

PANAMA FACTSHEET

Panama is known mostly for its famous canal, but the country's natural attractions offer great birding opportunities, snorkelling and deep-sea fishing. Panama is a proud nation that offers astounding wildlife indigenous peoples and colourful festivals. The country's indigenous name means 'abundance of fish'. Rafters can ride 20 sets of rapids in a single day, wildlife abounds in the scarcely-visited national parks, and a person can snorkel in the Caribbean Sea and swim in the Pacific Ocean...on the same day! In fact Panama has more to offer than nearby, touristic Costa Rica.

Electricity: 110 & 220V, 60Hz

Time Zone: GMT/UTC -5

Dialling Code: 5070

Climate

Panama's dry season is from around mid-December to mid-April. The weather can be hot and steamy in the lowlands during the rainy season and the humidity makes the heat harder to endure. Rain in Panama tends to come in sudden short downpours that freshen the air and are followed by sunshine. The Darién Gap can be crossed in the dry season.

Festival Calendar

Carnaval is celebrated over the four days preceding Ash Wednesday and involves music, dancing and a big parade on Shrove Tuesday. The celebrations in Panama City and Las Tablas are the most festive. The Semana Santa (Easter Week) celebrations at Villa de Los Santos, on the Península de Azuero, are equally renowned. The Festival of the Black Christ at Portobelo on October 21 includes a parade of the famous life-size statue of the Black Christ and attracts pilgrims from all over the country.

Currency

Balboa (B) = 100 centavos. There is no Panamanian paper currency; coins exist in denominations of B10 and 1, and 50, 25, 10, 5 and 1 centavos. US currency circulates freely: B1 = US\$1.

Banks and cambios are available for changing currency. There is no need to exchange US Dollars.

Visa and MasterCard are the most commonly used, but American Express and Diners Club are also accepted.

Visas

Every visitor needs a valid passport and an onward ticket to enter Panama, but further requirements vary from country to country and occasionally change. UK, Germany and Swiss

citizens and many other nationalities need only a passport, while people from Canada, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, USA and more need a tourist visa or tourist card (US\$5) as well.

Please contact your local embassy or consulate for the most up-to-date visa requirements for your particular country.

Health

Take precautions against dengue fever, malaria, rabies and yellow fever.

Best time to go

Panama's tourist season is during the dry season from around mid-December to mid-April.

The weather can be hot and steamy in the lowlands during the rainy season, when the humidity makes the heat more oppressive than otherwise. Rain in Panama tends to come in sudden short downpours that freshen the air and are followed by sunshine. If you will be doing any long, strenuous hiking, the dry season is the most comfortable time to do it.

Upon arrival

Once you've reclaimed your baggage and cleared customs, you will be warmly welcomed to Panama, assisted with your luggage and taken you to your hotel by private air-conditioned minivan/bus. Please do not leave the airport terminal building unless you have made contact with Amazing Peru staff. Also ignore the calls from taxi drivers as your private transport has been provided for you.

Food and drink

Drink only bottled water. Pasteurised milk is widely available. Avoid dairy products that are likely to have been made from unboiled milk. Avoid street food vendors and the cheaper restaurants.

What to eat and drink

To try some typical foods, here is a selection of what we recommend.

French, Spanish and American food is available in all restaurants and hotels in Panama City and Colón. There is a huge selection of excellent restaurants in Panama City, as well as other main cities. There are also several Oriental restaurants. Native cooking is reminiscent of creole cuisine, hot and spicy. Dishes include ceviche (fish marinated in lime juice, onions and peppers), patacones de plátano (fried plantain), sancocho (Panamanian stew with chicken, meat and vegetables), tamales (seasoned pie wrapped in banana leaves), carimañolas and empanadas (turnovers filled with meat, chicken or cheese). Waiter service is the norm. The choice and availability of wines, spirits and beers in hotels, restaurants and bars is unlimited.

Highlights

Panama City: The capital is a curious blend of old Spain, modern America and the bazaar atmosphere of the East. In the old part of the city with its narrow, cobble stoned streets and colonial buildings, most of the interesting sights are to be found. These include the Plaza de Francia, the Court of Justice Building, the Paseo de las Bóvedas along the massive stone wall, San José Church with its magnificent golden Baroque altar and the Santo Domingo Church, next to which is the Museum of Colonial Religious Art. The old historic city with the Salón Bolívar is listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. Overlooking the bay is the President's Palace, the most impressive building in the city; further along the waterfront is the colourful public market. The most interesting museum in town is the Museum of the Panamanian Man north of the market and near the shopping centres. A worthwhile excursion from the city is a visit to Panamá Viejo and its ruins including the square tower of the old cathedral, 6km (4 miles) away. This is the original Panama City which like Fort San Lorenzo was, in 1671, sacked and looted by Henry Morgan.

Boquete

Known for its cool, fresh climate and pristine natural environment, the small alpine town of Boquete is nestled into a craggy mountain valley 38km (23mi) north of David. It's a fine place for walking, bird-watching, horseriding and enjoying a respite from the heat of the lowlands. Flowers, coffee and citrus fruits are grown in the area and the town's Feria de las Flores y del Café is a popular annual festival held for ten days each January. Boquete is a good base for climbing the 3475m (11,400ft) Volcán Barú or visiting the volcano's vast national park.

Isla Taboga

This charming historical island, south of Panama City, has an attractive beach, protected rainforest, and bountiful flocks of brown pelicans. Known as the Island of Flowers for the times of the year it is filled with the aroma of sweet-smelling blooms, it's a popular retreat from the city.

Panama Canal

Both an engineering marvel and one of the most significant waterways on earth, the canal stretches 80km (50mi) from Panama City on the Pacific to Colón on the Atlantic. Seeing a huge ship nudge its way through the narrow canal, with vast tracts of jungle on both sides, is an unforgettable sight. The easiest and best way to visit the Canal is to go to the Miraflores Locks, which offers visitors a good view of the locks in operation. There's also a museum with a model and a film about the Canal. Five-hour boat tours leave from Balboa in Panama City.

Archipiélago de Bocas del Toro

Several of the pristine islands of the Bocas del Toro Archipelago in the Caribbean Sea are protected by the Parque Nacional Marino Isla Bastimentos. The park offers great diving, snorkeling and swimming, and its beaches are used as a nesting ground by several species of sea turtle. The main town on the archipelago is Bocas del Toro on the southeastern tip of Isla Colón. The archipelago is off the northeast coast of Panama and is accessible by plane from Panama City, David and Changuinola, or by ferry from Almirante and Chiriquí Grande.

Archipiélago de San Blás

The islands of the San Blás Archipelago are strung out along the Caribbean coast of Panama from the Golfo de San Blás nearly all the way to the Colombian border. The islands are home to the Kuna, who run the 378 islands as an autonomous district called Comarca de Kuna Yala. They maintain their own economic system, language, customs and culture, with distinctive dress, legends, music and dance. The economy of the islands is based on coconut sales, fishing and tourism, offering travellers good diving, snorkelling and swimming.

Isla Grande

A giant pastiche of exotic Caribbean clichés is squeezed into this 7 sq km (3 sq mi) island, inhabited by 300 people of African descent who make their living from fishing and coconuts. There is plenty of accommodation and boats for rent, but no dive operators or places to rent snorkeling equipment. Visitors are often attracted by local festivities, which include San Juan Bautista in June, celebrated with canoe and swimming races; the day of the Virgen del Carmen, on 16 July, is marked by a land and sea procession; and Carnaval, before Ash Wednesday, is a fiesta of Calypso dancing and songs.

Hotels

All the hotels we recommend are clean, well located and comfortable hotels varying in services according to their category. We rarely use hostels as the price difference is negligible between a good hostel and a hotel. In places like the national reserves areas we do work with some very good lodges. Panama is a relatively wealthy Central American country with a choice of three star hotels to 5* Deluxe hotels, so you are able to choose the best hotels in line with your budget. We will always quote you with good hotels on all our programmes but upgrades or downgrades will be available as per your request. However, as the price will decrease with downgrades, this will ultimately reflect in the services and standards of the hotel.

Flights

Unless otherwise stated, we provide all internal flights in your programme, excluding the airport taxes. We also provide international flights around Central and South America and can quote, upon request, your international flight to Panama. We work directly with the best airlines in Central and South America but are not responsible for any changes in flight schedules or cancellations made by the airlines. This is the responsibility of the airline in question. We will always endeavour to minimise any delays or changes but cannot guarantee a successful outcome.

Insurance

It is a mandatory requirement that all our customers take out adequate travel insurance cover. Once you have obtained your insurance, it is company practice to check the validity and cover of your insurance policy and we hold the right to refuse travel to anyone whose insurance does not satisfy Amazing Peru's stringent criteria. These include cancellation and curtailment, death or injury, medical insurance, emergency repatriation, delayed baggage, loss and theft etc.