

Panama

Due to the income brought in from the Panama Canal and international trade, Panama City is one of the more prosperous Central American capitals. The city center can be broken into three distinctive areas. Casco Antiguo is the poorer, historical area, the banking district (El Cangrejo) is the wealthier, modern area and La Exposicion is in between both economically and geographically.

Casco Antiguo, with many interesting sights, is a good place to start a tour of Panama City. It also has a series of cheap cafeteria-like restaurants, which is good for tourists who don't speak Spanish or are on a budget. It is a bit dodgy at night and



Unfortunately some of the sights are now ruins. A series of churches can be visited including Iglesia y Convento de Santo Domingo, which has an accompanying religious art museum. The church has fallen apart, however, an arch, Arco Chato, remains. This arch is partially responsible for the building of the Canal in Panama instead of Nicaragua. Its survival proved that Panama was less susceptible to earthquakes than Nicaragua.

At the end of Casco Antiguo, runs an esplanade overlooking the sea. Plaza de Francia runs below the wall and is dedicated to the 22,000 workers who died in the French attempt to build a canal in the nineteenth century. Most of them died of diseases such as yellow fever. On one side of the plaza is a series of dungeons that have now been restored into restaurants and museums.

There are also several government and civic buildings here, which is why this area was heavily bombed in 1989 by the Americans in their attempt to remove General Noreiga. One building that was heavily damaged was Club de Clases y Tropas, which was a favorite hangout of Noreiga's. The Presidential Palace and Ministry of Justice buildings are also in this area. The National Theater is currently being restored but visitors can take a look inside and see its red and gold interior.

The street leading from Casco Antiguo to La Exposicion is a pedestrian mall called Avenida Central. Here, tourists can observe the wide mix of people in the city, including mestizo (mixed indigenous and Spanish), African descent, Spanish descent, mixed African and Spanish descent and Indian. All have a distinct look and distinct culture. Perhaps the most unique group is the Kuna, who are Indian. The women can be identified by their gold hoop nose rings, arm and leg bands of beads, long stockings and colorful blouses worn with the molas that they sew together. The molas are souvenirs that many tourists buy. They are sewn multilayered textiles that often attempt to explain specific events in the Kuna's life. The Kuna have a custom for most important events in their life, which are told by the molas as well through dances and chants.

Moving north along Avenida Central are a series of sights including the Legislative Plaza and Plaza Cinco de Mayo. To the east of these sights is the archeological museum. Hidden behind this museum, is the artesian market where tourists can pick up handicrafts. Moving further east is the largely residential area called La

Exposicion. However, it does contain one important statue on the waterfront dedicated to the explorer Balboa.

The banking area is the most modern place in the city and contains a few skyscrapers, which is uncommon in Central America. There are also a lot of fashion shops here and upscale restaurants. There are not many historical buildings here and the accommodations are more expensive but there are more services in the area.



The Panama Canal has a series of three locks that can be observed, but the Miraflores Locks is closest to Panama City. There is a covered lookout area, similar to a football stand, so tourists can get a good view of ships entering and leaving the lock. People on the ship will often wave at the observers as it takes time to open the 750-ton doors. Twenty-six million gallons

of water is transferred in only seven minutes, but the process of getting the ship moved into position and then through the locks takes some time. Ships are raised a total of 85 feet above sea level at the Gatun Locks on the Atlantic side and then lowered by the end of their transit.

The highest toll paid for a transit through the Panama Canal was the M/V *Sisler* in January 2000; it was US\$184,114.80. The lowest toll paid was US\$ 0.36 by Richard Halliburton who crossed the Canal by swimming it in 1928. The average cost of a voyage is approximately US\$30,000. The Hydrofoil Pegasus of the United States Navy did the fastest transit of the Canal by completing it in 2 hours and 41 minutes. However, an average trip through the Canal takes about eight to ten hours.

Control of the Panama Canal was transferred to Panamanians on December 31, 1999 in accordance with the 1977 Canal Treaty. Although they are proud of now owning the Canal, there are many concerns about the future. There is a fierce debate over whether to allow ships with nuclear fuel through the canal. Also, an additional cost of eight billion dollars is needed to build new locks for larger ships.

Close to Miraflores Locks is the Soberania National Park, which is essentially a series of hiking trails. There is a chance to see some birds, a few animals and the twisted trees are interesting to look at. There are more animals to see at the Summit Botanical Gardens and Zoo, but they are caged. But due to the proximity to the park, the zoo is worth visiting.

The area around Panama City also has a series of excellent beaches. Although Panama City isn't overly chaotic, it is still good to go to the beach. Playa Kobbe and Veracruz are short bus trips to the west of the city. A ferry can be taken to the nearby island of Tobago, fifteen miles south of the city,



which is another popular way to get away.

About 100 miles to the east of Panama City is Darien Province, which contains the Darien Gap. The word gap is appropriate as this where Highway 1, "The Gringo Trail" melts into the jungle only to pick up across the border in Columbia. Highway 1 runs from Alaska all the way down to the Darien Gap. This is also an area where there is a high amount of drug trafficking and kidnapping. According to US State Department statistics, 86% on anti-US terrorist attacks in 2000 occurred in Latin America. Although the political map has changed since 2000, the Darien Gap hasn't.

However, Panama City is a safe city with an interesting mix of people and events. The population is a manageable 700,000 and the layout of the city makes it easy to get around. The relative wealth of the business district allows tourists to enjoy the good life while visiting historical Panama is possible in Casco Antiguo.