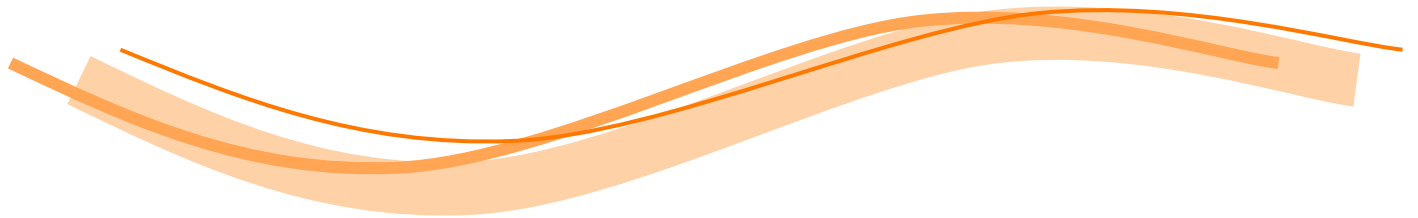




PANAMA & NOLITOURS





<p>NOLITOURS & PANAMA</p>	<p>Transat Holidays' sister company Nolitours has pioneered package holidays to Panama.</p> <p>Nolitours offer direct flights to Panama and an intriguing range of vacation options and excursions.</p> <p>Nolitours have an attractive Panama program and offer a range of hotels. Direct flights are on Air Transat –with added legroom on their planes, and they also offer Club Class.</p> <p>Nolitours have destination reps to help make your vacation the best possible and to help you book up excursions to explore Panama.</p> <p>Full details on each hotel are in the Nolitours 2012-2013 brochure.</p>
<p>Transat Tours Background</p>	<p>Transat Tours is an integrated tour operator that specializes in holiday travel and offers more than 60 destination countries. Transat, which was created in Canada and has offices in many other countries, is an international company that owns an airline, provides destination services, is active in the accommodation industry and operates an extensive travel agent network.</p> <p>Transat is now the largest tour operator in Canada with its two well-known vacation brands Transat Holidays and Nolitours, developing and marketing vacation products as well as flights to destinations in the South and Europe.</p> <p>The company acts as a master craftsman in assembling different components of leisure travel: air transportation, passenger transfers from airport to hotel, accommodation, recreational and cultural activities, meals, cruises, and much more.</p> <p>As an industry leader, Transat Holidays offers departures from many Canadian cities including: St-John's, Halifax, Moncton, Fredericton, Montréal, Québec, Ottawa, Hamilton, Toronto, Thunder Bay, Regina, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Calgary, Edmonton, Lethbridge, Vancouver, Victoria, Comox, Abbotsford, Prince George and Kelowna (as at 2012). Website: http://www.transat.com/en</p>
<p>Mission</p>	<p>Transat offers quality vacation packages to a wide variety of destinations. Each season, the company presents a wide selection of quality products, in order to meet the diversified needs of Canadian travellers. In keeping with their mission, their employees aim to exceed vacationers' expectations in order to maintain their position as a market leader. They see their role, ultimately, to turn holiday dreams into reality: making the vacation experience one of the most memorable ever.</p>
<p>Products</p>	<p>Packages, Cruises, Hotels, Flights, Tours, Car Rentals & Train Travel. With a choice of over 300 hotels located in more than 50 destinations and a complete line of itineraries offered in partnership with the most</p>

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	prestigious cruise lines, all products offered by Transat are subject to a rigorous standard review.
2012: Transat's 25th Anniversary	In 2012, Transat is celebrating its 25th Anniversary with a silver lining, giving travellers a reason to celebrate!
Awards	Agent's Choice Awards: Transat Holidays ranked number one for three years in a row by Canada's travel agents according to the results of the Agents' Choice Awards, a survey carried out by Canadian Travel Press and Travel Courier.
Current Brochures	Transat Holidays Sun 2012-2013 and Nolitours Sun 2012-2013 brochures are available at your local travel agent and cover vacations through to October 2013.
Air Transat's New Comfort Zone	With so many new comfort features, you're on vacation the minute you take your seat. It's Air Transat's 25th anniversary and they're giving their fleet a full makeover. Starting April 2012, one by one, the planes and passengers are soaring to new heights in design and comfort. They are rolling out the new cabins over the next two years. For a glimpse of what it will all look like: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBse6WOCd70
Air Transat Kids Club	To ensure that your family vacations are fun and unforgettable from beginning to end, Air Transat has created Kids Club so that young passengers can really enjoy themselves whilst onboard an Air Transat flight. It is designed to make air travel a fun experience for young travellers (and for their parents!). Even before the doors of the plane are closed following boarding, every child receives a small bag containing all sorts of surprises and games. The more fun they have, the easier the flight. Furthermore, children who are members of Air Transat Kids Club enjoy certain exclusive privileges. Members of the Air Transat Kids Club will enjoy several benefits that the whole family can share. You can check in at a special "Air Transat Kids Club Members" counter. Thanks to these special counters located in major Canadian airports where Air Transat flies, checking-in is quicker than before. At check-in, special tags will be placed on your baggage; as a result, your baggage gets priority treatment.
Air Transat Upgrades	Air Transat has added more legroom on all their aircraft, making the journey to and from your destination even more comfortable. They have also introduced a new Economy Class meal service on sun destination flights. Passengers flying south will now be welcomed onboard with a glass of champagne, while early morning passengers will be greeted with a mimosa. The meal service has also been improved. The airline will now offer passengers a more complete meal tray, including a choice of two hot meals, a complimentary glass of wine and dessert.
Best Leisure Airline	Air Transat was named World's Best Leisure Airline at the Skytrax annual World Airline Awards, held in July 2012 at the Farnborough International Airshow, near London. Distinctions were based on a survey measuring the satisfaction of more

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	<p>than 18 million customers. Conducted over a 10-month period, this survey included over 200 airlines that were rated on 38 different aspects of the passenger experience. The study analyzed customer satisfaction for the Airline Passenger Experience, from check-in to boarding, onboard seat comfort, cabin cleanliness, food and beverages, onboard entertainment, and service of staff.</p> <p>In the past five years, Air Transat has gained other recognitions as a result of its numerous environmental initiatives. In 2011, the Company ranked first worldwide in the Atmosfair Airline Index environmental performance indicator, in the long-haul category. Air Transat also obtained the Platinum LEED-EB (existing building) certification for its headquarters, located within the Montreal–Trudeau airport site.</p> <p>Air Transat was recognized as the Best Charter Airline for the fifth consecutive year at the Agents’ Choice Awards, which represents the largest sampling of travel agents in Canada. The airline also received the Family Friendly Airline Award, which acknowledges carriers that provide additional services and extra comfort to children & parents.</p>
<p>Transat Compensation Plan</p>	<p>Starting November 1st, 2012, Transat will introduce a new compensation plan for clients affected by an advanced flight schedule change on all South, Florida and Europe flights, packages and cruises. This new policy applies to all bookings made with Transat Holidays, for Air Transat or CanJet flights.</p> <p>Applicable to schedule changes within 45 days of departure.</p> <p>Schedule change of 3 to 12 hours</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transat will offer a \$50 voucher for future travel. <p>Schedule change of 12 to 24 hours</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transat will offer a \$75 voucher for future travel. <p>Schedule change of 24 hours or more and cancelled flights</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clients can cancel their flight and are entitled to a full refund in the event of a schedule change of 24 hours or more. • Transat will offer a \$50 voucher for future travel to clients who cancel. • Transat will offer a \$100 voucher for future travel to clients who accept the date change. • Clients who choose a product at a lower fare will be refunded the price difference, whereas clients who select a product at a higher fare will be required to pay the balance. <p>Schedule change of 3 hours or less</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No compensation will be offered to clients experiencing a schedule change that is delayed or advanced by 3 hours or less.

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<p>Transat Club Class</p>	<p>Enjoy exclusive privileges such as complimentary seat selection, wider, more comfortable leather seats, a choice of gourmet meals and fine wines, priority check-in, baggage service and boarding.</p> <p>Club Service</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated Club attendants • Attentive, personalized service • Exclusive, spacious Club cabin <p>Drinks & Snacks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome cocktails • Complimentary non-alcoholic drinks, snacks and bar service <p>Club Privileges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased baggage allowance • 40 kg checked/15 kg carry-on • Exclusive, rapid check-in counter in most airports • Priority boarding • Practical travel items (on Europe flights) • Free headsets • Canadian newspapers <p>Comfort & Refinement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wider, more comfortable leather seats • More leg room • Complimentary Seat Selection: call 1-877-872-6728 • Choice of gourmet meals • Choice of wine and more
<p>Option Plus</p>	<p>This Economy class option includes many priority privileges and services including priority check-in, priority baggage handling, an extra 10kg baggage allowance and even champagne. Here's what you get:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advance seat selection on roundtrip flights • Priority check-in at a dedicated counter • Priority baggage handling • Priority boarding • Complete Air Transat travel kit on flights to European destinations • Snacks from the On Board Bistro selection • Alcoholic beverages during drinks service 200ml bottle of champagne (Sun and Europe) • Supplementary baggage allowance up to 10 kg per flight segment • Wine or beer with the meal • Headsets <p>The cost is \$79-\$119 for southbound destinations and \$99-\$209 for European destinations as at December 2012</p>
<p>Transat and Sustainable Tourism</p>	<p>Transat recognizes the prime importance of the environment, host communities, cultural diversity, and their relationships with their employees, customers and partners. Tourism has become one of the world's leading industries. Society and communities reap the benefits,</p>

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	<p>and, each year, hundreds of millions of travellers discover new countries and cultures. Transat is firmly committed to the responsible development of the tourism industry, and has adopted the following definition of sustainable tourism:</p> <p>“Sustainable tourism entails respect for nature, as well as for host communities and their values; it combines positive socio-economic benefits for local populations with an enriching experience for travellers.”</p> <p>The issue of the environment, as far as Transat’s own facilities are concerned, is a clear and basic target. Their environment committees have implemented concrete initiatives with regard to recycling, conservation of resources, the disposal of obsolete electronic equipment, and raising employee awareness. Air Transat has begun developing an environmental management system that could lead to an ISO 14001 certification in the future. To find out more, consult the Transat and the Environment sections at their website:</p> <p>http://www.airtransat.ca/en/Info/the-environment-its-everyones-business.aspx?ExitID=69&ContentType=voyageur</p>
<p>Gift Certificates</p>	<p>Here’s your chance to make a loved one’s dream come true. With Transat gift certificates you can offer the beauty, excitement, and wonders of the world: the South with its heavenly beaches and endless sunshine, or just a rental car. Transat gift certificates are valid on all Air Transat, Nolitours, or Transat Holidays products in our brochures. They can be redeemed at a travel agent’s office at the time of reservation. To order your gift certificates call 1-800-322-6649.</p>
<p>2012 Hurricane Policy</p>	<p>Nolitours and Transat Holidays provide you with true peace of mind. Vacationers can travel secure in the knowledge that you will be protected should a hurricane affect your destination city in Florida, Mexico, the Caribbean or Central America. This Nolitours/Transat Holidays policy covers reservations for departures between June 1 and November 30, 2012 inclusive, but is likely to be renewed in 2013. If the conditions stipulated in the policy are met, you may choose one of the four options listed below:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Travel at a later date Passengers who choose to travel at a later date can do so at no additional cost. Travel must be completed on or before December 13, 2012. The destination city, departure day, hotel and room category must remain the same. 2. Travel to another destination city Passengers who choose to travel to a different destination can do so by selecting another Transat Holidays destination that is not at risk of a hurricane. Travel must take place within four weeks of the original departure date. In the event the package price is higher than the original

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	<p>booking, the passenger will be responsible for paying the difference.</p> <p>3. Travel to the booked destination city Passengers who want to travel to their initially booked destination may do so, provided Transat Holidays still serves that destination city on the scheduled departure date. No refund will be issued if this option is taken.</p> <p>4. Cancel with a full refund Passengers who choose not to travel may cancel with a full refund (excluding travel insurance premiums already paid).</p>
<p>Nolitours Excursions in Panama</p>	<p>Here are some of the trips you can experience with Nolitours to see more of this fascinating destination:</p> <p>Panama Canal Expedition: Journey to the heart of the rich tropical ecosystem of the rain forest, alive with capucin and howler monkeys, sloths, and myriad bird species such as toucans, herons, egrets, and kingfishers.</p> <p>Caribbean Beach and Panama Canal Railway: A chance to see how the famous canal operates at the Gatun Locks! Next, visit the colonial town of Portobelo, followed by lunch in a local restaurant on Playa Langosta. Time for a swim in the crystal-clear waters of the Caribbean followed by a scenic tour of Colon before returning to Panama City by train.</p> <p>City Tour and Canal: Set off for the Miraflores Locks and watch the canal in operation. Visit the colonial city, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Next, it's a panoramic tour of Old Panama, followed by a visit to charming Mi Pueblito, with its replicas of Spanish, Indian and Afro-Caribbean homes.</p> <p>Chagres National Park-Emberas: Visit an indigenous community, view their arts and crafts, listen to their chief tell stories, sample some of their savoury culinary delicacies, get a traditional temporary tattoo, and have a refreshing swim in the river.</p> <p>Partial Canal Transit: Sail through the canal between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Cross two locks with a total drop of 27 m before sailing across Lake Gatun to the port of Balboa on the Pacific Ocean.</p> <p>Anton Valley: Visit a picturesque village in the crater of an extinct volcano. Tour the colourful farmers' market and see crafts handmade by the villagers. Visit</p>

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	El Chorro Waterfall and stroll through the rain forest. See the animal rehabilitation centre and the botanical garden, along with the amphibian centre and orchid nursery in El Nispero.
Weddings	<p>Imagine saying “I do” to the love of your life on a sparkling white-sand beach, a gentle breeze rustling the palms as you pronounce the words that will seal your love forever.</p> <p>Nolitours makes getting married in paradise easier than ever. Their exclusive worry-free wedding package has been carefully designed by experts so you and your beloved can relax and enjoy your special day, focused on each other and your shared happiness.</p> <p>They have a special wedding package that you can purchase at this resort: Passion, This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private roundtrip transportation between the airport and hotel • Separate check-in at the hotel for your group • 2 hours’ wedding coordinator services • Fruit basket in the couple’s room • Bridal bouquet and boutonniere for the groom • Wedding decorations • Sparkling wine and wedding cake after the ceremony for up to 24 guests • Romantic dinner for bride and groom including sparkling wine, flowers and candles • US \$50 credit for hairdressing and make-up sessions for bride and groom • US \$100 credit for wedding photos
Groups	Group rates are available – as few as 10 adults make up a group.
Special Deals to Panama	<p>Transat currently has some very special deals to Panama this winter including free wedding offers, free golf and more. For instance, as at 14 Dec 2012:</p> <p>\$1017 Toronto to the Decameron 1 week 7 Jan 2013 tax incl</p> <p>\$1329 Montreal to the Decameron 1 week 8 Jan 2013 tax incl</p> <p>Check out their website at www.Nolitours.com for latest deals.</p>

HOTEL PRIZE PARTNER	Royal Decameron Golf, Beach Resort & Villas Panama Ideal for families and groups of friends...A splendid resort that boasts extensive recreational activities with great “eco” sightseeing. This resort offers a world-class golf course, full service spa and a casino.
Location	Beachfront property on the Pacific Ocean, 137 km from Panama City and 135 km from the Panama airport.
Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pools (including 1 adults-only) and Whirlpools • Disco • Gym • Casino

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spa and Beauty salon • Gift shops • Internet
Accommodation	<p>This lively, popular resort offers 820 rooms in 3-storey buildings. Hotel Room: air-conditioning, 1 king-size or 2 double beds, bathroom with shower, hairdryer, TV, in-room safe, balcony or terrace, maximum occupancy 3 adults (or 2 adults and 2 children)</p>
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bicycles • Snorkelling • Fishing • Golf course • Motorized water sports • Sailing, Pedal boat, Kayaking • Tennis • Pool tables <p>There's also an introduction to scuba diving in the pool.</p>
Children	<p>Children's activities and children's pools. Babysitting is also available</p>
Restaurants	<p>There are 8 à la carte restaurants at this resort: Thai, Japanese, Fusion, Steakhouse, Seafood, Catch of the Day, Italian and Mediterranean.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • El Canal (Seafood) • Pannamai (Italian) • Mogo Mogo (Thai) • Cayuco (Steakhouse) • Sushi Samba (Japanese) • Café Med (Mediterranean) • Kontiki (Fusion) • Catch of the day (Fish and seafood) <p>There are also a total of twelve bars:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • El Cayuco (Pool): 10 pm to 2 am • Las Marias (Beach): 10 pm to 2 am • La Marina (Beach): 10 am to 11 pm • Las Congas (Beach): 10 am to 6 pm • Nega Nega (Pool): 10 am to 11 pm • Chigore (Pool): 10 am to 5 pm • Palo Alto (Pool): 10 am to 11 pm • La Murga (Lobby): 5 pm to 11 pm • Las Molas (Lobby): 5 pm to 11 pm • Tree Top (Lobby): 5 pm to 11 pm • Sambu (Sports bar): 5 pm to 1 am • Tu Candela (Disco): 10: pm to 3 am
CURRENT DEALS	<p>Book 35 days or more in advance and save \$60 per couple per week with Nolitours. Two centre holidays also available with Gamboa Rainforest Resort or Panama City hotels</p>

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PANAMA	<p>Explore one of Central America's best kept secrets – the untouched gem of Panama. Visitors can discover towering volcanoes, secluded beaches, exuberant rainforests bursting with exotic wildlife – and very few fellow travellers.</p> <p>Experience nature in all its glory as you gaze at the exquisitely transparent waters of the Caribbean from your own deserted cove. Swim under a magnificent waterfall surrounded by a lush tropical forest. Travel upriver in a piragua (dug-out canoe) to see a local village. The more adventurous may want to trek through the rainforest. Dance the night away in one of Panama City's lively nightclubs. Or try your luck at the casinos.</p>
Location	<p>The Republic of Panama is located in the centre of the Western Hemisphere where Central America narrows before joining the North and South American continents.</p> <p>Its borders are: to the North, the Caribbean Sea; to the East, the Republic of Colombia; to the South with the Pacific Ocean and to the West with the Republic of Costa Rica. Panama is the link between Central America and South America, constituting an isthmus of 80 km. wide in its narrower section.</p>
Geography	<p>Panama is an S-shaped isthmus that measures little more than 77,700 sq. km, yet there is a huge diversity of landscapes and microclimates within this tiny nation. Because Panama City faces southeast, travelers are presented with the uncommon view of the sun rising over the Pacific. Besides the isthmus, Panama is made up of than 1,500 islands, many of them uninhabited and cloaked in thick vegetation. These islands are grouped into four regions. In the Caribbean Sea there are the Bocas del Toro and San Blas archipelagos; in the Pacific Ocean, Las Perlas Archipelago in the Gulf of Panama, and Coiba Island and its accompanying tiny islands in the Gulf of Chiriquí.</p> <p>Panama is home to two mountain ranges, the Serranía del Darién in the east, and the Cordillera Central in the west, the latter of which is home to the highest peak in the country, the dormant Volcán Barú, at 3,475m (11,400 ft.).</p>
Name	Panama means "abundance of fish" in the local Indian language.
Population	<p>Panama has 3.2 million residents, and more than a third of them live in Panama City, Colón, and David, the country's three largest cities. The remaining population is concentrated mostly in small towns and villages in central Panama and the Azuero Peninsula. Officially roughly 70% of the population is mestizo, or a mix of Amerindians and Caucasians; 14% are African descent, 10% are white and other immigrant races, and 6% Amerindian. About 30% of the population is under the age of 14.</p>
Language	Spanish is the official language in Panama, though English is widely spoken in the tourism industry, and many hotel owners are native

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	English-speakers themselves. Panama's seven indigenous groups speak their own languages in their communities, and in some isolated areas indigenous groups do not speak Spanish fluently. On the Caribbean coast, creoles speak a patois called Guari-Guari or Wari-Wari, a mix of English, Spanish, and Ngöbe-Buglé. So many residents here speak English that it could almost be called Panama's second language.
Currency	The unit of currency in Panama is the U.S. dollar, but the Panamanian Balboa, which is pegged to the dollar at a 1:1 ratio, also circulates in denominations of 5¢, 10¢, 25¢, and 50¢ coins. (U.S. coins are in circulation as well.) Balboa coins are sized similarly to their U.S. counterparts, and travellers will have no trouble identifying their value. Currently (22 nd December 2012) the Canadian Dollar is at parity with both the Panamanian Balboa and the US Dollar.
Tipping	Tipping in Panama at restaurants is 10%. Taxi drivers do not expect tips, but you might consider it if you've rented a taxi for the day. Porters and bellhops should be tipped \$2 to \$5 depending on the calibre of the hotel.
Government	Constitutional democracy.
Documentation	Citizens of the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and most European nations may visit Panama for a maximum of 90 days. No visa is necessary, but you must have a valid passport and a \$5 tourist card, paid when entering by land or at customs when entering by airplane.
Time zone	Panama is 5 hours behind Greenwich Mean Time (GMT), and 1 hour ahead of Costa Rica. Panama does not observe daylight saving, so from the first Sunday in November to the second Sunday in March, the time in Panama is the same as that in the Canadian Eastern Time Zone (Toronto, Montreal and others); from mid-March to early November, it's the same as that in the Central Time Zone (Winnipeg).
Health	No vaccinations are mandatory, but always consult your family doctor and remember to ensure you have travel insurance. The Panamanian hospitals are modern and most doctors are American-trained.
Safety tips	Panama is a safe country and Panamanians are some of the friendliest people in Latin America.

CLIMATE	
General climate	<p>Panama lies between 7 degrees and 9 degrees above the equator, which places it firmly within the Tropics. Accordingly, average year-round temperatures are a balmy 24°C-29°C, varying only with altitude. The average temperature in the Chiriquí Highlands, for example, is 16°C, and is the only area in Panama where you will likely feel cold.</p> <p>Humidity is always high in Panama, and rainfall varies noticeably between the Pacific and Caribbean sides of the country, with some areas in the Caribbean receiving almost twice the yearly rainfall of</p>

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	Panama City.
Today's weather	30C with sun and clouds for Panama City (22 nd Dec 2012)
Best time to visit	The best time to visit Panama is during the summer dry season from mid-December to mid-April; this is also high season.

GETTING AROUND	
Getting There	All international flights land at the newly expanded Tocumen International Airport, near Panama City. Copa Air has direct flights from Toronto four times per week.
Cities	Panama City is the thriving commercial and financial hub of the Americas and is asserting itself as a burgeoning tourist destination. Panama City (commonly referred to simply as "Panama") is one of those rare Latin American capitals that has it all: a high standard of living, a seemingly endless supply of investment from abroad, a surplus of natural beauty, and a rich cultural brew of ethnicities and religions. There is a sizeable ex-pat presence in the city, as well as a growing Asian community, which continues to change the face of Panama City. It has been called the new Hong Kong and Miami - a sleek and modern city proud of its role as host to the world. Signs of Panama City's reinvention are everywhere. The Amador Causeway, formerly a U.S. military base, is ground zero for several multimillion-dollar condominium and commercial-centre developments, such as the new Biodiversity Museum designed by famed architect Frank Gehry. The run-down 19th-century buildings of Casco Viejo have been revitalized with private and public funds and declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Along the coast, swiftly rising skyscrapers, spurred by an irresistible 20-year tax exemption, portend a megalopolis in the making: 5 of the 10 tallest buildings in Latin America are here in Panama City, including the tallest, at 104 stories.
Distances	Some distances are as follows: Panama City to Colon: 1 hour Panama City to Gamboa: 25 minutes Panama City to Portobello: 1 1/2 hours Panama City to Carti: 3 hours Panama City to Boquete: 7 hours Panama City to the Azuero Peninsula: 7 hours
Ferries	Boat trips are available on portions of the Panama Canal
Trains	The Panama Express, the first inter-oceanic railway, operates along the Canal to and from Panama City.
Car Rental	Driving in Panama allows you the most flexibility. Renting a car costs about as much as in Canada, and gas is a little more expensive, so while this isn't the cheapest option, it allows you to enjoy the scenery, adhere to your own schedule, make pit-stops, and visit destinations away from your hotel. Generally speaking, speed limits in Panama are about 60-80

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	<p>km/hr on major roadways and slower on secondary roads. There are car rental kiosks at both the Tocumen Airport (car rental agencies at are open 24 hr), and each agency has a few locations in town. Tocumen Airport car-rental agency phone numbers are as follows: Alamo (tel. 238-4142; www.alamopanama.com), Avis (tel. 238-4046; www.avis.com), Budget (tel. 263-8777; www.budgetpanama.com), Dollar (tel. 270-0355; www.dollarpanama.com), Hertz (tel. 238-4081; www.hertz.com), National (tel. 238-4144; www.nationalpanama.com), and Thrifty (tel. 264-2613; www.thrifty.com).</p> <p>When renting a car in Panama, you must purchase two basic insurances. The agency will also offer a variety of other full-coverage options, but generally, your credit card rental insurance should cover you, and you really only need the obligatory insurances.</p> <p>Keep in mind that, depending on your destination, it's sometimes better to get a four-wheel drive vehicle, as some of Panama's roads are unpaved and rocky. If you're staying close to Panama City or all your planned destinations are right off the Pan American Highway, you should be fine with a two-wheel drive.</p> <p>Although most Panamanians drive stick shift vehicles, automatics are readily available at all car rental agencies, though you should expect to pay a bit more. Generally speaking, renting a car in Panama should cost you between \$40 and \$80 a day, depending on the kind of car and how you reserve.</p> <p>There are also car rental agencies in David, Colon, and other popular tourist destinations.</p>
<p>Buses</p>	<p>Bus routes between major and minor destinations in Panama are frequent and relatively inexpensive. Expect to pay about \$2 to \$4 per hour, depending on your destination. Panama City's bus terminal is located adjacent to Albrook Airport. It's not necessary to reserve your tickets ahead of time unless you are traveling on a holiday weekend or during December or Easter week. Be sure to arrive at the terminal at least 45 minutes ahead of time. Long-distance buses are air-conditioned, comfortable, have an on-board bathroom, and usually show several movies. Shorter routes tend to use smaller, less comfortable buses, but are usually air-conditioned. If your route is 4 or more hours, the driver will make a pit-stop about half-way through for lunch or dinner.</p>
<p>ACCOMMODATION TYPES</p>	<p>Panama offers a wide variety of lodging options, from five-star luxury eco-lodges to well-known chains, to budget backpacker hostels. Outside of Panama City, there aren't many chain hotels, however. In Panama City, the Marriot, Radisson, and Intercontinental are among the best chain hotels. Sprawling resorts are limited to the Pacific Coast, with the best bed and breakfasts in Boquete and the Valle de Anton.</p>

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There are also eco –lodges and luxurious all-inclusive resorts.

LIFESTYLES	
Kids	Panama is an excellent destination for families, especially those with young children who are easily bored by stuffy museums. Jungle cruises, wildlife sightings, interactive marine museums, and outdoor activities such as snorkeling and kayaking are kid-pleasers. Hotel resorts are generally family-friendly, with children's swimming pools, playgrounds, and even kids' organized activities.
Teens	Join an early-morning jungle cruise on Lake Gatún to visit "Monkey Island," and view other wildlife like crocodiles, capybaras, and sloths, and motor past huge tankers transiting the canal. Alternatively, ride a dugout canoe up the jungle-shrouded Chagres River to visit an Emberá indigenous community and get painted with jagua juice. At the Gamboa, take a bike ride to Pipeline Road in the afternoon, or visit the resort's serpentarium and butterfly exhibits, and take a ride on their aerial tram. In Panama City, pedal a bike ride along the Causeway and stop at the Punta Culebra Marine Exhibition Center. Visit the harpy eagle exhibition and see tapirs, ocelots, jaguars, and more at the Summit Gardens Park & Zoo . Afterward, stop at the Panama Canal's Miraflores Locks, tour the visitor center, and have lunch at their restaurant looking out over ships transiting the locks. Go to El Valle de Anton, 2 hours from the city, and stay at the Crater Valley Adventure Spa. Relax, bike ride, or let the hotel-activities staff teach your kids to ascend their climbing wall or obstacles course while you have a massage. Book a ride on the Canopy Adventure for a thrilling zip-line ride through the forest. Later, families can organize an easygoing horseback ride, bike ride on country lanes, walk to a waterfall, or explore the amphibian exhibit and mini-zoo at El Nispero.
Romance	What could be more romantic than a swim in the natural pool beneath the Yayas Falls , surrounded by a lush forest and amazing flora?
Honeymoons & Weddings	Weddings can be arranged in beautiful natural settings at beachside resorts and jungle eco-lodges.
Seniors	This is an excellent destination for Seniors, with first class resorts, good infrastructure and a thankful escape from Canadian weather in the winter!

UNIQUES	The Darien The easternmost region of Panama is known as the Darién Province, a swath of impenetrable rainforest and swampland that is undeveloped, save for a handful of tiny villages and indigenous settlements. It is Panama's wildest region and the most difficult to reach: This is the famous "missing link" of the Pan-American Highway that runs from
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	<p>Alaska to Puerto Montt, Chile. The interior of the Darién can be reached only by foot, boat, or small plane - and herein lies the allure of adventure for travelers. Within the province lies the Darién National Park, most of it inaccessible except for the Cana Research Station, an area revered by birders worldwide for the abundance of endemic and "show-bird" species such as macaws and harpy eagles, the largest predator in the world.</p>
<p>Surprising</p>	<p>Panama Hats: Not very Panamanian at all... Despite the name, Panama hats did not originate in Panama but in Ecuador, and were traditionally made by the Ecuadorian indigenous group from the Manabí Province using fibers from the toquilla palm. The hat was first popularized by Ferdinand de Lesseps during the French canal effort, and later during the canal building by the U.S., when thousands were imported from Ecuador and given to workers for protection from the blistering tropical sun. Hence, the name "Panama hat" stuck.</p>
<p>History</p>	<p>Early History Little is known about the ancient cultures that inhabited Panama before the arrival of the Spanish. The pre-Columbian cultures in this region did not build large cities or develop an advanced culture like the Mayans or the Incas did, and much of what was left behind has been stolen by looters or engulfed in jungle. We know that the most advanced cultures came from Central Panama, such as the Monagrillo (2500-1700 B.C.), who were one of the first pre-Columbian societies in the Americas to produce ceramics. Excavation of sites such as Conte, near Natá, have unearthed elaborate burial pits with huacas (ceremonial figurines) and jewelry, which demonstrates an early introduction to metallurgy during the first century, as well as trade with Colombia and even Mexico. What little remains of Panama's prized artifacts can be viewed at the Museo Antropológico Reina Torres de Araúz in Panama City.</p> <p>Spain Conquers Panama The first of many Spanish explorers to reach Panama was Rodrigo de Bastidas, who sailed from Venezuela along Panama's Caribbean coast in 1501 in search of gold. His first mate was Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, who would return later and seal his fate as one of Panama's most important historical figures. A year later, Christopher Columbus, on his fourth and final voyage to the New World, sailed into Bocas del Toro and stopped at various points along the isthmus, one of which he named Puerto Bello, now known as Portobelo. Estimates vary, but historians believe that between 1 and 2 million indigenous people were in Panama at that time. Groups such as the Kuna, the Chocó, and the Guaymí lived in small communities and were highly skilled in pottery making, stonecutting, and metallurgy. Because they frequently wore gold ornaments, Spanish explorers during the following years would be</p>

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further convinced of the existence of fabled El Dorado, the city of gold. Columbus attempted to establish a colony, Santa María de Belen, near Río Belen, but was forced out after a raid by local Indians.

Meanwhile, **Balboa** had settled in the Dominican Republic but had racked up huge debts. In 1510, he escaped his creditors by hiding out as a stowaway on a boat bound for Panama. In the years since Columbus's failed attempt, many other Spaniards had tried to colonize the coast, but were thwarted by disease and indigenous raids. Balboa suggested settling at Antigua de Darién, where he became a tough but successful administrator who both subjugated Indians as well as befriended conquered tribes. Having listened to stories by Indians about another sea, Balboa set out in 1513 with Francisco Pizarro and a band of Indian slaves, and hacked his way through perilous jungle for 25 days until he arrived at the Pacific Coast, where he claimed the sea and all its shores for the king of Spain. Balboa was later beheaded by a jealous new governor, Pedro Arias de Avila (Pedrarias the Cruel), on a trumped-up charge of treason.

In 1519, **Pedrarias** settled a fishing village called Panama, which meant "plenty of fish" in the local language, and resettled Nombre de Dios on the Atlantic to create a passageway for transporting Peruvian gold and riches from the Pacific to Spanish galleons in the Caribbean Sea. The trail was called the Camino Real, or Royal Trail, but later a faster and easier route was established, called the Camino de las Cruces. The land portion of this trail was two-thirds shorter, and met with the Chagres River, which could be sailed out to the Caribbean Sea. This trail can be walked today, and portions of the stone-inlaid path still exist.

With Incan gold nearly exhausted, the Spanish turned their interests to the immense supply of silver found in Peruvian mines, and in 1537 they held their first trading fair, which would grow into one of the most important fairs in the world. With so much wealth changing hands on the isthmus, pirate attacks became increasingly common, and ports like Nombre de Dios declined in importance after having been raided by the English pirate Sir Francis Drake twice in 1572 and 1573. Portobelo was refortified and became the main port of trade. Panama City, on the other side of the isthmus, flourished with trade profits, and was considered one of the wealthiest cities in the Americas.

By the mid-17th century, dwindling supplies of silver and gold from the Peruvian mines and ongoing pirate attacks precipitated a severe decline in the amount of precious metals being transported to Spain. In 1671, the notorious Welsh buccaneer Henry Morgan sailed up the Chagres River, crossed the isthmus, and overpowered Panama City, sacking the city and leaving it in flames. Those who escaped the attack rebuilt Panama City 2 years later at what is now known as Casco Viejo.

Spain finally abandoned the isthmus crossing and Portobelo after the

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city was attacked by the British Admiral Edward Vernon, and returned to sailing around Cape Horn to reach Peru.

Independence from Spain & the Gold Rush

Spain granted independence to its Central America colonies in 1821, and Panama was absorbed into "Gran Colombia," a union led by liberator Simón Bolívar that included Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador. Panama attempted to split from Colombia three times during the 19th century, but wasn't successful until the U.S.-backed attempt in 1903.

Having been a colonial backwater since the pullout of the Spanish in the late 17th century, Panama was restored to prosperity from 1848 to 1869 during the height of the California Gold Rush. Given that crossing from the Atlantic to the Pacific of the U.S. was a long, arduous journey by wagon and prone to Indian attacks and other pitfalls, gold-seekers chose to sail to Panama, cross the Las Cruces trail, and sail on to California. In 1855, an American group of financiers built the Panama Railroad, greatly reducing the travel time between coasts. In 20 years, a total of 600,000 people crossed the isthmus, and both Colón and Panama City benefited enormously from the business earned in hotels, restaurants, and other services.

The Panama Canal

The history of the canal dates back to 1539, when King Charles I of Spain dispatched a survey team to study the feasibility of a canal, but the team deemed such a pursuit impossible. The first real attempt at construction of a canal was begun in 1880 by the French, led by Ferdinand de Lesseps, the charismatic architect of the Suez Canal. De Lesseps had been convinced that a sea-level canal was the only option. Once workers broke ground, however, engineers soon saw the impracticality of a sea-level canal but were unable to convince the stubborn de Lesseps, and for years rumors flew, financial debts mounted, and nearly 20,000 workers perished before the endeavor collapsed. Few had anticipated the enormous challenge presented by the Panamanian jungle, with its mucky swamps, torrential downpours, landslides, floods, and, most debilitating of all, mosquito-borne diseases such as malaria and yellow fever.

Meanwhile, Panama was embroiled in political strife and a nonstop pursuit to separate itself from Colombia. Following the French failure with the canal, the U.S. expressed interest in taking over construction but was rebuffed by the Colombian government. In response, the U.S. backed a growing independence movement in Panama that declared its separation from Colombia on November 3, 1903. The U.S. officially recognized Panama, and sent its battleships to protect the new nation

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from Colombian troops, who turned back home after a few days. A French canal engineer on the de Lesseps project, Philippe Bunau-Varilla, a major shareholder of the abandoned canal project, had been grudgingly given negotiating-envoy status by the Panamanian government for the new U.S.-built canal. His controversial Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty gave the U.S. overly generous rights that included the use, occupation, and sovereign control of a 16km-wide swath of land across the isthmus, and was entitled to annex more land if necessary to operate the canal. The U.S. would also be allowed to intervene in Panama's affairs.

The French had excavated 40% of the canal, built hospitals, and left behind machinery and the operating railway, as well as a sizeable workforce of Afro-Caribbeans. For the next 10 years, the U.S., having essentially eradicated tropical disease, pulled off what seemed impossible in terms of engineering: carving out a path through the Continental Divide, constructing an elevated canal system, and making the largest man-made lake in the world.

The 20th Century to the Present

A stormy political climate ensued in Panama for the following decades, with frequent changes of administration. Presidents and other political figures were typically rabiblanco, or wealthy, white elites loathed by the generally poor and dark-skinned public. One especially controversial character in the political scene was Arnulfo **Arias**, a racist yet populist, one-time sympathizer of the fascist movement who would be voted into and thrown out of the presidency three times. Increasingly, Panamanians were discontented with the U.S. presence and, in particular, its control of the canal. In 1964, several U.S. high-school students in the Canal Zone raised the American flag at their school, igniting protests by Panamanian college students. The protests culminated in the deaths of more than two dozen Panamanians, an event that is now called "Día de los Mártires," or Martyrs Day.

By 1974, the U.S. had begun to consider transferring the canal to Panama. **Arias** was once again voted into power and after strong-arming the National Guard, he was deposed in a military coup led by Omar Torrijos Herrera, a colonel of the National Guard. **Torrijos** was an authoritarian leader but a champion of the poor who espoused land redistribution and social programs -- a "dictatorship with a heart," as he called it. His most popular achievement came in 1977, with the signing of a treaty with then-president Jimmy Carter that relinquished control of the canal to Panama on December 31, 1999. Also part of the treaty was the closing of U.S. military bases and the U.S. right to intervene only if it perceived a threat against the security of the canal. On July 31, 1981, **Torrijos** died in a plane accident.

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	<p>By 1983, the National Guard, now renamed the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF), was firmly controlled by Colonel Manuel Antonio Noriega, and continued to dominate political and everyday life in Panama. Noriega created the so-called Dignity Battalions that aimed to stifle citizen dissent through force and terrorize anyone who opposed the PDF. For the next 6 years, Noriega kept the Panamanian public in a state of virtual fear, running the country through presidents he had placed in power via rigged elections, killing and torturing his opponents, and involving himself in drug trafficking.</p> <p>The U.S. imposed tough economic sanctions on Panama that included freezing government assets in U.S. banks, and withholding canal fees, spurring widespread protests against Noriega across Panama City. In 1989, a fresh set of presidential elections pitted the Noriega-picked candidate against Guillermo Endara. When Endara won, Noriega annulled the election amid widespread claims by foreign observers of fraud on the part of the Noriega regime.</p> <p>With Panama veering out of control, the U.S. began sending troops to bases in the Canal Zone. On December 20, 1989, the U.S. launched Operation Just Cause, led by 25,000 soldiers who pounded the city for 6 days, leaving anywhere from 500 to 7,000 dead, depending on whom you asked. Noriega fled and hid in the offices of the Vatican nuncio, where he asked for asylum. He later surrendered and was flown to the U.S., where he was tried, charged, and sentenced to 40 years in prison. Panama's current president is Martín Torrijos, the son of the late Omar Torrijos, voted into office in 2004. The country's youngest president, he has a platform to increase jobs and security, and to fight against corruption.</p>
Books	Frommer's Panama, 2 nd Edition
1000 Places to See Before You Die	<p>Panama Canal – the 'greatest engineering show on earth'</p> <p>Archipelago de San Blas – a scattering of small, idyllic tropical islands off Panama's Caribbean coast</p>
Must Sees	The Canal, the rain forest, the local markets, the wildlife, the beaches.

SPORTS ACTIVITIES	<p>Kayaking & White-Water Rafting</p> <p>Panama has some of the most thrilling white-water rafting and kayaking in the Americas. The translucent rivers that pour down the Talamanca Mountain Range in the Chiriquí Highlands provide wild Class III and IV kayaking and rafting, principally on the Chiriquí River east of Volcán Barú, and the Chiriquí Viejo River west of the volcano, near the border with Costa Rica. Unfortunately, the Chiriquí Viejo is being threatened by a series of dams for a hydroelectric project, but for now it's a pristine river and a lot of fun to ride. There are tamer floats, too, such as the Esti River, a Class II, that is perfect for younger rafters, families, and beginners. What's special about the Chiriquí area is that relatively few paddlers</p>
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have discovered it, so rafters and kayakers have the river, and lush mountain scenery full of birds and wildlife, all to themselves. There are two local rafting companies in Boquete with years of experience and expert knowledge of the region; an option is to book with a tour operator that can put together multiday, multi-destination, or instructional trips. On the other side of the Talamanca, the Guarumo River has family-friendly Class I and II rapids that descend into the Caribbean Sea at Bocas del Toro; only two lodges offer this excursion, Tranquilo Bay and Casa Cayuco.

Closer to Panama City, there is rafting on the Class II and Class III Chagres River with Aventuras Panama, a 5-hour float through rainforest and past Emberá Indian villages.

Chiriquí River Rafting (www.panama-rafting.com) is owned and operated by Hector Sánchez, who has been rafting this region for more than 25 years. Hector and his professional crew offer year-round, half- and full-day rafting excursions around the Chiriquí, both for die-hards and families seeking an easy, fun float. Packages include lodging at their rustic bunkhouse or at the owner's private home and B&B.

Panama Rafters (www.panamarafters.com) is a young, American-owned company offering rafting and kayaking on the many rivers in the Chiriquí Highlands. They also teach beginning and intermediate kayaking. This company is especially good for rafters and kayakers seeking a wilder ride on the river.

Surfing

The powerful swells and hollow reef breaks off the Pacific and Caribbean coasts make Panama the destination for a surfin' safari. The water's warm, the waves are uncrowded, and surfing here is consistent year-round, with the largest swells between April and October in the Pacific, and December to March in the Caribbean. If you're a beginner or need tips on technique, a couple of camps specialize in surfing instruction.

Bocas del Toro is often compared to Tahiti or Hawaii for its huge swells - from December to March, and June and July - and monster waves such as Dumpers and Silverbacks, the latter a right-hand, reef-bottom point break comparable to Backdoor Pipeline in Oahu. Waves in Bocas range between 1.2 to 7.6m, and can be powerful beach breaks, big waves, reef point breaks, and spitting tubes. Isla Grande has powerful reef breaks and is a good bet if you want to surf the Caribbean but don't want to go as far as Bocas.

In the Chiriquí Gulf, the surf meccas are at Morro Negro, and Santa Catalina, internationally renowned among surfers and located straight

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	<p>across the bay from Isla Coiba, in the Pacific. Farther east on the Azuero Peninsula is Cambutal, Punta Negra, Dinosaurios, and Horcones, other reliable spots for consistent breaks, including beach, point, and reef-bottom breaks that are sometimes even better than at Santa Catalina, and less crowded. The up-and-coming Playa Venado, near Pedasí, is a long beach break with lefts and rights and swells that can be as little as 1.5m or as high as 4.6m. The Pacific beaches that lie between 1 and 2 hours from Panama City are beach breaks and point breaks. If you just don't want to waste time planning your surf trip, or if you want a local's insider information on the best breaks, check Panama Surf Tours (www.panamasurftours.com), a respected company with flexible 5- to 8-day tours that run from economical to luxury.</p> <p>Yachting & Sailing Panama Yacht Tours (www.panamayachtours.com) is a Panama City-based operation with multiple-day charters to Coiba Island, Bocas del Toro, the Pearl Islands, and the San Blas Islands, as well as private charter rental for partial transit of the Panama Canal.</p> <p>The Panama Yacht Club (www.panamayachtclub.com), based out of Fort Amador Marina in Panama City, specializes in private excursions to the Pearl Islands, with a day excursion for \$800, and a 4-night, 5-day journey for six passengers for \$5,000, aboard their luxury catamaran.</p> <p>San Blas Sailing (www.sanblassailing.com), a French company, has a fleet of sailboats based in the San Blas Archipelago, offering 4- to 14-night all-inclusive adventures sailing around the islands, snorkeling, kayaking, and visiting Kuna villages.</p> <p>Ziplining: It's all the rage in Costa Rica, and now Panama has joined in to offer this adrenaline-fueled and exhilarating adventure. Participants climb high to a treetop platform, where they are strapped into a harness and then descend quickly using a pulley attached to a cable. Part of the experience is observing wildlife, mostly birds, from different vantage points in the forest. Both Canopy Adventures www.canopylodge.com, in El Valle, and Boquete Tree Trek www.canopypanama.com, in Boquete, offer canopy rides.</p>
<p>Golf</p>	<p>Panama provides golfers with a variety of championship courses, some of which are open for public day use, others as part of an all-inclusive resort. Close to Panama City, Summit Golf & Resort (www.summitgolfpanama.com) is the ideal venue for those staying in the capital; it's located on the east bank of the Panama Canal on the Gaillard Highway, and is accessible by taxi from the city for about \$15 one-way. There is no hotel here, but there are swimming pools, a</p>

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	<p>restaurant, and a pro shop. Designed by noted architect Jeffery Myers, the course is spread across rolling hills, with sweeping views of the Gaillard Cut of the Panama Canal. It's very classy, and there is a traditional 18-hole course as well as a 6-hole course for juniors and beginners. Rates Monday through Friday are \$90 per person; Saturday and Sunday \$100 per person, which includes a golf cart; and clubs are available for an additional \$15.</p> <p>The Coronado Golf & Beach Resort (www.coronadoresort.com) is a long-standing, premiere golf resort located on the Pacific Coast, about an hour from Panama City. Designed by Tom Fazio, this is the only seaside 18-hole course in the country; players can come for the day from Panama City, but the resort specializes in packages with lodging included.</p> <p>Costa Blanca Golf & Villas (www.costablanca.com.pa) is located next to the Decameron Resort on the Pacific Coast, about 1 1/2 hours from Panama City. It has an 18-hole course that, because of its lights, you can play both day and night. The cost a bargain: Monday through Friday it's \$30 per person, with an additional \$22 for a cart; weekends cost \$72 per person (including cart). The course is within a residential development, and there are a clubhouse and restaurant.</p>
<p>Fishing</p>	<p>Panama is a world-class fishing destination known for its fast and furious reeling-in of monster species such as blue, black, and striped marlin; yellowfin tuna; and wahoo and swordfish. Fishing takes place year-round; however, marlin and tuna are more abundant from January to April. The Pacific Ocean is where the best fishing is - there's also fishing in the Caribbean, but the infrastructure (marinas and such) isn't well developed. Anglers looking for a sure bet can't beat Lake Gatún for peacock bass - throw your line in and within minutes you'll snag one, guaranteed, making this a good excursion for kids. In addition to the information provided below for Lake Gatún, Gamboa Rainforest Resort offers fishing trips for guests and even for visitors not lodging at the resort.</p> <p>Fishing charters are available for day and multiday excursions, either as part of a trip organized by a competent operator, or by simply hiring a local boatman to take you out on the water. Custom sport-fishing tours head to the Pearl Islands, the Gulf of Chiriquí (around Coiba Island), and Piñas Bay - the latter is home to the Tropic Star Lodge, and when they're sold out, a fishing charter is a good second option. Charters typically include transportation, meals, fishing gear, and bilingual or native-English-speaking guides.</p> <p>Fishing Charters: Exploration Panama www.explorationpanama.com an American-run company based out of Boca Chica, in the Chiriquí Gulf near David, operates a 15m refashioned U.S. Coast Guard vessel with a capacity for six overnight guests. Their all-inclusive day excursion</p>

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	<p>around the Gulf of Chiriquí costs, per person, \$225; their 1-night, 1-day excursion is \$275; and their Coiba Island 2-night, 3-day fishing excursion is \$950; they can custom-build a trip to the Darién area, too. Exploration Panama also offers scuba diving and snorkeling during fishing trips.</p>
<p>Horse riding</p>	<p>Horseback-riding outfits are sparsely distributed throughout the country, and the only lodge that focuses solely on riding is Hacienda del Toro (www.haciendadeloro.com), which offers short rides only, not full-day excursions. Still, it's a solid operation with high-quality horses. One of the best places to ride is in El Valle with Mitzila (tel. 6646-5813); she and her team charge \$4 per hour and operate daily. Trails here wind through thick forest, offering some wide-open panoramas. They have guides, but speak limited English. In Boquete, horses can be rented from Eduardo Cano (tel. 270-1750) for \$5 an hour for tours around the surrounding countryside. Horseback riding here takes place along mountain paths that provide riders with sweeping vistas of the Boquete valley. Eduardo speaks Spanish only, so depending on your own facility with el español, have your hotel make arrangements.</p>
<p>Hiking</p>	<p>Hiking in Panama ranges from strolls on the glorious beaches to strenuous tramping in the rain forest – Nolitour's Gamboa Rainforest Resort is an excellent base for this.</p> <p>Trekking the Camino Real: Centuries before the Panama Canal, the Spanish built an 80km cobblestone path to transport looted gold from the Pacific to galleons waiting in the Caribbean Sea. You can trace their path, much of which still exists in stone, in about 3 days, beginning with a canoe ride up the Chagres River, an overnight in an Emberá Indian Village, and a tramp through earthy jungle full of birds and wildlife to Nombre de Dios, near Portobelo. Lodging is in tents, and the return trip is by railroad to give you an idea of how revolutionary the railroad's construction was to increasing coastal access. Ancon Expeditions www.anconexpeditions.com is the company to call.</p>
<p>Cycling</p>	<p>Mountain biking is relatively new in Panama. There are few places suitable for riding other than well-established paved and dirt roads, but many of these roads can be dangerous if there is a lot of vehicle traffic. Roads in Panama are curvy, often with hairpin turns, and do not have bike lanes or a proper road shoulder, so keep alert for speeding vehicles coming around a bend. If you just feel like getting out and pedaling around town, you'll find bicycle rentals in more touristy areas that rent for an average of \$10 a day.</p> <p>In Panama City, the most popular and safest bike-riding area is the Amador Causeway, which is flat and has bike lanes - and a pretty spectacular view to boot. Outside the city, the Gamboa Resort rents bicycles for touring around; from here it's a couple of kilometers to the</p>

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	<p>Pipeline Road Trail, a dirt-and-mud road that is flanked by tropical jungle. El Valle de Anton was made for bike riding: Vehicle traffic is light, roads are flat and paved, and a few steep, technical dirt roads offer a good workout. Boquete, too, has picturesque, winding roads that provide moderate terrain and pastoral views. Note that rental bicycles around Panama are not top-of-the-line models and usually lack shocks and other deluxe features.</p> <p>Adventures in Panama offers two bike day trips around Panama City. Their day excursion to the Pipeline Road Trail gives cyclists a chance to get (a little) dirty and ride through jungle at one of the best bird-watching sites in Panama. Across the isthmus, they offer a day tour that begins with a bike ride across the Gatún Locks, connecting with a 6.4km dirt road to Fort San Lorenzo, a road known for birds and wildlife. The company Bike Hike Adventures combines biking on the Amador Causeway and near Fort San Lorenzo as part of their multisport package trips.</p>
<p>Diving</p>	<p>Isla Coiba, in the Chiriquí Gulf of the Pacific Ocean, is simply the best diving site in Panama, often described as a cross between the Cocos Islands in Costa Rica and the Galápagos Islands of Ecuador. Isla Coiba was the site of a notorious penitentiary until 2005, which kept visitors away, and therefore the surrounding waters are untouched. The snorkeling here is outstanding, too, but diving puts you close to pelagics such as white-tipped sharks, sailfish, manta rays, and dolphins. Coiba is also surrounded by one of the largest coral reefs on the Pacific Coast of the Americas. Other islands such as Islas Secas, and the islands within the National Marine Park in the Chiriquí Gulf, also provide outstanding diving.</p> <p>On the Caribbean coast, Bocas del Toro is where you want to go to view some of the best and most colorful hard and soft coral in the world. In the Caribbean, visibility is best from March to May, and during September and October. The reef at Baja Escribano, between the San Blas and Colón, is the new talked-about dive site for its clear waters and colorful sponges.</p> <p>Some of the best snorkeling in all of Panama is in the waters surrounding the Pearl Islands, for the abundance of marine life found here. Expect multitudinous schools of tropical fish and large pelagics such as white-tipped sharks. Bocas is billed as a top snorkeling site, but you'll need to get away from the standard tours to find the good stuff. Isla Iguanas, off the coast of Pedasí in the Pacific Ocean, is excellent for snorkeling, too.</p>

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	<p>The outfitters listed offer diving trips around Panama, including multi-destination trips. The resort Islas Secas in the Chiriquí Gulf and the Coral Lodge in the Caribbean are two lodges with on-site dive shops and personalized tours for guests only.</p> <p>Panama Divers (www.panamadivers.com) is the premiere dive operation in Panama, based in Panama City and Portobelo. They also offer dives around Las Perlas and Kuna Yala. Panama Divers, which is fully insured, has decades of experience and a PADI instruction facility.</p> <p>Scuba Panama (www.scubapanama.com) has a bicoastal dive that starts in the Caribbean Sea - visiting a sunken B-45 plane - and then goes to the Pacific Ocean for a dive there. They also have a unique (and spooky) dive in the Panama Canal, and dives around Portobelo and Isla Grande.</p>
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<p>CULTURE</p>	<p>Panama's seven indigenous groups' settlements are scattered in semi-autonomous territories. The Ngöbe, Buglé, Naso-Teribe and Bri-bri are the most representative native group in the Western part of the country, in the provinces of Chiriquí, Bocas del Toro and Veraguas. Together, they comprise 70% of the country's indigenous population. The Eastern side of the Panama is inhabited by the Emberá and Wounaan natives, in the Darien province, and by the Kunas, in the Kuna Yala Region.</p>
<p>Arts</p>	<p>Theatre tickets can be purchased by calling the theatre directly, or you can buy tickets at Blockbuster locations and at the bookstore El Hombre de la Mancha or Exedra Books. All theatre productions are in Spanish, with the exception of the Ancón Theater Guild (www.tga-panama.com ; admission donation around \$10). The well-respected guild has been around for more than a half-century, first opening its doors in Colón to provide entertainment to U.S. troops during World War II. The guild normally produces contemporary dramas and comedy with a mix of native English speakers and Panamanian actors trained in English-language schools.</p> <p>Classical music productions, plays, and ballet take place at Panama City's turn-of-the-20th-century National Theatre, on Avenida B in Casco Viejo. The best Spanish-language theatre productions can be found at Teatro la Quadra, on Calle D in El Cangrejo (www.teatroquadra.com ; tickets average \$10). This cultural centre was founded to promote and develop the art of theatre in Panama, and they receive acclaim for their nightly performances of well-known plays and children's theatre. Teatro ABA at Avenida Simon Bolívar (Transístmica), near Avenida de los Periodistas in front of the Riba Smith supermarket produces half its own</p>

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	shows and rents out its 200-person theatre to independent groups; productions are mostly comedy, drama, and well-established plays. The historic Teatro Anita Villalaz on Plaza Francia in Casco Viejo, is administered by the National Cultural Institute (INAC); the intimate theatre is home to folkloric productions, concerts, and plays, some of which are produced by the University of Panama students.
Music	Panama has a rich and diverse music history, and important contributions to Cumbia, Saloma, Pasillo, Punto, Tamborito, Mejorana, Bolero, Jazz, Salsa, Reggae, Calypso, Rock and other musical genres. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_of_Panama
Films	The Tailor of Panama (2001) is an excellent spy-thriller starring Pierce Brosnan, Geoffrey Rush, and Jamie Lee Curtis and centers around the transfer of power of the canal from the Americans to the Panamanian people during the post-Noriega years. The recent James Bond film, Quantum of Solace (2008), doesn't take place in Panama, but the Bolivia scenes were filmed in Casco Antiguo, and Colón doubles as Jamaica. Actor Daniel Craig stayed in the Canal House Hotel in Casco Antiguo during much of the movie's filming.
Museums	Museo del Canal Interoceánico de Panamá Housed in a fine antique building that was once the Gran Hotel and later the French canal headquarters, this is the best museum in Panama City and an obligatory stop for every traveller. The museum is a study of the Panama isthmus - from pre-Columbian times, to the arrival of the Spanish, to the French and the American canal-building efforts, through the present day. The museum gives you a good understanding of the isthmus as the center of world trade; it also provides an explanation of the effect of the isthmus and the canal on the Panamanian identity. This is an impeccable museum, with interpretive information in Spanish and English and on-site guides who give bilingual tours. www.sinfo.net/pcmuseum
Festivals	Festivals are part of what make this destination so special. There's almost bound to be an event going on while you are there, but here are some of the festivals you may want to plan your trip around... February: Carnaval (Carnival). Panama's largest yearly celebration takes place during the 4 days that precede Ash Wednesday. The largest celebrations are in small towns on the Azuero Peninsula, such as Las Tablas, and Panama City, with parades, music, and dancing. Be prepared to get wet by mojaderos, or trucks that spray revelers with water. March: Semana Santa. During this week (Holy Week), parades, religious processions, and other special events take place across the country. Palm Sunday through Holy Saturday.

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Feria de David. The Chiriquí capital's largest festival draws more than 500 exhibitors from around the world to display industrial products and new technology. During the 10-day event, the city hosts plentiful cultural and folkloric events; www.feriadedavid.com . Mid-March.

April: Feria de Orquídeas (Orchid Festival), Boquete. It's not as grand as the flower festival, but the Orchid Festival is enjoyable because it showcases thousands of varieties of these delicate flowers for public viewing. At the fairgrounds around mid-April.

Feria Internacional del Azuero, La Villa de Los Santos. This multiday festival is something akin to a county fair, with animal displays, food stalls, and lots of drinking. Mid-April.

June: Festival Corpus Christi, La Villa de Los Santos. The town explodes with activity for a 2-week religious festival known for its elaborate dances led by men in devil masks. Forty days after Easter.

July: Festival Patronales de La Virgen de Santa Librada, Las Tablas. This festival is famous for its Festival de la Pollera on July 22, which showcases the region's most beautiful pollera dresses and elects the "Queen of the Pollera" for that year. July 20 to 22.

September: Feria Internacional del Mar (International Festival of the Sea), Bocas del Toro. This 5-day event features food stands serving local cuisine, handicrafts booths, exhibits by the Smithsonian Institute and ANAM (the park service), folkloric presentations, and dances. Around the second week of September.

Festival de la Mejorana, Guararé. This nationally famous folkloric festival features hundreds of dancers, musicians, and singers coming together for a week of events and serious partying. Last week of September.

October: Festival del Cristo Negro (Black Christ Festival), Portobelo. Thousands of pilgrims come to pay penance, perform other acts of devotion, and do some reveling at the Iglesia de San Felipe, home to a wooden black Christ effigy that is paraded around town on this day. October 21.

November: Independence Days. Panama celebrates three independence days. November 3 and 4 are Independence Day and Flag Day and the largest independence celebrations, featuring parades, fireworks, and other entertainment in Panama City and larger cities like David. November 10th is a holiday for the "First Call for Independence," as is November 28th honoring Independence Day from Spain, with some

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	<p>regional festivities - but nothing matching November 3 and 4. Feria de las Tierras Altas, Volcán. This Highlands Festival is a 5-day celebration of agriculture, local arts, and culture. Around the last week of November.</p>
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<p>ATTRACTIONS</p>	
<p>Beaches</p>	<p>Panama has hundreds of kilometers of coastline on both the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean. Here some favourites:</p> <p>Comarca Kuna Yala: This is the premier beach destination in Panama, with over 350 islands scattered off the Caribbean coast that offer picture-postcard beaches with powdery white sand, coral reef, piercing turquoise water, and clusters of swaying palm trees. The colorful Kuna indigenous population administers this province, and their fascinating culture is part of the reason to visit the region, too. The glitch is that scuba diving is prohibited, and lodging is mostly Robinson Crusoe rustic, but all you'll want to do here anyway is swim, sun, and swing in a hammock.</p> <p>Isla Bastimentos National Park, Bocas del Toro: Cayos Zapatillas, or the "Slippers Islands" (so-called because they resemble footprints), not only fulfill the beach lover's fantasy with their soft sand backed by a tangle of jungle; they are also surrounded by a rich display of coral that attracts hordes of fish, providing good snorkeling. The park's main island, Isla Bastimentos, offers terrific beaches with clean sand and blue water, such as Red Frog Beach, Wizard Beach, and Playa Larga, which can be reached by a short walk or hike, or by boat during the calm-water season from August through October.</p> <p>Las Perlas Archipelago: Despite this Pacific archipelago's proximity to Panama City, its top-notch snorkeling, white-sand beaches, and calm-water swimming conditions, the Pearl Islands are a relatively unsung beach destination. Outside of holidays and the hard-core summer, you won't find crowds here, even during weekends. It's also drier here during the rainy season. Isla Contadora offers lodging and day trips for fabulous snorkeling and visits to uninhabited beaches, and there is a luxury lodge, Hacienda San José, on Isla San José.</p> <p>Isla Coiba National Park: Beyond ranking as Panama's number-one diving site, Isla Coiba National Park boasts fine beaches backed by dense jungle. Tiny islands such as Granito de Oro are so idyllic that midsize cruise ships make a stop here. Even the beach fronting the park station seems too perfect to be true.</p>

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	<p>Las Lajas, Chiriquí Province: It's not the most beautiful beach in Panama, but the water is the perfect temperature and produces just the right amount of waves for bodysurfing - though there's little current. All of which means that Las Lajas is ideal for swimming, and since the beach measures more than 13km in length, you can walk forever. Rustic shacks and cheap restaurants are clustered on the beach at the end of the road, but it's best to bring your own snacks. If you're looking for a beach closer to David (and Boquete), try La Barqueta. Strong currents at this black-sand beach mean the water is not ideal for swimming, but it is lengthy like Las Lajas and good for walking, and there is a nature reserve here, too.</p> <p>Playa Los Destiladores & Playa Venado, Azuero Peninsula: Of the multitude of beaches lining the coast of the Azuero Peninsula, these two are the cleanest and the most attractive, and they are within a 20-minute drive from each other. A protected cove at Playa Venado means it's calm enough for a toddler, and farther east crashing waves have converted the beach into a surfing hot spot. A major bonus here is the nearby picturesque town of Pedasí, and three gorgeous lodges.</p> <p>Santa Clara & Farallón, Pacific Coast: These two are the most appealing beaches along the Pacific Coast, and the best for swimming. Best of all, they lie within a 2-hour drive of Panama City. The beaches' water is bluer and the sand cleaner and whiter than its neighbours closer to the city. The Decameron Resort produces throngs of beachgoers at Farallón, but for the most part this long stretch of sand sees few crowds outside of weekends. Be warned however, that swimming conditions can be treacherous due to large waves and strong riptides.</p>
<p>Wildlife</p>	<p>If you're a nature lover, consider that Panama is a land bridge between North and South America, and hundreds of wildlife species - more than 900 species of birds alone - meet here at the isthmus, providing a rich environment for eco-travel.</p> <p>Panama is home to more than 225 species of mammals. While it is very unlikely that you will spot a puma, you have good odds of catching a glimpse of a monkey, coatimundi, agouti, or sloth.</p> <p>Whale watching: The migratory humpbacked whale spends the winters in the Southern Hemisphere and migrates north along the Pacific Coast from June to September. These mammals have black backs and whitish throat and chest areas. Whales breed when spending time off the coast of Panama. Humpback whales can be spotted off the shore of the Pacific Coast, around Coiba Island, the Pearl Islands, and the Azuero Peninsula.</p>

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<p>Parks</p>	<p>Natural Metropolitan Park, Panama City: Panama City is the only metropolis that boasts a tropical rainforest within its city limits. Travelers with ample time will want to visit national parks like Soberanía, but there's no denying the appeal of hopping in a cab and, within 10 minutes, exchanging the city streets for a steamy jungle teeming with wildlife.</p> <p>Volcán Barú National Park (Chiriquí Highlands): The rugged, 3,505m (11,500-ft.) Barú Volcano, the highest point in the country, is this national park's centerpiece and a "bioclimatic island." It's home to a wild, dense rainforest packed with bamboo gardens and towering trees dripping with vines and sprouting bromeliads and orchids from their trunks and branches. In higher reaches, an intermittent cloud forest evokes an eerie, prehistoric ambience. The park is very popular with bird-watchers, who come to glimpse the famous resplendent quetzal. One of the most enjoyable full-day hikes in Panama is here along the Quetzal Trail, which links the towns of Guadalupe/Cerro Punta with Boquete, and the crystalline rivers that descend from the volcano provide thrilling white-water rafting. On a clear day, hikers can see both oceans from the summit of the volcano.</p> <p>La Amistad International Park (Chiriquí Highlands): Like Isla Coiba, UNESCO rated this park a World Heritage Site because it is one of the most biodiverse regions in the Americas. The park is "international" because half of it is in Costa Rica, and it's managed by both nations. Characterized by virgin forests, La Amistad's rugged Talamanca Range is home to more than 400 species of birds and 100 species of mammals, many of them endangered. The park is mostly inaccessible, except near Cerro Punta, where there are several outstanding walking trails suitable for all ability levels, and enjoyable rain or shine.</p>
<p>Gardens</p>	<p>Summit Garden & Zoo near Panama City: Wildlife is notorious for shying away from humans, but you can view jaguars, monkeys, tapirs, harpy eagles, and other species endemic to Panama at this zoo. It's not a fancy attraction, but there are extensive lawns and gardens, and the zoo is undergoing a progressive renovation during the next few years.</p>
<p>Historical Sites</p>	<p>Panama Viejo was the first city of Panama, founded by the Spanish back in 1519. It was the first city founded at the Pacific and it became rapidly a prosperous point where gold from the southern colonies would make it to the Caribbean and later on to Europe. It was attacked by pirates several times, the last of them by Pirate Henry Morgan who destroyed it forever in 1671. In 1673, a new city was built, but this time using the knowledge painfully acquired by experience. The Spanish by then knew well the risks of settling cities in tropical swamps: mosquitoes, tropical diseases and difficulty to defend its territory. The second city was founded at the opposite side of the bay in very different conditions: a</p>

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	<p>rocky peninsula easy to defend and with crossed winds that would ensure the health of its inhabitants. This city is known today as Casco Antiguo, and it is here where the Republic of Panama was born as it is known today</p> <p>Currently a UNESCO protected site, Casco Antiguo (or Casco Viejo) is Panama City's second touristic destination and the reason is that its buildings reflect the diversity of Panamanian society. Although a Spanish colonial city, because of several fires and the influence of merchants from all around the world, it became a vibrant city with styles ranging from Caribbean to French and even Art Deco. Today, Casco Antiguo undergoes an interesting revitalization process.</p>
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OTHER ACTIVITIES	
Shopping	<p>The major shopping malls in Panama City offer excellent quality and national and international brands. A principal shopping avenue is Vía España, where both high- and low-end shops vie for business, as well as grocery stores and pharmacies. Designer stores are located around Calle 53 in Marbella and in the nearby World Trade Center's Centro de Comercio. Also try Plaza Paitilla in the Paitilla neighborhood. You'll find electronics shops around Vía Estronga, in the Financial District.</p>
Markets	<p>The Mercado de Mariscos, located on Avenida Balboa and Calle 15 Este, is distribution headquarters for fresh seafood pulled from the Pacific and Caribbean. It's a vibrant market with lots of action as fishmongers shout while they deftly fillet corvina, tuna, octopus, and more. You can dine here at their upstairs restaurant. Several food stands sell seafood snacks like ceviche. Next door is the brand-new Mercado Público, the covered farmer's market of Panama City with exotic fruits and vegetables, meats, dried spices and nuts, and a food court of fondas, or cheap food stands serving Panamanian fare. Don't forget to bring your camera.</p> <p>Artesanía, or indigenous handicrafts, are the number-one buy here in Panama. Molas, the reversed appliqué panels made by Kuna Indian women, rank high on the list of popularity for souvenirs and gifts, either sewn onto a beach bag, as a shirt, or sold individually for you to frame or stitch onto anything you'd like (pillowcases are an ideally sized canvas). Other popular handicrafts, such as tagua nuts or vegetable ivory carved into tiny figurines, Ngobe-Buglé dresses, and Emberá Indian baskets and masks, can be found at the following markets. These markets are open daily with the general hours 8 or 9am to 5 or 6pm (until about 2pm Sun). The Mercado Nacional de Artesanías, in Panama Viejo next to the visitor centre, is expansive and sells handicrafts from around the country. In Balboa, on Avenida Arnulfo Arias Madrid and Amador, is a small YMCA Handicrafts Market, with mostly Kuna and Emberá</p>

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	<p>indigenous arts and crafts, and clothing. A little farther east and up Avenida Arnulfo Arias Madrid is the Kuna Cooperative, featuring Kuna handicrafts. This market is fun for kids because Kuna women offer to affix their traditional beaded bands onto the arms and legs of tourists, just as they themselves wear them.</p> <p>For the more adventurous traveler seeking an "authentic" shopping experience, you can't beat Avenida Central, a pedestrian street and market that stretches from where Justo Arosemena meets Vía España to the Santa Ana Plaza, and that is near Casco Viejo. It's a scrappy, run-down neighborhood, with cheap stores, outdoor fruit and vegetable markets, and a bustling fusion of ethnic groups shopping for a bargain. Visually, it's the most colorful neighborhood in town. Apart from \$1-and-under kind of shops, vendors lining the streets hawk clothing, accessories, plastic gizmos, and knickknacks. Shopkeepers like to blare music or announce their deals through megaphones to pull buyers in. It's a slice of everyday Panama, but it's also street theatre and people-watching as fascinating as catching sight of Kuna Indian women lining up at McDonald's.</p>
<p>Nightlife</p>	<p>You don't have to experience 5 days of Carnaval to know that Panamanians are party-loving people. When the sun goes down, Panama City lights up with a vibrant scene that caters to all ages, interests, and levels of stamina.</p> <p>Nightspots are concentrated in four neighbourhoods: Bella Vista (also called Calle Uruguay), the Amador Causeway, Marbella (Calle 53 Este), and Casco Viejo.</p>
<p>Spas</p>	<p>The recently opened Inter-Continental Playa Bonita Resort & Spa (www.ichotelsgroup.com) is located on the Pacific, just a 30-minute drive from Panama City. The plush beach resort has a sybaritic spa facility with all the trimmings; services are booked individually, or as part of a package that combines fruit- and chocolate-infused skin treatments, massage, aromatherapy, and body wraps.</p> <p>Decapolis Radisson (www.radisson.com), a sleek, trendy hotel, has the Aqua Spa, the top spa in Panama City in terms of service and hip decor, and you don't have to be a guest to book an appointment. They offer a full range of treatments and a stylish beauty parlor for one-stop makeovers.</p> <p>Gamboa Rainforest Resort (www.gamboaresort.com) is the best-known spa in Panama. The top-notch service, along with the recently renovated premises, make this one of the best spas in Panama. Expect traditional massages, body scrubs, and facials. If you're not staying at the resort, you can visit the spa anyway, and combine it with a bike ride and lunch.</p>

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Casinos	<p>Gambling is legal in Panama, and virtually every major hotel in the city has an adjoining casino. You'll find slot machines, video poker, gaming tables, sports betting, and special shows and parties.</p> <p>The hottest casino at the moment is at the Veneto Hotel & Casino. The Veneto has a sophisticated gaming area and often hosts over-the-top parties such as E! Entertainment's Wild On. There is a sushi bar here, too. El Panama Hotel has one of the newer centrally located casinos, which offers cheap drink specials for women.</p>
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CUISINE	
Food	<p>Panama is a melting pot of ethnicities, and its cuisine is accordingly influenced by its diverse population. Within Panama City, travelers will find something from every corner of the world, including French, Japanese, Italian, Thai, Middle Eastern, and Chinese food - all of it very good and true to its roots. In regional areas, traditional Panamanian cuisine is an overlapping mix of Afro-Caribbean, indigenous, and Spanish cooking influences incorporating a variety of tropical fruits, vegetables, and herbs. Most Panamanian restaurants are casual - diners, beachfront cafes, and roadside fondas (food stands). A large U.S. population has spawned North American cafes and bistros serving burgers and the like, and fast-food chains are plentiful in Panama City.</p>
Drinks	<p>When in Panama, do as the locals do and down an icy cold local beer. Beer is Panama's most popular alcoholic drink, and there is a wide variety of national brands to sample, such as Balboa, Atlas, Panamá, Soberana, and Cristal - all light pale lagers, none of which are particularly outstanding, but all taste divine in a hot, sticky climate. International brands such as Heineken, Corona, and Guinness can be found even in small-town markets.</p> <p>Panama's most famous drink is seco, a sugar-cane-distilled alcohol produced in Herrera and commonly served with milk and ice. You won't find seco in trendy bars or high-end restaurants; it's consumed mostly in rural communities and cantinas. Also popular in Panama are rum, vodka, and scotch.</p>
Restaurants	<p>There's a huge range of dining opportunities from roadside stalls to first class restaurants. Here's some recommendations from our friends at Frommer's guides:</p> <p>Manolo Caracol (Panama City; tel. 228-4640): The city's most innovative restaurant features an adventurous and creative daily menu that embraces in-season products and the freshest and most exotic fish of any restaurant in town. Sit back in the colonial, artsy ambience and wait for a "surprise" of 12 courses to be slowly ushered to your table - you never know what you're going to get, but you know it will be good.</p>

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	<p>Market (Panama City; tel. 264-9401): This snazzy new restaurant is one of the most popular dining spots in Panama City, and it's easy to see why. Contemporary, yet classy, Market serves up some of the best burgers and steaks in Panama City.</p> <p>Palms (Panama City; tel. 265-7256): It's one of the hippest restaurants in Panama City, with a tropical-chic and sleek decor, and delicious, well-conceived dishes that expertly blend Mediterranean, Asian, and Latin American flavors and ingredients. Upstairs is an ultra-modern bar for a nightcap.</p> <p>Madame Chang (Panama City; tel. 269-1313): Few diners are aware that some of the best Chinese food outside of China is here in Panama, and Madame Chang is where you come to savor it. The Peking duck is the restaurant's showcase dish. The owners have merged Old China with new, both in terms of cuisine and their smart-casual atmosphere.</p> <p>La Casa de Lourdes (El Valle de Antón; tel. 983-6450): The cuisine is so to-die-for good that some residents of Panama City endure the 4-hour round-trip to El Valle de Antón just to have Sunday lunch. Ultra-fresh ingredients and exotic fruits are used to create updated takes on Panamanian and Latin American fare. Dining is alfresco: under the archways of a Tuscan-style manor house, next to an outdoor swimming pool.</p> <p>Restaurant Vista Mar (Vista Mar; tel. 215-1111): This restaurant is run by a renowned French chef, and sports a chic Moroccan decor, plus outdoor dining with ocean views. The Mediterranean-style seafood is well-conceived and bursting with flavor. The restaurant is within the Vista Mar residential community, on the Pacific Coast.</p>
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MORE INFO	
Brochures	Online brochures are at www.visitpanama.com
Website	The Panama Tourist Board , known as the Autoridad de Turismo de Panama (ATP), has a website and toll-free number for North Americans tel. 800/231-0568 www.visitpanama.com ; English-language brochures are available. The website has links to other helpful sites. Make sure to check out www.panamainfo.com as well; it's probably the best travel site currently available on Panama and they also publish a quarterly magazine with tourist, real estate, and restaurant information.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES	I have recently taken my family to Panama – check out my Travel Blog at http://www.chrisrobinsontravelshow.ca/Blog/tabid/400/EntryId/62/Panama.aspx
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	I have also created a Pinterest board on Panama to add a visual taste: http://pinterest.com/TravelShow/panama
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