The most cosmopolitan capital in Central America, Panama City is both a gateway to the country’s natural riches and a vibrant destination in its own right. A hub of international banking and trade, the city sports a sultry skyline of shimmering glass and steel towers reminiscent of Miami.

The capital rides the rails of urban chaos, with no shortage of traffic jams, wayward taxis, and casinos stacked sideways between chic clubs and construction sites. A respite from all that buzz, the colonial neighborhood of Casco Viejo is a dilapidated peninsula with ruins and cobbled streets reminiscent of old Havana. After the city elite fled to live in skyscrapers, decades passed with Casco Viejo crumbling on the edge of the sea. Recently, artists and small businesses are moving back in and renovations are abundant. With luxury lofts, cafes and the hottest nightspots arriving, the Casco is approaching full-swing revival.

With arms open to the east and the west, Panama City developed as a hub of trade and immigration. As a result, urbanites hail from every corner of Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia. Increasing numbers of North Americans and Europeans are adding to the mix. The result is a cultural mix that marks this capital as more dynamic and fluid than its neighbors. An ‘anything goes’ attitude proves a breath of fresh air.

Within minutes of the city’s center are tropical rainforests and verdant parks home to howler monkeys, toucans and sloths. You can also escape the bustle by hitting a broad sandy beach (Pacific or Caribbean) or by hopping a train to Colón.
HISTORY
Panama City was founded in 1519 by the Spanish governor Pedro Arias de Ávila (Pedrarias) not long after Balboa first saw the Pacific. Although the Spanish settlement quickly became an important center of government and church authority, the city was ransacked and destroyed in 1671 by the English pirate Sir Henry Morgan, leaving only the stone ruins of Panamá Viejo.

Three years later, the city was reestablished about 8km to the southwest in the area now known as Casco Viejo. Although the peninsular location made the city well-defended, the Spanish overland trade route faded upon the destruction of the Caribbean port at Portobelo in 1746. Panama gained independence in 1821 and became part of Gran Colombia, though a decade later the regional confederation dissolved and Panama belonged to Colombia. Panama City subsequently declined in importance, though it would return to prominence in the 1850s when the Panama Railroad was completed, and gold seekers on their way to California flooded across the isthmus by train.

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

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

Following the handover of the Panama Canal in 1999, and the subsequent closure of American military bases in the country, Panama City has finally taken charge of its own destiny. Today, Panama City is by far the wealthiest city in Central America, and residents are optimistic about the future. With a spate of foreign investment and the Panama Canal expansion, the city is poised to continue its constant transformation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

INFORMATION
Bookstores
El Hombre de la Mancha (Map p76; ☏ 263-6218; Calle 52; 10am-9pm Mon-Sat) A Spanish-language bookstore favored by Panamanians.
Exedra Books (Map p74; ☏ 264-4252; Vía España at Vía Brasil; 9:30am-9:30pm Mon-Sat, 11am-8:30pm Sun) Easily one of Central America’s best bookstores.
Librería Argosy (Map p76; ☏ 223-5344; Vía Argentina near Vía España) A bookstore and cultural institution owned by a cheerful Greek immigrant.

Emergency
Ambulance ☏ 228-2187, 229-1133
Fire ☏ 103
Police ☏ 104
Internet Access
Most lodgings have wi-fi, and internet cafes are plentiful in Panama City, especially in the El Cangrejo banking district.

Business Center (Map p76; Calle 49A Oeste; per hr US$0.75; 24hr) Air-conditioned; fast internet.

Libraries
Earl S Tupper Tropical Sciences Library (Map p74; 212-8113) A world-class resource for information on tropical biology and conservation.

Maps
Instituto Geográfico Nacional (Tommy Guardia; Map p74; 236-2444; 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) Just off Av Simón Bolívar opposite the Universidad de Panamá. Has an excellent collection of maps for sale.

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

Centro Médico Paitilla (Map p74; 265-8800, 265-8883; cnr Calle 53 & Av Balboa) This medical center has well-trained physicians who speak both Spanish and English.

Centro Metropolitano de Salud (Map p70; 512-6600; Corosel Los Ríos; 7:30am-noon & 1-3pm Mon-Fri) Offers yellow-fever vaccinations with international certificate (required for travel to Colombia if returning) for a minimal charge.

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

**HSBC** (Map p76; Via España) Changes Amex traveler’s checks with no fee; US$5 per transaction for other types.

**Panacambios** (Map p76; 222-1800; Ground fl, Plaza Regency Bldg, Via España; 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Buys and sells international currencies.

### Post

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

**Main post office** (Map p74; Av Balboa btwn Calles 23 & 24; 7am-5:45pm Mon-Fri, 7am-4:45pm Sat) Holds poste restante items for 30 days.

**Post office** (Map p74; Plaza las Americas; 7am-5:45pm Mon-Fri, 7am-4:45pm Sat) Only post office for mailing packages. There’s a second branch nearby.

### Telephone

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

### Tourist Information

All the ATP (Autoridad de Turismo Panamá) offices give out free maps. The usefulness of a given office depends on the individual employee. Note that few ATP employees speak English.

**ATP** (Map p70; 226-7000; www.atp.gob.pa; Via Israel, San Francisco; 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) Panama’s tourist bureau is headquartered at the Atlapa Convention Center in the San Francisco neighborhood. Enter at the rear of the large building. ATP gives out free maps and information on
things to see and do. There are also ATP information counters in Casco Viejo and Panamá Viejo.

Autoridad Nacional del Ambiente (ANAM; Map p74; ☏ 315-0855; ☏ 8am-4pm) ANAM can occasionally provide maps and information on national parks. However, they are not organized to provide much assistance to tourists. Located inside Building 804 of the Albrook district.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

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

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

Calle Uruguay, the clubbing hub of the city, also attracts opportunists. Don’t take your full wallet out at night. We have heard reports of women going up to male travelers to hug them and taking their wallets.

Taxis generally allow unrelated passengers to share the cab but robberies do occasionally occur. If you feel uncomfortable, don’t get into a taxi with more than one passenger. If you speak Spanish, you can offer a slightly higher fare to keep your taxi to yourself.

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

Panama has become stringent on drug control, which sometimes means roadblock checks of drivers and their passengers. Always have your passport with you.

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

SIGHTS

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

Casco Viejo

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

In 1904, when construction began on the Panama Canal, all of Panama City existed where Casco Viejo stands today. However, as population growth and urban expansion pushed the boundaries of Panama City further east, the city’s elite abandoned Casco Viejo, and the neighborhood rapidly deteriorated into an urban slum.

Today, Casco Viejo is half-crumbling, half-high end. Part of the allure of strolling along Casco Viejo’s cobbled streets is the dilapidated charm of the crumbling buildings, modest homes and ruins. The newly restored architecture gives a sense of how magnificent the area must have looked in past years. Declared a Unesco World Heritage Site in 2003, the area is getting international recognition. Unfortunately, developers are still known to tear down patrimonial architecture with little consequence. The restoration of Casco Viejo is a work in progress, so please be aware of your surroundings and exercise caution while exploring this fascinating neighborhood.

The following places are located on Map p78.

PLAZA DE LA INDEPENDENCIA

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

IGLESIA DE SAN JOSÉ

This church (Av A) protects the famous Altar de Oro (Golden Altar), which was about the only thing of value salvaged after Henry Morgan sacked Panamá Viejo. According to local leg-
end, when word came of the pirate’s impending attack, a priest attempted to disguise the altar by painting it black. The priest told Morgan that the famous altar had been stolen by another pirate, and even convinced Morgan to donate handsomely for its replacement. Morgan is said to have told the priest, ‘I don’t know why, but I think you are more of a pirate than I am.’ Whatever the truth, the baroque altar was later moved from the old city to the present site.

**TEATRO NACIONAL**

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

**PLAZA DE FRANCIA**

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

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

**PASEO LAS BÓVEDAS**

This esplanade runs along the top of the sea wall built by the Spanish to protect the city. From here, you can see the Puente de las Américas arching over the waterway and the ships lining up to enter the canal.

**PALACIO DE LAS GARZAS**

The Palacio de las Garzas (Presidential Palace; Av Alfaro) is named after the great white herons that reside here. The president of Panama lives on the upper floor.

**CLUB DE CLASES Y TROPAS**

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

**PARQUE BOLÍVAR**

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

**MUSEO DE ARTE RELIGIOSO COLONIAL**

Housed beside the ruins of the Iglesia y Convento de Santo Domingo, the Museo de Arte Religioso Colonial (Museum of Colonial Religious Art; ☎ 228-2897; cnr Av A & Calle 3; admission US$1; 🕒 8am-4pm Tue-Sat) has a collection of colonial-era religious artifacts, some dating from the 16th century.

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

**MUSEO DEL CANAL INTEROCEÁNICO**

The impressive Museo del Canal Interoceánico (☎ 211-1995; www.museodelcanal.com; Calle 6a Oeste; admission US$2; 🕒 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) is housed in a beautifully restored building that once served as the headquarters for the original French canal company. The Panama Canal Museum (as it’s more commonly known) presents excellent exhibits on the famous waterway, framed in their historical and political context. Signs are in Spanish, but English-speaking guides and audiortours (US$5) are available.
MUSEO DE HISTORIA DE PANAMÁ

The modest Museo de Historia de Panamá (☎ 228-6231; Calle 6a Oeste, Palacio Municipal; admission free; ☛ 8:30am-3:30pm Mon-Fri) has a small selection of exhibits covering Panamanian history from the colonial period to the modern era.

Parque Natural Metropolitano

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

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

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

The park is bordered on the west and north sides by Camino de la Amistad and to the south and east by Corredor Norte; Av Juan Pablo II runs right through the park. Pick up a pamphlet for a self-guided tour in Spanish and English at the visitors center (Map p70; ☎ 232-5516; admission US$1; ☛ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat), 40m north of the park entrance.

Additionally, the Panama Audubon Society (☎ 224-9371; www.panamaaudubon.org) holds its monthly meeting at the visitors center from 7:30pm to 9:30pm on the second Thursday of every month. The meetings are open to the public, and often feature interesting speakers. Both English and Spanish are spoken here. These meetings provide an excellent opportunity to get to know some Panamanian bird-watchers and to learn more about tropical bird species.

An international team of scientists from the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI) have set up a crane in the park to study the forest canopy, which is home to a complete ecosystem 30m to 50m up from the ground. Although the crane was previously off-limits to the public, Ancon Expeditions (see p296) has exclusive access to take tourists up to the treetops. This recommended experience provides an entirely different view of the rainforest. Book in advance as the number of tourists allowed up on the crane per day is limited.

Panamá Viejo

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

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

It was the first of their many mistakes. When the two forces met in battle, the Spanish infantry left their ranks after mistaking a repositioning of some of Morgan’s men for a retreat. The Spanish soldiers ran

DAYS TRIPS FROM PANAMA CITY

Looking to get out of the city for the day? Here are some author-tested suggestions (see Map p101).

- Laying eyes on the awe-inspiring Panama Canal (p100)
- Spotting feathered friends along Pipeline Rd in Parque Nacional Soberanía (p103)
- Visiting the world-famous tropical biology center on Isla Barro Colorado (p106)
- Escaping to the flower-dotted island of Isla Taboga (p107)
- Surfing gnarly breaks along the Pacific Coast (p115)
after the pirates, leaving a high position for a gully. French sharpshooters within Morgan’s band were delighted by the development and opened fire on the Spaniards from nearby knolls. The first volley of musket fire dropped about 100 soldiers, and the Spanish force fell to pieces. Soon after, nearly everything of value was either plundered and divvied up or destroyed by fire.

For the next three centuries, what remained of the abandoned city – mostly beams and stone blocks – served as a convenient source of building materials. Yet most of the remnants of the one-time metropolis were still intact as recently as 1950, when the limits of modern Panama City reached the ruins in the form of a squatter settlement. Unfortunately, by the time the government declared the ruins a protected site in 1976 (Unesco followed suit in 1997), most of the old city had already been dismantled and overrun.

Today much of Panamá Viejo lies buried under a poor residential neighborhood, though the ruins are a must-see, even if only to stand on the hallowed grounds of one of Central America’s greatest cities.

**ORIENTATION & INFORMATION**

The ruins of Panamá Viejo are not fenced in, so you can visit them anytime, though for safety reasons it’s best to explore the area during the daylight hours. So little of the original city remains that its size, layout and appearance are the subject of much conjecture.
The city was founded on a coastal bar alongside a shallow cove. The primary government buildings were at the mouth of the cove, which was rather spacious at the time and could be used as a port. Panamá was also home to all of the major Catholic religious orders – the Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits and Augustines – all of which had churches and convents in town. The best houses and most of the convents were built on the narrow strip of land along the beachfront.

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

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

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

Entry cost depends on what you wish to see, with the higher price including both the museum and a trip up to the mirador (admission US$3 to US$6, children US$0.50). Children under eight are not allowed to go up the tower.

The following places are featured on the Panamá Viejo map, below.

**RUINS**

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

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

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

Immediately north of the cathedral are the massive ruins of **Casa Alarcón**, the town’s best-preserved and largest known private residence, which dates from the 1640s. Just north of the former residence is the **Iglesia y Convento de Santo Domingo**, the best-preserved church of the ruins. The convent dates from the 1570s, though the church was built 20 or more years later.

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

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

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

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

About halfway between Puente del Rey and the Iglesia y Convento de Santo Domingo lies the **Iglesia de San José**, which belonged to the Augustine order. Of special interest here are the building’s vaulted side chapels, an architectural feature seldom seen in Panama.

**MERCA DO NACIONAL DE AR TESANÍAS**

Panamá Viejo buses (US$0.25) coming from Plaza Cinco de Mayo will drop you off at the **Museo de Sitio Panamá Viejo** (Av 6 Sur; admission US$3; 9am-5pm) contains a rather impressive scale model of Panamá Viejo prior to 1671 as well as a few surviving colonial artifacts. All signs are in Spanish, though a brochure and tape recording recount the site’s history in English.

**MUSEO DE SITIO PANAMÁ VIEJO**

The **Museo de Sitio Panamá Viejo** (Av 6 Sur; admission US$3; 9am-5pm) contains a rather impressive scale model of Panamá Viejo prior to 1671 as well as a few surviving colonial artifacts. All signs are in Spanish, though a brochure and tape recording recount the site’s history in English.

**The Causeway**

At the Pacific entrance to the Panama Canal, a 2km palm-tree-lined **calzada** (causeway) connects the four small islands of Naos, Culebra, Perico and Flamenco to the mainland. The Causeway is the popular place to be in the early morning and late afternoon, when residents head here to walk, jog, skate and cycle, or simply escape the noise and pollution of the city. The Causeway also offers sweeping views of the skyline and the old city, and you can see flocks of brown pelicans diving into the sea here most times of the year. Others arrive here simply to savor the pleasant breeze at one of the Causeway’s many restaurants and bars.
CAPTAIN MORGAN
After sacking Panamá in 1671, Captain Henry Morgan burnt the city to the ground, massacred its inhabitants and made off with the richest booty in the Americas, though his infamous exploits didn’t end there. Because his actions violated a peace treaty between England and Spain, Morgan was arrested and conducted to England the following year, but he was acquitted on the questionable account that he had no prior knowledge of the treaty. In 1674 Morgan was knighted before departing for Jamaica to take up the post of Lieutenant Governor.

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

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

At the Causeway entrance, Bikes n More (per hour from US$3.50; 8am–6pm Sat & Sun) operates a booth where you can rent a bicycle.

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

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

At the marina, daily boats leave for the nearby resort island of Isla Taboga (p107).

CENTRO DE EXHIBICIONES MARINAS
Ideal for families, the Centro de Exhibiciones Marineras (Marine Exhibitions Center; % 212-8000, ext 2366; admission US$1; 1-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun), operated by the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI), includes an informative marine museum with signs in English and Spanish, two small aquariums and a nature trail through a patch of dry forest containing sloths and iguanas.

Exhibits include a small six-sided building with sweeping views of the Bahía de Panamá, which was built by Noriega for intimate gatherings. Today it houses a museum containing exhibits on the history of Panama’s indigenous cultures.

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

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

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

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

Sadly, the establishment and preservation of museums is not a governmental priority in Panama City. Those that do exist are mostly the products of extraordinary efforts by individuals who took it upon themselves to move a bureaucratic mountain and create institutions in which Panama’s human and natural histories could be preserved.

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

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

In addition to those listed in the Casco Viejo section (p72), Panama City is home to several other interesting museums.

Moved to a new location, the Museo Antropológico Reina Torres de Araúz (Map p70; ☎ 262-8338; Camino de la Amistad, Curundú; admission US$2; 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) shows the rich cultural heritage of Panama with a collection of pre-Columbian artifacts and exhibits. Unfortunately, much of the best material from this museum is no longer on display.

The small Museo Afro-Antillano (Map p74; ☎ 262-5348; cnr Av Justo Arosemena & Calle 24 Este; admission US$1; 8:30am-3:30pm Tue-Sat) has exhibits on the history of Panama’s West Indian community, particularly their work building the railroad and later the canal.

Museo de Arte Contemporáneo (Map p74; ☎ 262-8012; near Av de los Mártires, Ancón; admission free; 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat, to 3pm Sun) is a privately owned museum with an excellent collection of works on paper by Latin American artists, and the occasional temporary exhibition by a foreign or national artist.

At the time of publication, construction was well underway on the Museo de la Biodiversidad (Museum of Biodiversity; www.biomuseo.panama.org; Causeway), Panama’s new landmark museum with extensive botanical gardens. World-renowned architect Frank Gehry, who designed the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, designed this controversial structure of crumpled multicolor forms. Located near the tip of the Causeway, it is slated to open in 2011.

Panama Canal Murals

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

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

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

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

**Bahá’í House of Worship**

On the outskirts of Panama City, 11km northeast of the city center on the Vía Transístmica, the white-domed Bahá’í House of Worship (☎ 231-1137; ☏ 10am-6pm) looms like a giant egg atop a hill. The inside is surprisingly beautiful, with a fresh breeze always present. The Bahá’í House of Worship serves all of Latin America.

Information about the faith is available at the temple in English and Spanish; readings from the Bahá’í writings (also in English and Spanish) are held Sunday mornings at 10am. Any bus to Colón can let you off on the highway, but it’s a long walk up the hill. A taxi from Panama City costs around US$20, plus waiting time.

**Courses**

**Dance Courses**

You can try open-air salsa dancing at Parque Recreativo Omar (see Map p70), classes run every Saturday at 8:30am. The cost is US$1. To practice, check out Havana Panamá (p94) in Casco Viejo.

**Language Courses**

Located in the suburban El Dorado neighborhood, the Institute for Spanish Language Studies (ILERI; Map p70; ☏ 260-4424; http://ils.com/panama; Camino de la Amistad) offers four hours of one-on-one instruction per day, five days a week. Costs start at US$395 for the first week (including lodging, meals, trips and activities), and then decreases with each subsequent week. The weekly rate without lodging starts at US$265.

Language school Spanish Panama (Map p76; ☏ 213-3121; www.spanishpanama.com; Edificio Americana No 1A, Vía Argentina), gets strong reviews from travelers. It has a similar structure to ILERI’s: four hours of one-on-one classes daily and dorm accommodations for US$375 per week (long-term discounts are available).

**Panama City for Children**

Panama City has a variety of attractions to enthrall and entertain kids. The city’s new Cinta Costera has waterfront paths and a playground. The setting also hosts sporting events and occasional fairs. Another park option is Parque Recreativo Omar, the local answer to Central Park, with greens that were once a golf course.

A perfect reward for a day well spent is ice cream, and Casco Viejo has a parlor, Granclement (p89), that even mom and dad would beg to visit.

Great rainforest excursions abound. At the Rainforest Discovery Center (p106), kids can walk short paths and check out the wildlife from the top of a 32-meter tower. Other good options include visiting Summit Botanical Gardens & Zoo (p103), with kid-focused programs, a small zoo and trails. Alongside huge canal boats, jungle boats cruise along Lago Gatún (p115) fishing for peacock bass or just spotting troupes of monkeys, birds and other animals.

Another interesting day trip, Isla Taboga (p107) has plenty of sand to play in and a cool ferry ride that’s a blast for small travelers.

For more adventure, families can visit an Emberá village in the Parque Nacional Soberanía (p103), tour the old cannon-lined forts in Portobelo (p236), or take a moderate hike
through Parque National Soberanía (p103), or even just in town at Parque Natural Metropolitano (p77) where the chances of spotting a monkey or toucan are pretty good.

The Panama Canal Railway (p233) that links the two oceans provides a lovely journey along the canal and through rainforest. Kids might also enjoy a visit to the Miraflores Locks (p100), especially since the new museum there has lots of eye-catching multimedia exhibitions and is hands-on in parts.

If you need a respite from the heat (or the rain), head to Centro de Exhibiciones Marinas (p81) to get close to Panama's amazing underwater world. Or if all else fails, stroll down to Multicentro Mall (p95) – a mall with dozens of shops and restaurants, a movie theater and an internet cafe.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

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

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

Officially, the craziness starts slowly, with a small parade on Saturday that consists of the queen and her court. Unofficially, the cork is way out of the bottle by then. Vía España fills with people, and everyone is in high spirits and partying in an atmosphere that is sexually charged and free of class distinctions. Music pours from all directions and spontaneous dancing breaks out everywhere. Masqueraded characters cavort among the crowd. Colorful street vendors wander through the throngs of people, and improvised entertainment abounds. The party moves indoors at night – into cantinas, private clubs and hotels – where combos play Afro-Cuban and typical Panamanian music, and the dancing and drinking continue till dawn.

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

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

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

A much newer tradition, the Panama Jazz Festival (www.panamajazzfestival.com) is gaining momentum as one of the biggest musical events in Panama, drawing hundreds of thousands of spectators for a weeklong festival held all over the city. It’s held annually in mid-January. For more information, see p94.

SLEEPING

Panama City has myriad options for visitors, ranging from a very simple cell to dens of luxury.

As Casco Viejo sees extensive renovation, this old-world charmer is becoming an excellent option for lodging. Advantages include the great number of restaurants and cafes and its walkability.

La Exposición is home to a number of standard midrange hotels. This central working-class neighborhood bustles at daytime but you probably would end up elsewhere for dinner and outings.

Fast-paced, modern Panama City is best experienced in the neighborhoods of Bella Vista and El Cangrejo, chock-full of soaring
steel and glass. Hotels here tend toward costly, though you can’t beat the views from high up. San Francisco is another well-heeled neighborhood that is developing B&B-type options.

For those who place less emphasis on nightlife and more on the quiet life, outlying neighborhoods have excellent B&B options. These include the former US-occupied neighborhoods of Clayton, Albrook, Ancón and Amador, which are located in the Canal Zone.

**Casco Viejo**

The following accommodations are featured on Map p78.

**Hospedaje Casco Viejo** (☎ 211-2027; www.hospedaje cascoviejo.com; Calle 8a Oeste; dm US$9, d without/with bathroom US$16/18; P) Every inch of this old hostel has seen heavy use, from the worn tiled bathrooms to bowing beds, but it’s hard to get picky at these prices. The best room is the dormitory, with well-spaced single beds. While service is laissez-faire, perks include a communal kitchen, wi-fi and an open-air courtyard. It’s on a quiet side street next to the Iglesia de San José.

**Pensión Colón** (☎ 228-8506; cnr Calles 12 Oeste & B; s/d US$21/24, without bathroom US$11/14; P) Originally built to house Panama Canal workers, this old hotel is a Graham Greene fantasy, with rickety clapboard passageways and peeling paint, along with incredible bay views. Fortunately, it recently passed into new management and improvements are imminent.

**Luna’s Castle** (☎ 262-1540; www.lunascastlehostel.com; Calle 9a Este; dm/d/tr incl breakfast US$12/28/36; P) Every inch of this old house showing popular flicks. A bit looney and friendly, this is the kind of hostel people get picky at these prices. The best room is the dormitory, with well-spaced single beds. While service is laissez-faire, perks include a communal kitchen, wi-fi and an open-air courtyard. It’s on a quiet side street next to the Iglesia de San José.

**Los Cuatro Tulipanes** (☎ 211-0877; www.locuatro tulipanes.com; office Av Central btwn Calles 3 & 4; apt from US$165; P) Ideal for travelers yearning for a little independence and privacy, the ‘four tulips’ are in fact a set of luxury apartments in distinct Casco Viejo locations. While each is unique, all are elegant, restored spaces with features like handpainted tiles, hardwood details, high ceilings and private terraces. Some have a concierge. Kitchens come fully equipped, and maid service, wi-fi, cable TV and coffee and tea are included.

**Canal House** (☎ 228-1907; www.canalhousepanama.com; cnr Calle 5A Oeste & Av A; ste from US$221; P) Exclusive and elegant, this grande dame B&B is where Agent 007 sleeps when in town filming. Indeed, it is the city’s top boutique offering. The three luxury bedrooms feature fine details such as blown-glass lamps and embroidered pillows. Shared spaces are lovely and service rates impeccable. Though it’s in the Casco, it feels removed, with climate-controlled rooms and double-glass windows that seal out all street noise (and yes, part of the ambience). Green-gold certified, the hotel recycles and separates waste, in addition to using energy-saving lights and biodegradable detergents. They also work with the Cal y Canto Foundation to train and employ Casco residents.

**La Exposición**

Central La Exposición is within arm’s reach of the city highlights, but itself is a very working-class area not frequented by outsiders for nightlife. Given that foot traffic dwindles in the evening, it’s best to take taxis at night. The following accommodations are featured on Map p74, unless otherwise noted.

**Mamallena** (☎ 6538-9745; www.mamallena.com; Calle Maria Icaza; dm/d incl breakfast US$11/28; P) If looking for a small, intimate hostel, Mamallena should be your top pick. Run by Stuart, an over-working, over-playing Aussie, this place nails the mark on service. Desk service is 24-hours and guests get free wi-fi and computer use, pancake breakfasts and access to a DVD library. High-ceiling dorms have air-con at night and the cute motel-style doubles offer considerable privacy. The house itself is homey and cool, on a residential street that’s somehow survived the wrecking ball. The neighborhood is rough around the edges but in walking distance of many hot spots. You can arrange tours and sailboat trips here too.

**Hotel Acapulco** (☎ 225-3832; Calle 30 Este; s/d US$39/42; P) A discerning step up from the standard hotel fare that runs checkablock in this part of town, the Acapulco offers a certain no-nonsense style. Spotless rooms offer air-con, hot-water showers and balconies off the French doors (make sure yours locks).
Hotel Andino (☎ 225-1162; Calle 35 Este; s/d US$39/50; ⚒ Foto) Rooms at the Andino come up short on charm, but they’re big, clean and equipped like a start-up apartment. Request a king-size and you can also get a two-burner stove for some self-catering adventures. If you don’t feel like leaving the hotel, there’s a bar and restaurant, making it a convenient choice to crash overnight between bus departures.

Hotel Marparaíso (☎ 227-6767; Calle 34 Este; s/d incl breakfast US$40/50; ⚒ Foto) If counting pennies, consider that your stay here includes a free airport pickup, satellite TV, wi-fi and continental breakfast. Rooms have bright tropical bedding and smell a bit too much of deodorizer. Try for one on the 4th floor or higher. A chill bar and restaurant is a good place to chat with other travelers.

Hotel Caribe (☎ 225-0404; www.caribehotel.net; cnr Calle 28 Este & Av Perú; d/tr incl breakfast US$52/75; ⚒ Foto) Psychedelic and slightly retro – by default rather than design – this large casino-hotel is good on price but short on atmosphere. Its best feature is a rooftop pool overlooking the city. While central, the neighborhood tends to be a little rough.

Hotel Costa Inn (☎ 227-1522; www.hotelcostainn.com; Av Perú near Calle 39 Este; d US$55; ⚒ Foto) A discernible step up in quality and service, the Hotel Costa Inn offers no-nonsense rooms in a part of town famous for surprises. Good-value amenities include a gym and pool. Try for a room on the 4th floor; they’re notably better than those on the lower levels. Euros are accepted. Guests get a free airport transfer and there’s a travel agency on the premises.

Hotel Roma (☎ 227-3844; www.hotelromaplaza.com; Av Justo Arosemena at Calle 33 Este; s/d incl breakfast US$72/83; ⚒ Foto) Relatively spacious and updated, Roma offers clean, no-fuss rooms a world beyond the drab interiors of its neighboring hotels. If you’re travelling with the little ones, the family-style suites are great value and the rooftop pool will keep everyone’s temperatures down. A pleasant restaurant-bar on the 1st floor serves up a good mix of Panamanian favorites and Western standards.

Miramar Inter-Continental (Map p76; ☎ 214-1000; www.miramarpansion.com; Av Balboa near Av Federico Boyd; d/tr US$330/350; ⚒ Foto) Once the only posh digs in Panama City, this landmark hotel has hosted the likes of Hillary Clinton, Jimmy Carter and Mick Jagger (separately, we believe). Gorgeous guest rooms brim with all the creature comforts. Amenities include a piano lounge, spa and workout center, beauty salon, tennis courts and an enormous pool complete with its own island. Windows face either the gleaming expanse of the Bahía de Panamá or the shimmering towers of the financial district. Since the addition of the Camino Costero, it is a bit marooned between traffic lanes.

El Cangrejo & Bella Vista

As central as it gets, these neighborhoods have no lack of restaurants or bars within walking distance. However, it is also one of the noisier spots in town, with snaking traffic and honking horns dominating the daytime hours. All of the following accommodations are featured on Map p76, unless otherwise noted.

BUDGET

Anita’s Inn (☎ 213-3121; www.hostelspanama.com; Av 2a B Norte; dm/s/d without bathroom US$13/33/39; ⚒ Foto) Affiliated with Spanish Panama (p83), this student guesthouse occupies a plain peach building. While the location is good, the rooms could use some love and personal presence.

Casa de Carmen (Map p74; ☎ 263-4366; www.lacasadecarmen.com; Calle 1a de Carmen 32, El Carmen; dm/s/d without bathroom US$12/30/35, d with bath US$55; ⚒ Foto) Located in a cozy colonial near Via Brasil, this congenial home is lovely and sought-after. Fresh rooms have high ceilings, warm incandescent light and tiled bathrooms with scalloped sinks. Guests of all ages congregate in the communal kitchen, lounge area or on the lush hammock patio. The owners offer a wealth of knowledge about the city and countryside. Be sure to book ahead.

Hostal Balboa Bay (Map p74; ☎ 227-6182; Calle 39 Este No 21; dm incl breakfast US$13, s/d with air-con US$30/40; ⚒ Foto) Though quiet and clean, this central hostel gets less traffic than the competition. Service may not be a strong suit, but doubles are ample and airy. The dorm has single beds without bathroom US$12/30/35, d with bathroom US$55; ⚒ Foto)

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Baru Lodge (☎ 393-2340; www.barulodge.com; Calle 2nda Norte H-7, El Carmen; s/d incl breakfast US$55/88; ⚒ Foto) Tasteful and cordial, this subdued inn sits on a residential street central to the action. Rooms are sleek and modern, with subdued colors and soft lighting. Cable TV, wi-fi, air-con and air purifiers are among the perks. The garden patio has wicker seating, where
continental breakfasts are served, and soon will have a pool.

Executive Inn (☎ 265-8011; www.executivehotel-panama.com; cnr Calles 52 & Aquilino de la Guardia; s/d incl breakfast US$105/115; P ☑ ☑ ) Bustling and efficient, this business hotel is centrally located in El Cangrejo with an endless array of prim white rooms. While rooms are definitely too skinny, we like it because the service is friendly and caring. It’s also the secret spot in the city for outstanding American breakfasts at the 24-hour cafe.

Toscanina Inn (☎ 265-0018; www.toscanainnhotel.com; Calle 1a A Norte; d incl breakfast US$108; P ☑ ☑ ☑ ) The best of the bunch on this hotel-lined street, this newish addition has good service and a modern look and feel. Beds have firm mattresses and brocade covers in ample rooms with flat-screen TVs and leather sofas. You can get away on the 6th-floor terrace, and facilities include an onsite business center, wi-fi and a nice adjoining cafe.

Coral Suites Aparthotel (☎ 269-3898; www.coral suites.net; Calle D; s/d US$110/132; P ☑ ☑ ☑ ) This all-suites hotel is serviceable for traveling executives who require their amenities, or long-term visitors in need of more than a hotel room. Suites are unremarkable yet functional, with spacious bathrooms, bouncy mattresses and fully equipped kitchens. Staff is pleasant and guests have use of a full gym, business center, and 24-hour rooftop pool.

Torres de Alba (☎ 269-7770; www.torresdealba.com. pa; Av Eusebio A Morales; s/d/tr US$119/129/139; P ☑ ☑ ☑ ) These spacious rooms occupy a modern hotel tower in an ultraconvenient location. Service can be a little flat but the rooms feel nice, with marble bathrooms that feature fine fixtures and hot-water massage showers. Amenities include a business center, gym and rooftop pool. A second tower is soon to be added next door.

Hotel Riande Continental (☎ 265-5114; www.hoteleriande.com; Calle Ricardo Arias & Vía España; d from US$149; P ☑ ☑ ☑ ) This well-located upscale hotel has that swinging, tropical style more common to Havana than Panama, thanks to the open architecture, cool breezes and abundance of fresh-cut flowers. The rooms themselves have four-poster federalist-style beds and enough space to do somersaults, though you’ll be disappointed if you get a room in the old tower. If you can afford it, upgrade to a suite and you’ll be treated to eye-popping skyline views from the sitting area, the bed and even the walk-in closet. Of course, the real action at the Riande happens poolside – grab a cocktail and watch it all swirl by.

Sheraton Hotel (Map p70; ☎ 270-0477; www.caesar park.com; Calle 77 Este near Vía Israel, San Francisco; d incl breakfast US$260; P ☑ ☑ ☑ ) This gigantic hotel is like a slice of Vegas transplanted to Panama City: rococo, bodacious and stacked with services – it even has the casino, but is short an Elvis impersonator. There’s also an athletic club and spa, swimming pool, business center, dance club and mall. There are 361 suites on offer here, each of varying shape and size, though all of them boast great views of the soaring skyline.

DeVille Hotel (☎ 206-3100; www.devillehotel.com.pa; Av Beatriz Miranda Cabal near Calle 50 A Este; ste from US$275; P ☑ ☑ ☑ ) The boutique concept is executed impeccably at this sweetheart of a hotel that has won a devoted clientele for its classy, tasteful digs and sterling service. While it’s comfortable and functional enough for the most distinguished executive travelers, it’s also undeniably romantic – a hard balance to strike. All of the 33 rooms are suites and offer luxury par excellence. Among the features in your beautifully appointed room, expect to find antique Thai dressers, glistening with inlaid mother of pearl; marble-topped antique tables set with Louis XV chairs; and the finest-quality US-made mattresses with custom bed linen made of Egyptian cotton and goose-feather pillows.

Bristol (☎ 265-7844; www.thebristol.com; Calle Aquilino de la Guardia; d US$369; P ☑ ☑ ☑ ) Intimate and elegant, the Bristol marks the difference the moment the door is swept open for you. Oriental carpets, flamboyant orchids and precious woods abound, and that’s just the lobby. Rooms are smart and stylish, with some four-poster beds, comfortable chairs and cable internet. The acclaimed restaurant has an award-winning chef whose take on Panamanian cuisine infuses a modern touch. Other five-star amenities include a 24-hour butler service and free mobile-phone loan.

Le Meridien (☎ 297-3200; www.starwoodhotels.com; cnr Calle Uruguay & Av Balboa; d US$380, ste from US$550; P ☑ ☑ ☑ ) Created by 100 artists, there’s cool digital art and even birdsong in the elevator. Yet while daring and innovative, some details of this luxury hotel simply aren’t thought out. Rooms have laminated wood walls and furniture that seems a bit cheap given the all-out setting. A luxury hotel simply aren’t thought out. Rooms have laminated wood walls and furniture that seems a bit cheap given the all-out setting. A luxury hotel simply aren’t thought out. Rooms have laminated wood walls and furniture that seems a bit cheap given the all-out setting. A luxury hotel simply aren’t thought out. Rooms have laminated wood walls and furniture that seems a bit cheap given the all-out setting. A luxury hotel simply aren’t thought out. Rooms have laminated wood walls and furniture that seems a bit cheap given the all-out setting. A luxury hotel simply aren’t thought out. Rooms have laminated wood walls and furniture that seems a bit cheap given the all-out setting. A luxury hotel simply aren’t thought out. Rooms have laminated wood walls and furniture that seems a bit cheap given the all-out setting. A luxury hotel simply aren’t thought out. Rooms have laminated wood walls and furniture that seems a bit cheap given the all-out setting. A luxury hotel simply aren’t thought out. Rooms have laminated wood walls and furniture that seems a bit cheap given the all-out setting. A luxury hotel simply aren’t thought out. Rooms have laminated wood walls and furniture that seems a bit cheap given the all-out setting. A luxury hotel simply aren’t thought out. Rooms have laminated wood walls and furniture that seems a bit cheap given the all-out setting. A luxury hotel simply aren’t thought out. Rooms have laminated wood walls and furniture that seems a bit cheap given the all-out setting. A luxury hotel simply aren’t thought out. Rooms have laminated wood walls and furniture that seems a bit cheap given the all-out setting. A luxury hotel simply aren’t thought out. Rooms have laminated wood walls and furniture that
San Francisco
Similar to Bella Vista, San Francisco is a central, busy location with the added perk of having the biggest green space in this part of the city – Parque Recreativo Omar.

Our pick Hostal Casa Margarita (Map p70; 394-5557; www.hostalcasamargarita.com; Casa 97, Calle Los Claveles; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast US$66/77/110/132; P ☀ ☀ ☀ ) Irresistibly cozy and chic, this is a great addition to the Panama City B&B scene. Rooms in this stucco house are smart and simple, with colorful touches, flat-screen TVs and minifridges. A huge garden and breakfast patio offers ample space to lounge or dally over a complete breakfast with fresh fruit. Guests also get kitchen use and wi-fi, but the real treasure here is the warm Venezuelan family attentive to your every need.

Canal Zone
All of the following accommodations are featured on Map p70.

Hostel de Clayton (317-1634; www.hostedelayton.com; Edificio 6058, Calle Guanabana; dm US$14, d with/without bathroom US$40/35; P ☀ ☀ ☀ ) Reminiscent of an army barracks, this friendly hostel is located on the site of the former US army base of Clayton, a well-heeled residential area. The rooms and amenities here are perfectly suited to the budget traveler, but for those without a rental car or the budget for taxis, the location leaves you adrift in suburbia.

Hostal Amador Familiar (314-1251; www.hostalamadorfamiliar.com; Casa 1519, Calle Akee, Balboa; dm incl breakfast US$15, d with fan/air-con US$30/35 P ☀ ☀ ☀ ☀ ) An excellent budget option, this big yellow canal house offers airy, high-ceilinged bedrooms and a private garden with a dining patio and open-air kitchen. Breakfast comes with cereal or eggs, toast and coffee. Tiled rooms with rod iron beds and sashed windows sport the quirks and creaks of old buildings. The location is just off the causeway, a US$3 taxi ride from the center.

Canal Inn (314-0112; www.canal-inn.com; Casa 7, Calle Ernesto J Castillero, Balboa; s/d/tr incl breakfast US$77/88/99; P ☀ ☀ ☀ ☀ ) Catering mostly to couples and older independent travelers, this personable inn offers excellent service and a selection of snug, bright rooms. Some mattresses are worthier than others. The best room is No 17, sporting its own balcony. While the ethnic decor gets a little overly enthusiastic, it’s still a sweet and relaxing spot.

The quiet neighborhood is ideal for jogging or strolling out to the causeway.

La Estancia (314-1417; www.bedandbreakfastpanama.com; Casa 35, Quarry Heights, Ancón; d incl breakfast US$83; P ☀ ☀ ☀ ☀ ) Perched atop Cerro Ancón and surrounded by tropical flora and fauna, La Estancia is a small cement apartment building converted into a tranquil B&B. Rooms are clean and uncluttered but slim on personality. Breakfasts are excellent, best enjoyed on the patio while gazing upon the Puente de las Américas. It’s a US$5 taxi ride to the center of Panama City.

Albrook Inn (315-1789; www.albrookinnpanama.com.pa; Calle Hazelhurst 14, Albrook; s/d incl breakfast US$99/110; P ☀ ☀ ☀ ☀ ) Set amid lush greenery and removed from the chaos of downtown, this lodging near Albrook airport aspires toward country inn but feels a bit lackluster. The location is mostly ideal if you have an early morning domestic flight. Motel-style rooms have modern decor and flat-screen TVs but could be roomier. A kidney-shaped pool spruces up the garden, perhaps the sole feature that makes the inn warrant its price tag.

Country Inn & Suites (211-4500; www.countryinns.com/panamacanalpan; cnr Avs Amador & Pelicano; d/ste US$135/149; P ☀ ☀ ☀ ☀ ) In a peaceful setting on the water overlooking the canal, this Panamanian installment of the American-owned Country Inn is reminiscent of a retirement community in Panama City, Florida. Cookie-cutter architecture aside, the rooms are fitted out with all the trimmings. The private balconies overlooking the Puente de las Américas in the distance are a nice touch. There’s also an enormous swimming pool complete with hot tub, which casts a resortlike ambience on the whole property.

EATING
Boasting the most innovative contemporary cuisine of Central America, Panama City is a paradise for those who love to dine out. There are literally hundreds of places to eat, from holes in the wall to garden bistros. Reflecting its large immigrant population, Panama City also offers an enticing variety of cuisines from every corner of the globe.

In the past, Casco Viejo was the best place in the city for budget travelers to find a cheap plate of rice and beans and whatever meat was cooking out back. Today, however, the urban renewal of the district has attracted a number of boutique eateries and European-inspired cafés.
The neighborhood of La Exposición reflects its working-class roots, while Bella Vista, the self-proclaimed restaurant district, is the best spot in the city for lightening the wallet and satisfying the taste buds.

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

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

For groceries and self-catering, stop by the 24-hour Supermercado Rey, which has several locations throughout the city, including one in El Cangrejo, and another inside the El Dorado Mall. Panama City is also home to a number of street vendors selling everything from shaved ices to grilled chicken or empanadas.

**Casco Viejo**
The following eateries are featured on Map p 78, unless otherwise noted. You can also find nice restaurants (they tend to come and go) around Parque Bolívar with outdoor seating on the plaza. Plaza Hererra is going in a similar direction though it’s more grungy than glamour.

**BUDGET**
**Café Coca Cola** (Av Central; plates US$1-3; 7:30am-11pm) A neighborhood institution, this old-school diner comes complete with chess-playing señoritas and no-nonsense waitresses. Air-conditioning and TVs broadcasting soccer matches seal its status as a den of the working class. Of course, the real reason you’re here is to eat out without breaking the bank on hearty platefuls of rice, beans and the featured meat of the day.

**Granclement** (Av Central; gelato US$2.50-3.50; noon-8pm) Pure pleasure defines these intense tropical fruit gelatos and intense, creamy flavors such as basil, orange and chocolate, and ginger. A few scoops of these fussy French creations will sweeten a leisurely stroll through the Casco.

**our pick Mercado de Mariscos** (Map p74; Av Balboa; mains US$2.50-8; lunch Mon-Sat) Above a bristling fish market in a new building donated by Japan, this unassuming restaurant is the place to get your seafood fix. Ceviche starts at US$2.50; you can also get a whole fried fish with salad (US$5). The cavernous bowls of ‘Get Up Lazarus’ soup are also worth it, if only for the name (we think it cures a hangover too).

**Diel Rojo** (Av A; lunch US$3.50-6; 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) This art cafe with biting social commentary and quirky folk art would be perfectly at home in Buenos Aires’ Palermo. You can also enjoy a frothy cup of cappuccino, cheesy arepas (savory corn cakes) piled high with eggs, hearty vegetarian soup or spinach quesadillas. Check for art openings or Tuesday night dinner-and-a-movie.

**Frit Arte** (Av Central; set menu US$3.80; 8am-4pm Mon-Sat) A fine lunchtime fix, this casual cafe offers a cheap changing menu with a mix of home-cooked and healthy dishes ranging from chicken and pineapple brochettes to spinach salad or roast beef. You can also get breakfast, a variety of vegetarian dishes and fritura (fried food) such as gourmet carimañas (deep-fried rolls with meat and yucca)

**TASTY & TO GO**
Admittedly, Panama City is not much of a takeout town, but any of these goodies could satisfy an urge to brown bag a picnic to the Cinta Costera, Parque Recreativo Omar or Casco Antiguo, for US$8 or less:

- Baguettes and croissants at bakery and cafe **Petit Paris** (Map p76; Marbella; 6:30am-8:30pm)
- Shrimp chow mein at **Lung Fung** (Map p70; Av Periodista & Via Transístmica) in Chinatown
- Spinach or spicy beef empanadas at **Caminito de la Empanada** (Map p74; Punta Paitilla; 7:30am-7:30pm), Argentine-style snacks
- Chicken frenke, like a naan sandwich, at **King’s Food** (Map p74; Punta Paitilla; noon-7pm Sat & Sun), also an Indian market
- Wine, cheese and deli goods at **Super Gourmet** (Map p78; Av A; 7am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-3pm Sun)
stuffed with gouda or grilled arepas. Service is superfriendly and the walls are lined with kooky crafts and art for sale.

**Café Per Due** (Av A; pizza US$5-8; ☎ 9am-10pm Tue-Sun) Our pick for a quick bite, this casual Italian-run eatery serves scrumptious thin-crust pizzas. Check out the bacon and blue cheese or the fresh tomato, basil and garlic. Mozzarella is not skimmed on. For privacy, try the tiny brick courtyard with a couple of tables.

**MIDRANGE & TOP END**

**René Café** (☎ 262-3487; Calle 7a Este; prix fixe US$10-20; 12noon-3pm & 7-10:30pm Mon-Fri, 7-11pm Sat) With an unbeatable location underneath the shadows of the Iglesia Catedral and overlooking the Plaza de la Independencia, this elegant classic offers fixed-price five-course lunches (US$10) and seven-course dinners (US$20) that change daily. However, the difference is that René emphasizes the international nature of the capital by infusing traditional Panamanian favorites with influences as broad as Pan-Asian and continental cuisine to create some truly unique tapas.

**Manolo Caracol** (☎ 228-4640; Av Central near Calle 3 Oeste; 5-course lunch US$25; 12noon-3pm & 7-10:30pm Mon-Fri, 7-11pm Sat) Manolo’s immerses you in tropical tastes, rescuing what’s native, toying with flavors, paring them down and surprising you. Tiny courses pair opposite flavors and textures, such as beef tongue sprinkled in sea salt, fire-roasted lobster drizzled in olive oil and tart mango salad with crunchy greens. Not every dish sings, but the fun is adventuring through them. Drinks are extra, but there is a fine selection of wine to splurge on. An open kitchen allows you to watch the cooks dodging flames, a lively backdrop to the warm, colonial style with bold art and heaped bowls of fruit.

**El Cangrejo & Bella Vista**

**BUDGET**

**La Tablita** (Map p70; Via Transistmica; mains US$2-8) Classic in the beat-up, run-down sense of the word, La Tablita is a smoking open-air grill with worn checked tiles, surly wait service and delicious charred meat. One ideal pairing is grilled chicken topped with an intense garlic chimichurri (onion and herb sauce) served with a cold Atlas. It also does quick sausages and whole fried fish with plantains.

**Niko’s Café** (Map p76; Calle 51 Este near Via España; mains US$3-8; ☎ 24hr) Spawned from a Greek immigrant who once sold food from a cart, Niko’s has become one of Panama City’s most successful chains, with locations throughout the city. These sprawling 24-hour eateries serve hearty portions of inexpensive food ranging from made-to-order breakfasts, Panamanian dishes and desserts.

**New York Bagel Café** (Map p76; Plaza Cabeza de Einstein, near Via Argentina; mains US$3-8; 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-8pm Sat, 8am-3pm Sun; ☎) More San Francisco than Brooklyn, this fully American creation nonetheless packs in expats with freshly baked bagels, lox and oversized breakfasts. The setting offers jazz, soft sofas and your assortment of laptop geeks.

**Athens** (Map p76; Calle 50, Bella Vista; mains US$5; 11am-11:30pm) Fresh, delicious and casual, this Greek eatery serves warm pitas with hummus, satisfying Greek salads, gyros and pizzas. It’s ideal for families and large groups, with long hours and plenty of indoor and outdoor seating.

**Crêpes & Waffles** (Map p76; ☎ 269-1574; Av 5a B Sur, Bella Vista; mains US$4-7; 12noon-11pm) Ideal for an afternoon pick-me-up or a quick bite before clubbing, this salad bar and crêpe factory has something for everyone. Spinach, ricotta and tomato are a good standby, though sweet crêpes, with fillings such as cheese, apples, chocolate and caramel are delectable.

**Machu Picchu** (Map p76; ☎ 264-5500; Av Eusebio A Morales 16, El Cangrejo; mains US$6-15; 11am-3pm & 6-11pm) Both low-key and traditional, this long-standing Peruvian restaurant offers delicious causas (an artful potato dish), ceviches and a signature dish of arroz negro – rice with squid ink. Start the night with a tart pisco sour made with fresh lime and grape brandy. The setting is a snug stone house with gold mirrors and bright tapestry-covered tables.

**MIDRANGE & TOP END**

**Ozone** (Map p76; Calle Uruguay, Bella Vista; mains US$8-12) Packed with worker bees at midday, Ozone is a local fixture serving enormous portions of good food. Too bad the ambiance is wanting – the dark location, pegged to the side of Habibi’s, was once a garage. But if you’re hungry, a huge salad, wrap or hummus is bound to satisfy, and the chocolate cake is a winner.

**Masala Indian Cuisine** (Map p74; ☎ 225-0105; Calle 42 Este, Bella Vista; mains US$8; 12noon-11pm) Nothing complements hot and humid tropical climes quite like a fiery plate of Indian curry and an ice-cold Kingfisher lager. Cozied up with floor pillows and colorful textiles, Masala offers a full complement of traditional dishes from the sub-
continent ranging from tikka masala to lamb vindaloo, with a good selection for vegetarians.

**Wine Bar** (Map p76; Av Eusebio A Morales; US$9-15) Some say this Italian bistro with an encyclopedic wine list is the best dinner value in town. Certainly, it is popular among the local cognoscenti. The pasta is satisfying, or you can order appetizers such as a plate of soft and hard cheeses.

**Market** (Map p76; Av 5a B Sur & Calle 47, Bella Vista; mains US$9-28) With blackboard specials, brick and bustle, this bistro is more Manhattan than Calle Uruguay, but here it is. Brought to you by the same folks who created La Posta, Market places an emphasis on style and quality. Salads come in oversized bowls and you can top off your order of Angus beef with interesting sides such as creamed spinach or green beans with bacon. It is wildly popular for weekend brunch.

**La Mar** (Map p76; 209-3323; www.lamereciberia.com; Calle Guatemala s/n, El Cangrejo; mains US$9-18; 11am-3pm & 6-11pm) Parading Peruvian classics as haute cuisine, La Mar proves a fun splurge. The atmosphere is sleek and the service snappy. Start with a tart pisco sour – they pack a punch, but in a good way. The degustación plate lets you try four varieties of causas or ceviche. The causas prove delicate and creamy, topped with shrimp or octopus. For timid palates, the arroz chaufa (fried rice) is a good bet; it’s fluffy and flavorful. Dress well and reserve ahead – this place gets busy.

**Ten Bistro** (Map p76; 213-8250; www.tenbistro.com; Calle Beatriz Miranda Cabal near Calle 50 Este, Bella Vista; mains US$9-28) The creation of chef Fabian Migny, this ultramodern bistro is barely a nook in the DeVille Hotel, but the setting is fresh and intimate. Consider the $10 lunch menu – a steal. For serious steaks, there is only one name in Panama City, and it’s Martin Fierro. Top selections include the best in US-imported New York rib steaks, grass-fed Argentinean fillets and locally raised Panamanian cuts. A selection of Chilean wines rounds out your meal.

**Madame Chang** (Map p76; 269-1313; Av 5a B Sur, Bella Vista; mains US$14-18; noon-3pm & 6-11pm Mon-Sat, noon-9:30pm Sun) This upscale Chinese eatery prepares traditional classics like Peking duck and sizzling sliced beef with oyster sauce. We’ve heard reports that it’s hit or miss lately, but it’s a local institution. The setting is Oriental opulence in a historic Bella Vista home.

**La Posta** (Map p76; 269-1076; www.laposta.panama.com; Calle Uruguay, Bella Vista; mains US$11-24; noon-2:30pm & 7-10:30pm Mon-Sat) For contemporary Panamanian cuisine, this is the place. The tropical setting says hacienda, with a breezy dining room decked with white linens and big wicker chairs. A seasonal menu features ultrafresh meats and seafood and quality regional produce. You can start with sashimi-style fish with seared herb crust and choose from flavorful mains such as seafood risotto or wood-fired roasted pork chops from Chiriqui Province. Aromatic mangrove wood supplies the sweet smoky flavor to dishes; La Posta works with a program to support its reforestation. For dessert, try the warm chocolate cake made with organic Bocas chocolate, oozing with simple goodness.

**Restaurante Matsuei** (Map p76; 264-9562; Av Eusebio A Morales, Bella Vista; mains US$11-18; noon-11:30pm Mon-Sat, 6-11:30pm Sun) Matsuei has a long and proud history stretching back over a quarter of a century. It’s easily one of Panama’s finest raw fish experiences – much of the fish is imported from Miami, so you can expect to see everything from unagi (eel) to maguro (tuna) on offer. Non-sushi eaters could try the piping hot sukiyaki, lightly fried tempura, as well as countless other Japanese standards.

**Martin Fierro** (Map p76; 264-1927; Av Eusebio A Morales; steak US$12-20; noon-3pm & 6-11pm Mon-Sat, noon-9:30pm Sun) This upscale Chinese eatery prepares traditional classics like Peking duck and sizzling sliced beef with oyster sauce. We’ve heard reports that it’s hit or miss lately, but it’s a local institution. The setting is Oriental opulence in a historic Bella Vista home.

**Viso 54** (Map p74; 715-0349; Via Italia, Punta Paitilla; mains US$14-28; Mon-Sat) While it has the veneer of another slick bore, Viso is anything but. Don’t skip the starters: the grilled octopus, shrimp wontons and avocado salad with tart mango, are spot on. Service is swift and the restaurant aims to please a range of tastes, from the straitlaced (skirt steak with asparagus) to the adventurous (quick-seared tuna with garlic cilantro and plantain ribs). The squid-ink risotto proves as intense as its color and deliciously rich.

**Eurasia** (Map p76; 264-7859; Av 5a B Sur, Bella Vista; mains US$15-25; noon-3pm Mon-Fri, 7-10:30pm Mon-Sat) This rich, sensory experience starts with a lavish setting complete with marble floors and original artwork. Service is snappy and the daring fusion cuisine includes dishes such as Vietnamese shrimp rolls, and onion soup...
with tofu and duck breast. Entrées similarly span the continents with dishes such as jumbo shrimp in tamarind sauce and coconut milk with rice pilaf or tuna breaded with ajonjoli (sesame) seeds and caramelized in honey.

San Francisco

Parillada Jimmy (Map p70; ☎ 226-1096; Av Cincuentenario, San Francisco; mains US$9-12; ✕ 11:30am-11:30pm) The long open porch with high ceilings and wrought-iron chandeliers lend a farmhouse feel to this Panama City institution. An open grill sears some serious cuts of beef, chicken and country-style sausage. Located in the San Francisco district just east of the Multiplaza Mall, Parillada Jimmy packs in lunchtime diners and an after-work crowd.

Limondillo (Map p70; ☎ 263-5350; Calle 69 Este, San Francisco; mains US$15-20; ✕ noon-3pm & 7-10:30pm Mon-Fri, 7-11pm Sat) Panamanian chef Clara Icaza Angelini cooked at some of the best restaurants in New York before returning to her roots and opening one of Panama City’s top restaurants. The menu changes every few months, but you can always count on a fresh and creative assortment of plates with delicate spices. The stylish setting is enhanced by local paintings, photographs and sculptures (some are for sale).

DRINKING

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

Big areas for nightlife include Casco Viejo, Bella Vista and the Causeway. Via Argentina is an up-and-coming spot – look for new bars and clubs on this fashionable thoroughfare. The district of Bella Vista is home to Calle Uruguay, a strip of trendy bars and clubs reminiscent of Miami’s South Beach. The scene is young and you can expect to pay to play here. Moreover, clubs change hands quick in this neighborhood, so it’s best to ask locals about the latest and greatest additions.

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

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

Our pick Bar Relic (Map p78; Calle 9a Este; ✕ 8:30pm- late Tue-Sat) Wildly popular with travelers and hip young Panamanians, this cavernous hostel bar knows the right thing at the right time. Service is friendly and patrons easily mingle in the ample courtyard set up with shared picnic tables. Not only are you outside (a rarity in Panama City bars) but you’re partying it up next to the historical wall of the city.

Cayucos (off Map p70; Causeway) Located on the causeway, this open-air resto-bar sits on the water with excellent views of the city. While not exactly a bar, it’s the perfect ambience for the first cold beer of the evening or a leisurely drink on the weekend.

La Musa del Chai (Map p76; Vía Argentina) A little bite of Puerto Rico, this tiny watering hole serves the best tapas in town – try the fresh ceviche with mango and hot pepper. Chorizo spring rolls and cod fritters are other house specialties – good nibbling with a cold beer. The hosts are ultrafriendly and English-speaking. To find it, enter the internet cafe across from HSBC and head upstairs.

El Pavo Real (Map p76; Via Argentina, Bella Vista; ✕ noon-midnight Mon-Sat) A mix of Panamanians and expats gather over games of darts or pool at this British pub-restaurant. The old location was made famous by John le Carré’s thriller The Tailor of Panama but pub grub continues to satisfy and there’s occasional live music.

Platea (Map p78; Calle 1 Oeste) With exposed brick walls and a small, intimate stage, this jazz club wouldn’t feel out of place in Greenwich Village. As the night wears on, both bohemians and society folk hit this swinging spot, making for some excellent people-watching over expertly crafted mojitos.

Habibí’s (Map p76; Calle Uruguay) The open patio is a scenic spot for Lebanese cuisine, while the upstairs is a colorful lounge resembling a sheik’s tent where you can imbibe cuba libres (rum and Cokes) after taking a few hits off the hookah. A belly dancer often appears on Friday and Saturday nights to add a splash of color to the scenery.

Lobby (Map p74; Av Balboa) The hip spot to jump start the evening with some martinis, this minimalist bar sits upstairs in the Decapolis hotel. The red lounge chairs, low lights and
modular seating attract a stylish crowd who also dine on sushi bites. It’s considered gay-friendly.

Lum’s (Map p70; ☏ 317-6303; Bldg 340, Corozal Oeste off Carretera Diablo, Ancón; mains US$6-10; 🍹 from 11am Mon-Sat) Occupying an old cavernous hangar that once housed machinery for the Panama Canal, Lum’s is now the expat hangout of choice. Satellite TV, pool table, foosball and a handful of tap beers pack in the crowds on weekends. The menu is heavy on ribs, steak and other grilled mains. It’s located in Ancón on the edge of the canal.

Wine Bar (Map p76; Av Eusebio A Morales) With more than 200 wine selections from around the globe on offer, this is the spot to leisurely share a bottle, with a selection of soft, blue and hard cheeses. Live jazz starts at 9pm most nights of the week.

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

If you’re not looking to get blotto, there are numerous ways to spend a moonlit (or rainy) evening in the city. A good place to start is the arts section in the Sunday edition of La Prensa or the back pages of the Panama News. Panamanians have a love affair with Hollywood and there are many air-conditioned cinemas in and around the city. Panamanians also love to gamble, and there are a few flashy casinos where you can get in on the action. There are also opportunities in the capital to see traditional folk dancing and live performances of music and theatre.

Nightclubs
Panama City has a wide selection of nightclubs – gay, straight, cruisy and sedate. DJs usually pull from a broad repertoire, from salsa and merengue to UK and US ‘80s classics, with electronic music (house, drum ‘n’ bass) liberally added to the mix. Most clubs don’t open their doors before 11pm, so plan your evening accordingly. As in most other Latin American cities, people dress to the nines when they go out – women typically don a skirt, blouse and heels for a night out dancing, while men tend to stick to slacks or designer jeans and a collared shirt. You can be sure that you’ll constantly be surrounded by the latest fashions, so go all out and dress to impress. Note that at most clubs, you’ll be denied entry if you’re wearing sneakers or shorts.

Due to a severe parking shortage, it’s best to take a taxi if you go out in the Calle Uruguay area, even if you’re renting a vehicle in Panama. Also, remember to bring identification with you, as you might be asked for it. Most clubs have a cover charge of US$10 to US$25, though this varies greatly depending on the place, the date and the time. Available in hotel lobbies and bars, the pocket magazine Hip features the newest Panama City nightlife.

Much like the city’s bar scene, clubs come and go, and what’s hot one minute is on the out the next. However, don’t be afraid to

PANAMA CITY AFTER DARK
Panama City’s nightlife scene is arguably the most diverse in Central America. It is a mishmash of martini bars, historic lounges, casinos, strip joints and secret underground haunts, all of which generally start thumping around midnight and shut down, quite candidly, when people are ready to leave.

Three main districts represent the city’s most popular entertainment options. For glamour, hit the diva-dense Calle Uruguay district, stopping in the street late at night for the obligatory spicy Colombian arepa. Cover charges here are ubiquitous as are dress codes and thumping electronic music. Across town, the newly minted Zona Viva, located at the neck of the Amador Causeway, offers a slightly cheesier alternative that’s pedestrian-friendly and based mostly outdoors: expect cheap drinks, security pat-downs, and a primarily Panamanian crowd.

Panama City’s most alternative (and perhaps fastest growing) nightlife district is the gritty Casco Viejo. Set within roughly 10 blocks of cobblestone, the Casco’s nightlife is about as far from sterile as it gets: offbeat bars, Brazilian lounges and hidden salsa clubs draw visitors eager for some neighborhood authenticity.

Matt Landau is the author of www.thepanamareport.com
follow the crowds and use your intuition – there’s no shortage of great spots.

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

Havana Panamá (Map p78; Av Alfaro; cover US$10; ᴡ ᵃ-Thu-Sat) Old school rules this vintage salsa bar replete with bandstand and leather booths. You’ll have to don your finest threads (there’s a dress code) and enter behind a swooshy velvet curtain. A complete salsa band rocks the house.

Sóis (Map p76; Calle Uruguay) Pronounced ‘seis’ (as in the number ‘six’), this club caters to miembros del club, aka, the beautiful people. There’s a fine selection of electronic music worthy of the megaclub scene but a more intimate and loungy vibe.

Li-bar (Map p76; Calle 76 Este, San Francisco) Today’s ‘it’ bar, this upscale lounge is new and cold as a meat locker. Popular with thirtysomethings, it is more chill than other spots, but nonetheless come dolled up to the nines.

Guru (Map p76; Av 5a B Sur; cover US$10-20) Playing a variety of today’s hits in the fog of a smoke-machine, this club sees its good days and is popular among shoestring travelers.

Starlight (Map p76; Calle Uruguay) The lion’s den of karaoke, this older club has no cover, you just have to consume a drink and muster the courage to croon under the disco rays.

Pure (Map p76; Av 5a A Sur) White walls, mattress seating and innocent girl photos heighten the virgin theme at this ultraplush club. Exclusive, it boasts a nice patio where the DJ spins. By the way, if you’re making conversation, it’s named for the English word ‘pure’ (not the Spanish word for mashed potatoes).

People (Map p76; Calle Uruguay) A favored spot for the beautiful people and their hangers-on, this polished club attracts a baby-faced crowd to dance to pop hits.

Zona Viva (off Map p70; Causeway) On the Causeway, Zona Viva is a closed compound hosting a number of nightlife spots, ranging from packed dance clubs to more low-key watering holes. Shop around and pick the theme that you like, be it a pirate bar or an Egyptian club. For some it’s pura racataca (without class), for others it’s a fishbowl of fun. Identification is checked at the gate to the complex, so the area is considered more secure than most.

GAY & LESBIAN VENUES

Maybe it’s an egalitarian move, but the best gay scene in Panama City is actually found at the city’s hippest bars and clubs, not in gay-specific establishments. For some, the gay and lesbian bars give so many ‘all you can drink’ promotions that they turn out to be sloppy spots not all that conducive to meeting and mingling.

THE JAZZ SOLUTION

Once a down-and-out section of the city with crumbling architecture and serious poverty, Casco Viejo is coming into a new chapter. Making a strong push towards revitalization, the neighborhood is home to dozens of new restaurants, cafes, shops and renovated historical buildings. In the midst of this architectural revival, another, less tangible one struggles to take place: that of the Panamanian music community.

Jazz great and native Panamanian Danilo Perez returned here to the musical conservatory where he learned his first notes to establish the Fundación Danilo Perez (Map p78; ☎ 211-0272; www.fundaciondaniloperez.com; Av A 1069), a musical foundation which has generated over US$1 million in youth scholarships. It also sponsors the Panama Jazz Festival, a wildly popular citywide event featuring artists from all over the world.

In an interview with El Casqueño, Perez says, ‘Through the discipline of music we can create relevant leaders and good citizens. We can solve many of society’s problems.’ Youth are chosen from inner-city Panama and all parts of the country, including Colón and the Comarca de Kuna Yala. Some grants take students as far as the Berklee School of Music and the New England Conservatory. Many come back to the music conservatory to teach others and complete the cycle of community participation.

The Panama Jazz Festival is held every January, with a week of events in theaters around the city, culminating in a free Saturday concert in the Casco’s Plaza de la Independencia. The foundation in Casco Viejo also houses a library and music museum and is open to the public (admission free).
Website www.farraurbana.com (in Spanish) lists new gay clubs as well as upcoming parties.

**BLG** (Map p76; Av 4a A Sur) Located in the heart of Panama City’s nightlife scene, this out-and-proud club serves an incredibly diverse clientele. BLG sees its share of top-notch DJs, and it’s hard not to have a good time when there’s a free open bar included in the cover charge (around US$10).

**Cinemas**
Panama City’s modern movie houses show mostly Hollywood films (with Spanish subtitles) for US$4.50. VIP showings, with comfortable leather seats and the option of alcoholic drinks, cost US$10. Most theatres offer half-price regular tickets on Wednesday. For listings and show times, pick up a copy of La Prensa or go to www.prensa.com and click on ‘cine.’

**Alhambra Cinema** (Map p76; Vía España, El Cangrejo) Occasionally screens independent films.

**Cinemark** (Map p74; Albrook Mall) Next to the Albrook bus terminal. There’s also one in the Multiplaza Mall (Map p74).

**Kinomaxx** (Map p74; Multicentro Mall) Near Punta Paitilla.

**Casinos**
None of the casinos in Panama City are on the verge of stealing business away from the mega-casinos of Las Vegas, but there are three attractive and popular houses of chance in the capital city. Most are inside top hotels: the Sheraton Hotel (p87), the Miramar Inter-Continental (p86) and the Hotel Riande Continental (p87).

**Traditional Dance**
A good place to see traditional Panamanian folk dancing is the **Restaurante-Bar Tinajas** (Map p76; 263-7890; Av 3a A Sur near Av Frederico Boyd; Mon-Sat) Sure, it’s touristy, but nicely done just the same. Shows are staged here on Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights at 9pm; there’s a US$5 entertainment fee, as well as a US$5.50 minimum per person for drinks and food. It is highly recommended to make a reservation before dining.

**Theater**
**Teatro Anita Villalaz** (Map p78; 211-4017; Plaza de Francia) A historical spot in Casco Viejo to see live performances.

**Teatro En Círculo** (Map p70; 261-5375; Av 6 C Norte near Vía Transístmica) Plays and musicals are scheduled regularly.

**Teatro Nacional** (Map p78; 262-3525; Av B at Calle 2a Este) Casco Viejo’s lovely 19th-century playhouse stages ballets, concerts and plays.

**SHOPPING**
The city has a number of markets where you can purchase handicrafts native to regions throughout the country (see p37). Here you’ll find a range of handmade goods from baskets made in Emberá villages to molas (traditional textiles) from Kuna Yala.

**Mercado Nacional de Artesanías** (Map p79; Panamá Viejo; 9am-4pm Mon-Sat, to 1pm Sun) In a new location, it’s a great place to shop for memorable souvenirs.

**Mercado de Buhonerías y Artesanías** (Map p74; 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) This bustling outdoor spot is a great place to shop for Panama’s crafts.

**Karavan** (Map p78; 228-5161; Calle 3a Oeste; 9:30am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun) An excellent place to find original Kuna embroidery with modern designs and Congo art from Portobelo, with artisans working onsite. Caravan commissions local artists and works closely to develop new talent.

**Reprosa** (Map p76; 269-0457; cnr Av 2 Sur & Calle 54 Este; 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) Sells quality huacas (replicas of pre-Columbian gold pendants) and necklaces made of black onyx and other gemstones.

**Joyería La Huaca** (Map p76; cnr Calle Ricardo Arias & Vía España) A reputable jewelry store in front of the Hotel Riande Continental.

**Flory Saltzman Molas** (Map p76; 223-6963; Calle 49 B Oeste) Has the best selection of authentic molas – a colorful, intricate, multilayered appliqué textile sewn by Kuna women.

**Malls**
The capital has a growing number of shopping malls, all of which highlight the increasing love of Americana in Panama. Consumerism aside, these air-conditioned spots can be a good place to escape the heat, especially if you’re traveling with kids.

**Albrook Mall** (Map p74; 10am-9pm Mon-Sat, 11am-8pm Sun) Next to the bus terminal, this mall has a cinema, supermarket and dozens of stores.

**El Dorado Mall** (Map p70; Av Ricardo J Alfaro; 10am-9pm Mon-Sat, 11am-8pm Sun) Near one of Panama City’s newer Chinatowns, El Dorado also has restaurants, shops and a cinema.

**Isla Flamenco Shopping Center** (off Map p70; 10am-10pm) Small, but nearby you’ll find the best selection of open-air restaurants in the city.
**Multicentro Mall** (Map p74; ☎ 10am-9pm) Also has a cinema and shops, along with many outdoor restaurants.

**Multiplaza Mall** (Map p74; Via Israel & Via Brasil; ☎ 10am-9pm) The biggest downtown mall, with shops, restaurant and cinema.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

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

International airlines serving Panama City are listed in the Transportation chapter (p288).

Panama’s domestic airlines are **Air Panama** (☎ 316-9000; www.flyairpanama.com/tickets) and **Aeroperlas** (☎ 315-7500; www.aeroperlas.com).

Domestic flights depart from **Albrook airport** (☎ 315-0403), aka Aeropuerto Marcos A Gelabert, in the former Albrook Air Force Station near the canal.

Flights within Panama are inexpensive and short – few are longer than one hour. However, if traveling to the Darién, Isla Contadora or Comarca de Kuna Yala, it’s quite possible that the plane may make multiple stops. You’ll find that prices vary according to season and availability. The flights listed in the table (see above) show the approximate cost for one-way fares.

**Boat**

For Isla Taboga, **Barcos Calypso** (☎ 314-1730; round-trip US$11) has regular departures from Panama City, see p110 for schedules. Ferries depart from the Causeway (p80).
For Isla Contadora, there’s a boat from the Balboa Yacht Club (☎ 314-0571, 6615-1392; local 2; round-trip US$60) on the Panama City causeway every Saturday at 8am, returning on Sunday at 2pm.

The easiest way to reach the dock is by taxi (US$4 to US$6).

**Bus**

Albrook bus terminal (Map p74), near the Albrook airport, is a convenient and modern one-stop location for most buses leaving Panama City. The terminal includes a food court, banks, shops, a sports bar, storage room, bathrooms and showers. A mall lies next door, complete with a supermarket and cinema. Before you board your bus you must pass through a turnstile and pay US$0.10 tax to the terminal.

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

Inside, Información (☎ 303-3040; ☏ 24hr) offers assistance.

Both Panaline (www.viajeros.com/panaline) and Tica Bus (www.ticabus.com) serve San José, Costa Rica; see their websites for hours.

Canal Zone buses with Cooperativa SACA depart from the Albrook Terminal to Balboa and Clayton (both US$0.25), Miraflores Locks (US$0.35), and Gamboa (US$0.65), leaving every 45 minutes.

**Car**

Many car-rental agencies lie clustered around Calle 49 B Oeste in El Cangrejo. Daily rates start from US$35 per day for the most economical cars, including unlimited kilometers and insurance.

Rental car companies in Panama City include the following:

- **Avis** Albrook airport (☎ 264-0722, 315-0434); Tocumen airport (☎ 238-4056)
- **Barriga** Tocumen airport (☎ 269-0221, 238-4495)
- **Budget** Albrook airport (☎ 263-8777, 315-0201); Tocumen airport (☎ 238-4069)
- **Dollar** Tocumen airport (☎ 270-0355, 238-4032)
- **Hertz** Albrook airport (☎ 264-1111, 315-0418); Tocumen airport (☎ 238-4081)
- **National** Albrook airport (☎ 265-2222, 315-0416); Tocumen airport (☎ 238-4144)
- **Thrifty** Albrook airport (☎ 264-1402, 315-0144); Tocumen airport (☎ 238-4955)

**Train**

The Panama Railway Company (PCRC; Map p70; ☏ 317-6070; www.panarail.com; Carretera Gaillard) operates a glass-domed luxury passenger train from Panama City to Colón (one-way/round-trip US$22/38), leaving at 7:15am and returning...
at 5:15pm every day. It’s a lovely ride that follows the canal, and at times the train is surrounded by nothing but thick vine-strewn jungle. If you want to relive the heyday of luxury train travel for an hour or two, this is definitely the way to do it. For more information on the history of this storied railway, see boxed text, p 233.

GETTING AROUND

Bicycle
The only spot to rent bicycles in Panama City is at the Causeway entrance. Both Moses (☎ 221-3671; 9am-7pm Sat & Sun) and Bikes n More (☎ 314-0103; 8am-6pm Sat & Sun) operate booths with rentals starting at US$3.50 per hour for mountain bikes. You can also rent tandems and rickshaw bikes.

Bus
Panama City has a good network of local buses (nicknamed diablos rojos or ‘red devils’), which run every day from around 5am to 11pm. A ride costs US$0.25, and we promise you’ve never seen anything quite like these tricked-out street rockets.

Buses run along the three major west-to-east routes: Av Central–Vía España, Av Balboa–Vía Israel, and Av Simón Bolívar–Vía Transístmica. The Av Central–Vía España streets are one-way going west for much of the route; eastbound buses use Av Perú and Av 4 Sur; these buses will take you into the banking district of El Cangrejo. Buses also run along Av Ricardo J Alfaro (known as Tumba Muerto).

There are plenty of bus stops along the street, but you can usually hail one from anywhere. Many of these buses stop at the Albrook bus terminal, the bus station near the Albrook airport.

Taxi
Taxis are plentiful but problematic. Some do not travel (or even know) the whole city, so don’t be surprised if they leave you standing on the sidewalk upon hearing your destination.

Taxis are not metered, but there is a list of standard fares that drivers are supposed to charge, measured by zones. One zone runs a minimum of US$2; canal zone destinations run up to US$6. An average ride, crossing a couple of zones, would cost US$3 to US$4, more for additional passengers or if it’s late. Always agree on a fare before you get into the cab, or better, ask your hotel to estimate the fare to your destination and then simply hand the driver the money upon arriving. Taxis can also be rented by the hour.

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

America (☎ 223-7694)
America Libre (☎ 223-7342)
Latino (☎ 224-0677)
Metro (☎ 264-6788)
Taxi Unico Cooperativa (☎ 221-3191)