Av Cincuentenario; mains US\$7-12; ☎ 11:30am-11:30pm) The long open porch with high ceilings and wrought-iron chandeliers lend a farmhouse feel to this Panama City institution. The grill flares in the corner giving an indication of the specialities served here, namely some serious cuts of beef, meaty chicken breasts and fresh country-style sausage. Although it's located in the San Francisco district just east of the old Aeropuerto Paitilla, Parillada Jimmy still packs in lunchtime diners from

the business district and it's always hopping with the after-work crowd.

**Greenhouse** (Map p79; ☎ 269 6846; Calle Uruguay; mains US\$8-12) This stylish restaurant and lounge draws its name from its enclosed patio, which puts you in touch with tropical greenery – inside, stained-glass windows, an artfully displayed fish tank and a nice, relaxed vibe completes the setting. Pleasant but sedate waiters bring warm towels as refreshment, before you dine on a variety of salads and tasty bites from the grill, such as *corvina* (flavorful white fish) and steak burgers, as well as wraps and quesadillas. At night, the restaurant puts the electronic music up a notch as a young good-looking crowd holds court over round upon round of expertly mixed martinis.

**Siete Mares** (Map p79; ☎ 264 0144; Calle Guatemala; mains US\$12-18; ☎ 11am-3pm & 6-11pm) Artful lighting and a few impressionistic paintings scattered along the exposed brick walls sets the mood for some serious seafood dining, which attracts suits from all corners of Panama City's financial district. The speciality here is lobster, though if the sea hasn't been bountiful, you can choose from a wide variety of options including sea bass, jumbo shrimp and red snapper. Despite the fact that the street is lined with countless other eateries, the crowds flocking in front of Siete Mares are testament to the fact that seafood here is about as fresh as it gets.

## DRINKING

Bars and clubs open and close with alarming frequency in Panama City, though generally speaking, nightlife is stylish, sophisticated and fairly pricey. With that said, the well-to-do denizens of Panama City love a good scene, so it's worth scrubbing up, donning some nice threads and parting with a bit dough. You might regret blowing your budget in the morning, but that's the price you pay to party with the beautiful people.

Big areas for nightlife are localized in four parts of town: Casco Viejo, La Exposición, Bella Vista and the Causeway. Bars in Casco Viejo are generally subdued and cater to an older crowd, though there's nothing quite like sipping a perfectly crafted cocktail in a crumbling colonial mansion.

As one of the older parts of the modern downtown, La Exposición isn't nearly as hip and trendy as some of the more fashionable

## LOCAL LORE: CAPTAIN MORGAN

After sacking Panamá in 1671, Captain Henry Morgan burnt the city to the ground, massacred its inhabitants and made off with the richest booty in the Americas, though his infamous exploits didn't end there. Because his actions violated a peace treaty between England and Spain, Morgan was arrested and conducted to England the following year, but he was acquitted on the questionable account that he had no prior knowledge of the treaty. In 1674 Morgan was knighted before departing for Jamaica to take up the post of Lieutenant Governor.

Although Captain Morgan is best remembered for his nefarious exploits at sea, the last several years of his life in Port Royal (the 'Sodom of the New World') is the stuff of legends. At the time, the pirate capital of the Caribbean was known as the richest, nastiest city in the world, and was famous for its gaudy displays of wealth and loose morals. Here, Morgan spent the last years of his life spending the riches of Panamá, though the actual events surrounding his death remain a mystery.

In 1688, at the age of 53, Captain Morgan suddenly died, leaving behind an immense personal fortune. Although his death has been attributed to tuberculosis and dropsy (edema), the local lore has it that world's most infamous pirate simply drank himself to death – it's fitting that Captain Morgan's legacy should live on in the form of syrupy-sweet spiced rum.

districts. However, there are still a few hidden gems out there, so keep your ears to the ground and don't be afraid to explore.

The district of Bella Vista is home to the always fashionable Calle Uruguay, a strip of trendy bars and clubs that's reminiscent of Miami's South Beach. Although you have to pay to play here, though there's nothing quite like a night in Panama City's playground of the rich and sexy.

At the Isla Flamenco shopping center on the Causeway, you'll find a number of nightlife spots, ranging from packed dance clubs to more low-key watering holes. However, the vibe here is not unlike what you might find in Las Vegas, so shop around and pick the theme that you like, be it a pirate bar or an Egyptian club.

For the latest on what's happening in the city, be sure to pick up a copy of *La Prensa* ([www.prensa.com](http://www.prensa.com) in Spanish). Weekend listings are available in the Thursday and Friday editions or on its website; look for the 'De Noche' section.

Half the fun of drinking in Panama City is finding a hidden gem, though here's a few of our favorite spots to get you started.

**Platea** (Map p80; Calle 1a Oeste) With exposed brick walls and a small, intimate stage, this jazz club wouldn't feel out of place in Greenwich Village, minus the Spanish of course. As the night wears on, a more mixed crowd is attracted to this swinging spot, making for some excellent people-watching over expertly crafted *mojitos*.

**Bolero** (Map pp76-7; Calle 42) This elegant, understated Cuban bar and restaurant hosts live salsa and merengue bands on Friday and Saturday, and a live DJ most other nights. Although there's no dance floor here, the young and feisty crowd occasionally dance among the tables when the music starts to peak.

**Player's** (Map pp76-7; Calle 42) This British-style pub is outfitted with dark-wood furniture and gleaming fixtures, which lends a proper Anglo feel to this watering hole. The pool table here is hopping most weeknights, and the Friday night rock performances draw in a good mix of Panamanians and expats from around the globe.

**Mango's** (Map pp74-5; Plaza Edison, Vía Brasil) Despite being a little far away from the action, this hidden bar-restaurant becomes a fairly popular gathering spot on weekends. Local DJs play a wide mix of sounds ranging from hip-hop and drum 'n' bass to electronica and reggaeton, sometimes packing the dance floor, sometimes clearing it.

**Spot** (Map p79; Calle 47) One of Panama City's best karaoke bars, this place attracts would-be divas and maestros who belt out Latin favorites to the often packed bar room. The Spot has a festive vibe and it's a good place to meet some new friends, especially if you don't mind embarrassing the hell out of yourself.

**Wine Bar** (Map p79; Av Eusebio A Moralel) This stylish Italian bistro showcases the fruit of the vine, with over 200 selections on offer from around

the globe. Accompanying the wine list are appetizers like smoked salmon with toasted almonds and carpaccio with capers. Live jazz starts at 9pm most nights of the week.

**La Kava** (Map p79; Calle Uruguay) The handsome La Kava attracts a young indie-rocker crowd and an eclectic mix of other laid-back types. Local rock bands perform on Thursday nights, and if old Nirvana covers don't cut it, you can always retreat to the mellow lounge space in the next room.

**Habibi's** (Map p79; Calle Ricardo Arias) The open patio is a scenic spot for Lebanese cuisine, while the upstairs is a colorful lounge resembling a sheik's tent where you can imbibe *cuba libres* (rum and cokes) after taking a few hits off the hookah. A belly dancer often appears on Friday and Saturday nights to add a splash of color to the scenery.

**Traffic Island** (Map pp74-5; Isla Flamenco Shopping Plaza) Located on Isla Amador, Traffic Island has a stunning open-air location and boasts sweeping views across the water to the Panama City's soaring skyline. Salsa and merengue set the tone for a variety of tropical drinks, and if the music puts you in the mood, there's plenty of nearby places to dance in the complex.

## ENTERTAINMENT

It's hard not to have a good night out in Panama City, especially since the capital is home to the most sophisticated clubs in Central America.

If you're not looking to get blotto, there are numerous ways to spend a moonlit (or rainy) evening in the city. A good place to start is the arts section in the Sunday edition of *La Prensa* or the back pages of the *Panama News*.

Panamanians have a love affair with Hollywood and there are many air-conditioned cinemas in and around the city. Panamanians also love to gamble, and there are a few flashy casinos where you can get in on the action. There are also opportunities in the capital to see traditional folk dancing and live performances of music and theatre.

### Nightclubs

Panama City has a wide selection of nightclubs – gay, straight, cruisy and sedate. DJs usually pull from a broad repertoire, from salsa and merengue to UK and US '80s classics, with electronic music (house, drum 'n' bass) liberally added to the mix. Most clubs don't open their doors before 11pm, so plan

your evening accordingly. As in most other Latin American cities, people dress to the nines when they go out – women typically don a skirt, blouse and heels for a night out dancing, while men tend to stick to slacks or designer jeans and a collared shirt. You can be sure that you'll constantly be surrounded by the latest fashions, so go all out and dress to impress. Note that at most clubs, you'll be denied entry if you're wearing sneakers or shorts.

Due to a severe parking shortage, it's best to take a taxi if you go out in the Calle Uruguay area, even if you're renting a vehicle in Panama. Also, remember to bring identification with you, as you might be asked for it. Most clubs have a cover charge of US\$5 to US\$15, though this varies greatly depending on the place, the date and the time.

Much like the city's bar scene, clubs come and go, and what's hot one minute is on the out the next. However, don't be afraid to follow the crowds and use your intuition – there's no shortage of great spots to party it up.

Here are a few of our favorite clubs to get you started.

**56is** (Map p79; Calle Uruguay) Pronounced 'seis' (as in the number 'six'), this intimate club plays a fine selection of electronic music to a laid-back mix of people. This is a good choice if you want to bypass the mega-club scene and just kick back with a good cocktail and soak up the loungey vibe.

**Liquid** (Map p79; Calle 53 Este) This sleek and ultramodern electronic club is heavy on the polished metal and the tubular lighting. Rotating DJs spin even heavier beats from around the globe to a fairly well-dressed crowd that's not afraid to let their hair down and sweat it out.

**Deep Room** (Map p79; Calle 48) Panama City's favored after-hours spot, Deep Room doesn't get going until sometime after 2am. However, the multilevel space attracts top DJs and there's no better place to be when the sun is about to rise above the horizon.

**Opah** (Map p79; Calle 47) The latest incarnation of this storied Bella Vista Club, Opah is a favored spot for the beautiful people and their hangers-on. The polished club is a good spot for dancing. Electronic music, '80s and salsa are the DJs' repertoire of choice, though you really never know what's in store for you here.

**Rock Café** (Map p79; Calle 53 Este) One of three large clubs in the Plaza Florida, Rock Café

packs in the crowds with its steady stream of everything from classic rock to modern riffs. Its all-you-can-drink nights for one low price is a great way to live it up and cancel whatever it is you have planned for tomorrow.

**Bongo** (Map pp76-7; Calle 42) This combination live-music hall and dance club is one of the best spots in the city to hear (and dance to) live salsa bands. DJs fill the space the rest of the time, though the atmosphere is always festive and the music is always danceable.

**Zomba** (Map pp76-7; Plaza Pacífica, Punta Pacífica) Located in the upscale district of Punta Pacífica, this stylish club attracts a mixed-crowd, but everyone is certainly well-to-do. This club has a much warmer feel than other dance clubs, and features an eclectic mix of music including salsa, ambient and world beats.

**Bucaneros** (Map pp74-5; Isla Flamenco, Amador) Sure, the cowboy theme is a bit overdone at this popular dance spot at the end of the Causeway, but a good time is certainly had by all here. Plus, you can't beat the open-air location, the tropical cocktails and the stunning views of Panama City's illuminated skyline.

**Karnak** (Map pp74-5; Isla Flamenco, Amador) Around the corner from Bucaneros, this Egyptian-themed club is even more over-the-top than its cowboy brethren. Although arguably better suited to Las Vegas, there's a fun time to be had here and the energetic crowds certainly enjoy themselves.

## GAY & LESBIAN VENUES

Although Panama City is far from being a liberal or even tolerant society when it comes to the topic of gay rights, the city does have several excellent gay clubs. Be sure to check out the nightlife-rich websites [www.farraurbana.com](http://www.farraurbana.com), [www.rumbanight.com](http://www.rumbanight.com) and [www.chemibel.com](http://www.chemibel.com), which list new gay clubs in town as well as upcoming parties (in Spanish).

**BLG** (Map p79; Calle 49) Located in the heart of Panama City's nightlife scene, this out-and-proud club serves an incredibly diverse clientele. Owing to its trendy location and increasing popularity, BLG sees its share of top-notch DJs, and it's hard not to have a good time when there's a free open bar included in the cover charge (from US\$25).

**Punto G** (Map p79; Calle D) Sexed-up bare-chested bartenders in spandex and cowboy hats serve the crowd at this raucous establishment, and the occasional tranny show makes for a fine interlude between the serious dancing. This unmarked club is next to the restaurant Ginza Teppanyaki, though the interior is certainly more lavish than its nondescript exterior.

**Glam** (Map pp74-5; Av Ricardo J Alfaro, Tumba Muerto) In an industrial area north of downtown, Glam proudly stands as the biggest gay dance club in the country. Saturday is generally the best night to go, when a wild and celebratory crowd fills the dance floor until late in the morning, though talented DJs spin house, drum 'n' bass, soul and Latin classics here every night. This place is best reached by taxi – it's located in front of the Club de Montaña.

## Cinemas

Panama City's modern movie houses show mostly Hollywood films (with Spanish subtitles) for US\$2 to US\$4. For listings and show times, pick up a copy of *La Prensa* or go to [www.prensa.com](http://www.prensa.com) and click on 'cine.'

**Alhambra** (Map p79; Vía España, El Cangrejo) Occasionally screens independent films.

**Cinemark** (Map pp76-7; Albrook mall) Next to the Albrook bus terminal.

**Kinomaxx** (Map pp76-7; Multicentro shopping center) Near Punta Paitilla.

## Casinos

None of the casinos in Panama City are on the verge of stealing business away from the megacasinos of Las Vegas, but there are three attractive and popular houses of chance in the capital city. All are located inside top hotels: the Hotel Caesar Park (p93), the Miramar Inter-Continental (p92) and the Hotel Riande Continental (p93).

## Traditional Dance

A good place to see traditional Panamanian folk dancing is the **Restaurante-Bar Tinajas** (Map p79; ☎ 263 7890; Av 3a A Sur near Av Frederico Boyd; ☎ closed Sun) Sure, it's touristy, but nicely done just the same. Shows are staged here on Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights at 9pm; there's a US\$5 entertainment fee, as well as a US\$5.50 minimum per person for drinks and food. It is highly recommended to make a reservation before dining.

## Theater

**Teatro Anita Villalaz** (Map p80; ☎ 211 4017; Plaza de Francia) A historic spot in Casco Viejo to see live performances.

**Teatro En Círculo** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 261 5375; Av 6 C Norte near Vía Transístmica) Plays and musicals are scheduled regularly.

**Teatro Nacional** (Map p80; ☎ 262 3525; Av B at Calle 2) Casco Viejo's lovely 19th-century playhouse stages ballets and concerts in addition to plays.

## SHOPPING

The city has a number of markets where you can purchase handicrafts native to regions throughout the country. Here you'll find a range of handmade goods from baskets made in Emberá villages to *molás* (traditional textiles) from Kuna Yala.

**Mi Pueblito** (Map pp74-5; Cerro Ancón; admission US\$1; ☎ 10am-10pm Tue-Sun) Scattered throughout this life-size replica of rural villages you'll encounter a huge selection of high-quality crafts – perfect for one-stop shopping. For more information on this complex, see p88.

**Mercado Nacional de Artesanías** (Map p84; Panamá Vieja; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Sat, to 1pm Sun) With a picturesque location next to the historic ruins of Panamá Viejo, this large artisan's market is a great place to shop for memorable souvenirs. For more information, see p82.

**Mercado de Buhonerías y Artesanías** (Map pp76-7; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) This bustling outdoor spot, located behind the Museo Antropológico Reina Torres de Araúzis, is a great place to shop, especially if you've just finished perusing the anthropology museum and have a newfound appreciation for Panama's crafts.

## Baskets

The Emberá and Wounaan people in Darién Province (p275) produce some beautiful woven baskets of incredibly high quality. There are two types: the utilitarian and the decorative. The utilitarian baskets are made primarily from the *chunga* palm, but can contain bits of other plants, vines, bark and leaves. They are usually woven, using various plaiting techniques, from single plant strips of coarse texture and great strength, and are rarely dyed. These baskets are often used for carrying seeds or harvesting crops.

The decorative baskets are much more refined, usually featuring many different colors and are created from palm materials of the *nahuala* bush and the *chunga* palm. The dyes

are 100% natural, and are extracted from fruits, leaves, roots and bark. Typical motifs are of butterflies, frogs, toucans, trees and parrots. The baskets are similar in quality to the renowned early 20th-century Chemehuevi Indian baskets of California.

You can often buy baskets at any of the markets.

## Huacas

It's possible to purchase high-quality replicas of *huacas* – golden objects made on the isthmus centuries before the Spanish conquest and placed with indigenous leaders at the time of burial. The indigenous population believed in an afterlife, and the *huacas* were intended to accompany and protect their souls on the voyage to the other world.

The *huacas* were mainly items of adornment, the most fascinating items being the three-dimensional figure pendants. Most took the form of a warrior, crocodile, jaguar, frog or condor. Little else is known about the exact purpose of these golden figures, but each probably held mystical, spiritual or religious meaning.

You can purchase exact (solid gold) and near-exact (gold-plated) reproductions of these palm-size objects. They are available at reasonable cost at **Reprosa** (Map p79; ☎ 269 0457; cnr Av 2 Sur & Calle 54 Este; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat). Also available here are well-priced necklaces made of black onyx and other gemstones. If you're looking for something special to bring back for a loved one, this is the place to come.

## Jewelry

Because of their proximity to mineral-rich Colombia and Brazil, the jewelry stores here often have high-quality gems at excellent prices. Beware: there are many fake gems on the world market, as well as many flawed gems that have been altered to appear more valuable than they really are. One of the city's most reputable jewelry stores is **Joyería La Huaca** (Map p79; cnr Calle Ricardo Arias & Vía España) in front of the Hotel Riande Continental. A high-quality sapphire ring there costs about one-third less than you would pay in Europe or the USA.

## Malls

The capital has a growing number of shopping malls, all of which highlight the increasing love of Americana in Panama. Consumerism

aside, these air-conditioned spots can be a good place to escape the heat, especially if you're travelling with the kids.

**Albrook mall** (Map pp76-7; ☎ 10am-9pm Mon-Sat, 11am-8pm Sun) Next to the bus terminal, this mall has a cinema, supermarket and dozens of stores.

**El Dorado mall** (Map pp74-5; Vía Ricardo J Alfaro; ☎ 10am-9pm Mon-Sat, 11am-8pm Sun) Near one of Panama City's newer Chinatowns, El Dorado also has restaurants, shops and a cinema.

**Isla Flamenco Shopping Plaza** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 10am-10pm) Small, but nearby you'll find the best selection of open-air restaurants in the city.

**Multicentro** (Map pp76-7; ☎ 10am-9pm) Also has a cinema and shops, along with many outdoor restaurants.

## Molas

A popular handicraft souvenir from Panama is the *mola* – a colorful, intricate, multilayered appliqué textile sewn by Kuna women – for more information, see p263. Small, simple souvenir *molas* are widely available in Panama City, and can be bought for as little as US\$5, but the best ones can fetch several hundred dollars.

Most upscale hotels have authentic *molas* for sale in their gift shops, though **Flory Saltzman Molas** (Map p79; ☎ 223 6963; Calle 49 B Oeste) has the best selection.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

International flights arrive at and depart from **Tocumen International Airport** (☎ 238 4160), 35km northeast of the city center. For information on getting to and from the airport see p78.

International airlines serving Panama City include:

**American Airlines** ☎ 269 6022

**Continental Airlines** ☎ 263 9177

**COPA** ☎ 227 2672

**Delta** ☎ 214 8118

**Grupo TACA** ☎ 360 2093

**LAB** ☎ 264 1330

**Lufthansa** ☎ 223 9208

**Mexicana** ☎ 264 9855

**United Airlines** ☎ 225 6519

Panama's domestic airlines are **Air Panama** (☎ 316 9000; www.flyairpanama.com/tickets) and **Aero perlas** (☎ 315 7500; www.aeroperlas.com).

Domestic flights depart from **Albrook airport** (☎ 315 0403), aka Aeropuerto Marcos A Gelabert, in the former Albrook Air Force Station near the canal. For information on getting to and from the airport, see p78.

All flights within Panama last under one hour. Prices vary according to season and availability. Flights within Panama are inexpensive and will save you lots of time getting around. Flights listed below are approximate one-way fares:

**Bocas del Toro** (US\$60; Air Panama 2 per day Tue, Thu, Sat & Sun, 1 per day Mon, Tue, Fri Aeroperlas 2 per day Mon-Fri, 1 Sat-Sun)

**Chitré** (US\$25; Air Panama 2 per week)

**David** (US\$60; Air Panama 2 per day Mon-Sat, 1 per day Sun Aeroperlas 2 per day Mon-Sun)

**El Porvenir (San Blás)** (US\$35; Air Panama 1 per day Aeroperlas 3 per week)

**Isla Contadora** (US\$30; Air Panama 4 per day Sat & Sun, 2 per day Mon-Fri Aeroperlas 4 per day Sat & Sun, 2 per day Mon-Fri)

**La Palma (Darién)** (US\$40; Air Panama 1 per week Aeroperlas 3 per week)

**Playón Chico** (US\$40; Aeroperlas per day)

**Puerto Baldía (Darién)** (US\$40; Aeroperlas 1 per week)

**Río Sidra (San Blás)** (US\$35; Air Panama 1 per day Aeroperlas 4 flights per week)

## Boat

**Barcos Calypso** (☎ 314 1730; roundtrip US\$10) has departures to Isla Taboga from Panama City at 8:30am and 3:00pm Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 8:30am on Tuesday and Thursday and 8:30am, 10:30am and 4:00pm on Saturday and Sunday. Ferries depart Isla Taboga at 9:30am and 4:00pm Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 4:30pm on Tuesday and Thursday and 9:00am, 3:00pm and 5:00pm on Saturday and Sunday.

Ferries depart from La Playita de Amador, which is located behind the Centro de Exhibiciones Marinas on the Causeway (p86). The easiest way to reach the dock is by taxi (US\$4 to US\$6).

For more information on Isla Taboga, see p115.

For information on sailing to Colombia, see p263.

## Bus

The shiny and new Albrook terminal, near the Albrook airport, is a convenient one-stop location for most buses leaving Panama City. The terminal includes a food court, banks, shops, a sports bar, storage room, bathrooms and showers. A mall lies next door, complete with a supermarket and cinema.



Local buses from the city's major routes stop at the terminal, and behind the station there are direct buses to and from Tocumen International Airport. To get to the station from the city, take any of the frequent buses that pass in front of the Legislative Palace or along Vía España (look for the 'via Albrook' sign in the front window).

Major bus routes are:

- Aguadulce** (US\$5; 3hr; 33 daily, 6am-8pm)
- Antón** (US\$3.50; 2hr; every 20min, 6am-6pm)
- Cañita** (US\$3.75; 2½hr; 11 daily, 6:40am-5pm)
- Chame** (US\$2.50; 1¼hr; 37 daily, 5:10am-10pm)
- Changuinola** (US\$24; 10hr; 1 per day at 8pm)
- Chitré** (US\$6; 4hr; hourly, 6am-11pm)
- Colón** (US\$2.50; 2hr; every 20min; 5am-11pm)
- David** (US\$12.50; 7-8hr; 13 per day; expresos US\$15; 5-6 hr; 2 per day at 10:45pm & midnight)
- El Copé** (US\$6; 4hr; 9 daily, 6am-6pm)
- El Valle** (US\$4; 2½hr; many buses, 7am-7pm)
- Las Tablas** (US\$6.50; 4½hr; hourly, 6am-7pm)
- Macaracas** (US\$7; 5hr; 5 daily, 7am-3:30pm)
- Ocú** (US\$6; 4hr; 8 daily, 7am-5pm)
- Penonomé** (US\$4; 2½hr; 48 daily, 4:45am-11pm)
- Pesé** (US\$6.50; 4½hr; 6 daily, 8:15am-3:45pm)
- San Carlos** (US\$3.50; 1½hr; 25 daily, 5:10am-10pm)
- San José, Costa Rica** (Panaline US\$25; 1 daily; noon; Tica Bus US\$25; 11am)
- Santiago** (US\$6; 4hr; 20 daily)
- Soná** (US\$7; 6hr; 6 daily, 8:30am-6pm)
- Villa de Los Santos** (US\$6; 4hr; 18 daily; 6am-11pm)
- Yaviza** (US\$15; 7-10hr; 8 per day; 5am-3:45pm)

Buses to Balboa, Ancón and the Canal Zone (Miraflores and Pedro Miguel Locks, Paraíso and Gamboa) depart from the bus stop on Av Roosevelt across from the Legislative Palace. All fares are less than US\$1.

## Car

Many car rental agencies lie clustered around Calle 49 B Oeste in El Cangrejo. Daily rates run from US\$30 to US\$55 per day for the most economical cars, including insurance and unlimited kilometers.

Rental car companies in Panama City include:

- Avis** Albrook airport (☎ 264 0722, 315 0434); Tocumen airport (☎ 238 4056)
- Barriga** Tocumen airport (☎ 269 0221, 238 4495)
- Budget** Albrook airport (☎ 263 8777, 315 0201); Tocumen airport (☎ 238 4069)
- Dollar** Tocumen airport (☎ 270 0355, 238 4032)
- Hertz** Albrook airport (☎ 264 1111, 315 0418); Tocumen airport (☎ 238 4081)

**National** Albrook airport (☎ 265 2222, 315 0416); Tocumen airport (☎ 238 4144)

**Thrifty** Albrook airport (☎ 264 1402, 315 0144); Tocumen airport (☎ 238 4955)

## Train

The **Panama Railway Company** (PCRC; Map pp74-5; ☎ 317 6070; www.panarail.com; Carr Gaillard) operates a glass-domed luxury passenger train from Panama City to Colón (US\$22 one-way, US\$35 for a round-trip), leaving at 7:15am and returning at 5:15pm every day. It's a lovely ride that follows the canal, and at times the train is surrounded by nothing but thick vine-strewn jungle. If you want to relive the hey-day of luxury train travel for an hour or two, this is definitely the way to do it. For more information on the history of this storied railway, see the boxed text on p246.

## GETTING AROUND Bicycle

The best spot to rent bicycles in Panama City is at **Bicicletas Rali** (☎ 220 3844; ☎ 8am-6pm Sat & Sun), which operates a booth at the Causeway entrance. You can rent a bicycle for US\$2.50 per hour or rollerblades for US\$1 per hour.

## Bus

Panama City has a good network of local buses (nicknamed *diablos rojos* or 'red devils'), which run every day from around 5am to 11pm. A ride costs US\$0.25, and we promise you've never seen anything quite like these tricked-out street rockets. Buses run along the three major west-to-east routes: Av Central-Vía España, Av Balboa-Vía Israel, and Av Simón Bolívar-Vía Transistmica. The Av Central-Vía España streets are one-way going west for much of the route; eastbound buses use Av Perú and Av 4 Sur; these buses will take you into the banking district of El Cangrejo. Buses also run along Av Ricardo J Alfaro (known as Tumba Muerto). There are plenty of bus stops along the street, but you can usually hail one from anywhere. Many of these buses stop at the Albrook bus terminal, the bus station near the Albrook airport.

The Plaza Cinco de Mayo area has three major bus stops. On the corner of Av Central and Av Justo Arosemena, buses depart for Panamá Viejo and the Tocumen International Airport. Buses for the Albrook domestic airport depart in front of the Legislative Palace. Buses depart from the station on Av Roosevelt,

opposite the Legislative Palace, for the Balboa and Ancón area (including the Causeway) and other destinations. A ride usually costs no more than US\$1.

## Taxi

Taxis are plentiful. They are not metered, but there is a list of standard fares that drivers are supposed to charge, measured by zones.

The fare for one zone is a minimum of US\$1; the maximum fare within the city is US\$4. An average ride, crossing a couple of zones, would cost US\$1.25 to US\$2,

plus US\$0.25 for each additional passenger. Always agree on a fare before you get into the cab. Taxis can also be rented for US\$8 an hour.

Watch out for unmarked large-model US cars serving hotels as cabs. Their prices are up to four times that of regular street taxis. You can phone for a taxi:

**America** ☎ 223 7694

**America Libre** ☎ 223 7342

**Latino** ☎ 224 0677

**Metro** ☎ 264 6788

**Taxi Unico Cooperativa** ☎ 221 3191