

BIG FIVE
TOURS & EXPEDITIONS



Panama

Travel Guide

The following general outline offers practical information, suggestions, and answers to some frequently asked questions. It is not intended to be the definitive guide for your trip. Be sure to check the reading listing included here for more information.

"Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us or we find it not."

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

Panama City ~ Elevation: 43 feet / Latitude: 08 59N / Longitude: 079 13W**Average Temperature**

	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
°F	83	83	84	84	83	82	82	82	81	81	81	82

Average Number of Days With Precipitation

	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
Days	24	13	10	18	26	22	22	23	24	26	26	28

CLIMATE

Temperatures are high across the whole country throughout the year, though cooler at high altitudes. The rainy season lasts from may to november. Rainfall is twice as heavy on the pacific coast as it is on the lowlands of the caribbean coast.

CLOTHING

Lightweight cottons and linens are worn, with rainwear advisable, particularly in the rainy season. Warmer clothes are needed in the highlands.

Laundry can be done at the major hotels at the appropriate charges imposed by the hotels. There are no laundry facilities in remote areas or on cruise vessels.

PASSPORTS / VISAS

passports: for international travel, a u.s. passport valid for at least six months from date of departure, containing **at least** two blank pages is necessary.

Visas: U.S. and Canadian citizens do not require visas in advance. Citizens from other countries, consult the nearest Panama consulate.

Important: please look at your passport prior to travel to insure that:

- 1) your passport is valid for at least six months after the date of travel.
- 2) you have sufficient blank pages for visa stamps that will be added as you travel in and out of various countries.

Please note: pages reserved for amendments and endorsements cannot be used for visas.

TIME ZONE & FLIGHT TIME

time zone: gmt - 5

Flight times (approximate): from panama city to london is 14 hours and to miami is 2 hours 45 minutes.

AIRPORT FORMALITIES

On arrival: upon your arrival, proceed through customs and immigration, obtain your luggage, and exit the airport. If you have booked a complete package with Big Five Tours, a representative will be holding a sign identifying you or him / her. If you have not made hotel and transfer arrangements with Big Five Tours & Expeditions, then please follow the instructions in your final itinerary. We recommend you change money at airports, hotels, or local banks.

International Departure Tax: b20. Children under 2 years of age and passengers in transit to another country not leaving the airport and remaining for under 9 hours are exempt.

Panama Customs: the following items may be imported into panama without incurring customs duty: 500 cigarettes or 50 cigars or 500g tobacco; 3 bottles of alcoholic beverage; perfume and eau de cologne in opened bottles for personal use; gifts up to the value of b50.

Prohibited items: fruit, vegetable, & animal products

US Customs: Your personal exemption is \$800. There are limits on the amount of alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, cigars, and other tobacco products you may include in your duty-free personal exemption.

Regulations frequently change so please contact your nearest Customs office or write the U.S. Customs Service, Box 7407, Washington, DC 20044. For updated information, visit the *Customs & Border Protection* website at www.customs.gov/xp/cgov/home.xml.

LUGGAGE

Traveling light is always the first and best rule! We recommend passengers limit their luggage to one medium-sized soft bag per person or two small duffel bags. In this security conscious era, airline luggage restrictions may change without notice. Also, luggage limits vary depending on ticket class, plane size, destinations, etc. It is always best to confirm with airlines for specific limitations.

Generally speaking, from the US, economy class passengers are allowed to check in two (2) normal size pieces of luggage (each piece measuring no more than about 62 linear inches, which means length plus width plus height), and not exceeding 70 pounds per bag.

Scheduled flights from other countries and within foreign countries generally limit luggage to 44 pounds total, plus one carry-on personal item. Further restrictions apply for charter flights. We will advise you of those restrictions in your final documents.

Most airlines now allow only one carry-on bag in addition to one personal item such as a laptop or handbag. Most bags within the 22 x 14 x 9 (or, a total of 45 linear inches) size restriction will be considered legal carry-on size by major domestic U.S. airlines. Many US airlines check-in desks have sizing boxes within which your bag must fit. Obviously, no knives or cutting instruments are allowed in carry-on baggage.

All luggage should have identification inside as well as secure baggage tags on the outside. *Please note that the US National Transportation and Safety Board now suggests that you do not lock your checked luggage. If a screener has to open your bag, the locks may have to be broken. This applies to flights within the US and international flights originating in the US. This, however, does not address other international travel issues. We suggest that you lock your luggage and bring a couple of spare locks in the event one or more are cut off. But the choice is up to each individual traveler to make.*

CAMERAS & FILM

Photography: Always approach people with an attitude of respect and ask permission before taking photographs. Do not take anyone's picture without permission. Many times it is necessary to negotiate a fee beforehand. The same general rule about asking permission also applies to photographing places of worship, religious festivals, and rural homesteads. Never take any photos of airports, police or government buildings, military installations, or borders.

Equipment: Bring cameras and lenses you are comfortable using. If you get new equipment before you go, do so as far in advance as possible. Shoot and develop at least a dozen rolls before departure to work out problems. And, don't forget your camera operation manual, filters, and a flash unit. Cameras should be packed with good cushioning. The roads are sometimes rough, and vibration can do damage. Make sure you have lens caps for all your lenses. Clean your equipment frequently. Bring along a puffer brush and lens cleaning tissues.

Lenses: A combination of fixed and/or zoom lenses with focal lengths from 28 mm to 200 mm is a good for general travel photography, although you can take excellent photographs with only a 50 mm lens. Zoom lenses such as 35-80mm, 70-210 mm, or 100-300 mm will help you capture the sights in a variety of different settings. A macro lens is helpful for shooting close-ups, but a good set of extension tubes will work well. A 2x converter is also a handy. Point and shoot cameras are nice for a group or indoor shots, but leave something to be desired when photographing animals, scenics, and nature. Bring a small cleaning kit and blower brush to keep equipment clean.

Film: It is always best to bring whatever film you need with you. Film is generally more expensive abroad and it may be hard to locate. You'll be surprised at how much film you use when you are trying to capture all those special moments. Even those not all that interested in photography will probably shoot a couple of 36-exposure rolls per day, and enthusiastic shooters will easily double or triple that amount. Be sure film is fresh and, when possible, keep it refrigerated. A film speed of ASA/ISO 64 is an excellent choice for color slide film. Use this speed when possible rather than higher speed films. There is a noticeable difference in quality that it is worth the extra effort to keep your camera steady at a somewhat slower shutter speed than you would otherwise use. For color prints, there are several good choices, including Kodak and Fuji films (ASA/ISO 100 & 200) for daylight photography, ASA/ISO 400 & 1000 are good for lower light and nighttime situations.

It is helpful to set up a numbering system for your film, marking each roll with masking tape and numbers or letters, before leaving home. This way you can code the rolls of film and where they were shot. It's quite a job to sort through hundreds of pictures with no clue where or when they were taken.

Avoid airport x-ray machines whenever possible and request a hand search of your film. While security people are often obliging, some are not, so allow a little extra time. X-rays are cumulative on exposed and unexposed film so the more times film is x-rayed, the more risk of damage. This is especially true with older machines found in many countries. Lead bags for film are available for purchase and are worth the small investment. Do not have film in your camera because it may be opened for inspection. Recent news reports warn that new explosive detectors used in more than 100 US airports to scan checked baggage will ruin unprotected, unexposed film. This technology will eventually be in place at all airports worldwide. Experts suggest carrying your film in your carry-on luggage and placing film in safety, lead-lined bags to prevent X-ray damage.

Video: If you are planning to shoot video on a safari, be sure to bring plenty of tape and batteries with you. Do not plan to buy videotape in abroad. Videotape is not affected by airport x-ray - only magnetic fields or prolonged exposure to heat will damage videotape. Your battery charger should be capable of automatically adjusting to 240 volts. You will probably have no problem finding a plug in most of the lodges and larger tented camps, but be prepared with plenty of batteries.

Batteries: Put fresh photo-quality batteries in your camera and other electric equipment before you leave and bring at least two sets of spare batteries with you. Your camera will be useless without them, and batteries tend to be expensive.

DEALING WITH JET LAG

With the joys and adventures of international travel come certain unavoidable inconveniences such as occasional lost luggage or bouts of jet lag. In fact, studies reveal that as much as 90% of long distance travelers experience a degree of jet lag.

Jet lag describes that out-of-sorts feeling associated with long flights, particularly those across time zones. Symptoms and severity vary but may include drowsiness, fatigue, irritability, difficulty concentrating, headaches, insomnia, and swelling of the extremities.

The number of time zones crossed affects the severity of jet lag. The internal body clock follows circadian rhythm, which is controlled by the hypothalamus that processes nerve signals. That clock is designed for regular cycles of light and darkness. Depending on the number of time zones crossed, it may take several days for that rhythm to be restored.

But that is not the only influence. Other factors include cabin pressure, stale air, lack of humidity, and your overall physical condition at the beginning of your trip.

Although jet lag can not be completely avoided, there are some simple things you can do to help minimize its affects. **Consider the following for your next trip:**

- Start your trip rested with a good night's sleep prior to departure.
- Drink plenty of fluids -- water and juices will help you to stay well hydrated. Seasoned travelers recommend that you carry drinking water with you and drink eight ounces every hour.
- Avoid alcohol and caffeine, however, just before and during flights. Both possess diuretic properties that promote dehydration. Alcohol also causes drowsiness and contributes to feeling sluggish.
- Once comfortably onboard, reset your watch to the time zone to which you are traveling. This small act helps you begin adjusting to your destination's local time.
- As much as possible, create a dark environment on the plane. Bright lights have been shown to have a strong effect on individuals' body clocks. If necessary, try eye shades and earplugs to help block distractions and convince your body that it is nighttime. Closing window shades and turning off overhead lights may also help. Sleep on the plane if your flight has an early morning arrival time.
- Loose-fitting clothing and comfortable shoes will help in the event you experience mild swelling. Experienced travelers often bring lightweight slippers to wear during flights.
- Get adequate rest before starting on your journey to help minimize the amount of catching up you'll have to do when you arrive at the destination. Once home, try to schedule a day of rest before returning to work.
- Although not always feasible, look for opportunities to walk around while in flight. Do simple isometric exercises (contracting and relaxing as many muscle groups as possible) in your seat. These will improve circulation, help promote increased alertness, and reduce chances of swelling.
- If you arrive in the morning, plan to stay awake. If possible, wait until the local bedtime to sleep. Many people swear that this is key in determining how quickly they adapt to local conditions. You will sleep better and

will be less likely to suffer insomnia than if you nap upon arrival.

- During extended stopovers, showers are sometimes available. Trans-Pacific pilots report that taking a shower helps them recover more quickly from the general effects of jet lag after the flight.

HEALTH

Food & drink: Mains water is normally chlorinated and safe. Bottled water is available. Drinking water outside main cities and towns may be contaminated and sterilization is advised. Milk is pasteurized and dairy products are safe for consumption. Local meat, poultry, seafood, fruit and vegetables are generally considered safe to eat.

Vaccinations: Yellow fever vaccination is recommended for those traveling to Darién. Travelers arriving from non-endemic zones should note that vaccination is strongly recommended for travel outside the urban areas, even if an outbreak of the disease has not been reported and they would normally not require a vaccination certificate to enter the country.

Following WHO guidelines issued in 1973, a cholera vaccination certificate is not a condition of entry to Panama. However, cholera may be a slight risk in this country and precautions are essential. Up-to-date advice should be sought before deciding whether these precautions should include vaccination, as medical opinion is divided over its effectiveness.

Malaria: There is a low malaria risk, predominantly of the *P vivax* form in three provinces throughout the year: Bocas de Toro, Darién and San Blas. The risk of transmission in the remaining six provinces is negligible.

Other: Typhoid fevers are common, but polio is not present. Hepatitis A and E occur. Dengue fever may occur. Rabies is present. For those at high risk, vaccination before arrival should be considered. If you are bitten, seek medical advice without delay.

Health Care: Modern and reliable private medical services are available. According to current legislation covering sanitary matters, Panama offers healthcare facilities to all nationals and foreign travelers who may require them, independent of any reciprocal agreement with a particular country. International travelers are, however, advised to take out medical insurance.

Please keep in mind that these requirements change frequently. Tour participants should consult their personal physicians and / or the Center of Disease Control in Atlanta, for any recommended health measures at the time of travel. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta has a fax information service with updated travel information. You can call 404-332-4565 to receive these documents.

SAFETY

Common sense safety precautions you normally observe when traveling anywhere should be followed to minimize the risk of personal injury or property loss.

Leave jewelry at home! Do not leave cash, traveler checks, airline tickets, etc. in an unattended room, even in a locked suitcase. Most of the lodges, hotels, and camps have safe deposit facilities at the front desk for your valuables. Use them. Be careful when carrying purses or cameras. Do not carry large amounts of currency or valuables. Do not

walk around unfamiliar cities alone at night. Be wary of entering into conversation with unknown people on the street. These are the same precautions a visitor would observe in North American cities. Common sense is the best defense.

Don't carry a lot of packages at once. Purses should be zippered and have short shoulder straps so you can protect them with your upper arm. Wallets and passports should not be carried in your back pocket, and expensive watches, chains and jewelry should not be worn. Don't leave cameras or binoculars in sight of any open window. Do not leave any valuables or money unattended in your hotel room. If you follow these precautions, you probably won't have any trouble. Common sense is the best deterrent to theft.

Please ensure that you carry your passport or tourist card at all times. Never go anywhere (not even the Post Office) without your passport or tourist card. Should you ever be asked, you should be able to present your identification, your passport, tourist card, or visa. Not having it with you could mean a trip to the Police Station.

Pamphlets addressing safety issues abroad are available from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402, or Bureau of Consular Affairs' home page: <http://travel.state.gov>.

TRAVELER'S ETIQUETTE

In addition to looking out for one's own safety, the conscientious guest has the obligation of treating his hosts with respect and courtesy. An effort to speak the local language, no matter how rudimentary, is always appreciated as are good manners and discretion in the use of cameras. Above all, one must remember that the polite guest, in a country no less than in a private home, is obliged to learn from and adapt to the ways of his hosts, rather than expecting them to accept his customs.

Travel necessitates being a good-natured realist as well as a romantic, and requires an agreeable acceptance of situations as they exist, not as each of us might prefer them to be. A good attitude makes for an enjoyable travel experience. If you are this appreciative traveler, we want you with us because we know you'll be a wonderful companion and have the time of your life.

Political unrest is an unfortunate reality in the world today, and sometimes changes to your final itinerary may be necessary to ensure your safety while traveling.

A concern for conserving the remaining natural wonders, boundless beauty, and diversity of our small planet is necessary, and always appreciated.

You are entering the blissful and rejuvenating world of discovery; be open to the experience. Our tours are dedicated to the individual with an inquiring mind. This is a time for you to escape the stresses and strains of your everyday life

SMOKING

We suggest that passengers refrain from smoking in public areas, sightseeing vehicles, and when aboard any cruise vessel while in the cabins, the dining area, or community areas. There are designated areas for smoking on cruise vessels. Please dispose of cigarette butts in the appropriate receptacles / ashtrays. Do not throw cigarette butts on the ground or overboard.

BUSINESS HOURS

- **Banks & Exchange:** M-F 0800-1500, Sa 0830-1200.
- **Business offices:** M-F 0800-1700

- **Government offices:** M-F 0730-1630
- **Shops and commerce:** M-Sa 0800-1900, Su1000-1900.
- **Restaurants:** varies

CURRENCY / BANKING

Panama currency: balboa (B) = 100 centavos. There is no Panama paper currency; coins exist in denominations of B10 and B1, and 50, 25, 10, 5 and 1 centavos.

Exchange: US currency circulates freely: B1 = US\$1. Banks and *cambios* are available for changing currency. There is no need to exchange US dollars.

Credit cards: Visa and MasterCard are the most commonly used, but American Express and diners club are also accepted. Check with your credit or debit card company for details of merchant acceptability and other services which may be available.

Traveler's checks: To avoid additional exchange charges, visitors are advised to take travelers checks in US dollars. Personal checks are not accepted.

SHOPPING

Panama is a duty-free haven and luxury goods from all over the world can be bought at a saving of at least one third. Local items include leatherwear, patterned, beaded necklaces made by Guaymí Indians, native costumes, handicrafts of carved wood, ceramics, *papier mâché* artifacts, macramé and mahogany bowls.

FOOD & DRINK

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. Waiter service is the norm. The choice and availability of wines, spirits and beers in hotels, restaurants and bars is unlimited.

Local dishes: local dishes include ceviche (fish marinated in lime juice, onions and peppers), palacones 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) native cooking is reminiscent of creole cuisine, hot and spicy.

TIPPING - *Tipping is solely at your discretion.*

Restaurants & Hotels: 10 to 15 per cent is customary (in some hotels it may be added automatically)

Taxis: Taxi drivers do not expect tips and rates should be arranged before the trip.

Guides: Your professional, licensed guide / driver, who accompany you, work very hard to ensure that you receive the best Big Five service, quality, and satisfaction. If you wish to reward them for their work, we suggest the following:

- \$5-\$10 per person per day for services rendered by any licensed guide/naturalist.
- \$2-\$4 per person per day for services rendered by driver.

ABOUT PANAMA

Panama borders Colombia, Costa Rica, the Caribbean and the Pacific Ocean. The two oceans are linked by the man-made Panama Canal, cut into a gap between the Cordillera de Talamanca and the San Blas mountain range and stretching for over 65km (40 miles). 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, cobblestone streets, most of the interesting sights are to be found. These include the Plaza de Francia and the President's Palace, the most impressive building in the city. The Panama Canal to the west of the city itself naturally attracts many visitors. An average transit takes 8 hours to complete. Colón is the second biggest city. Visitors should see the cathedral and the statues on the promenade known as the Paseo Centenario. Panama City in particular has a wide range of nightlife from nightclubs and casinos to folk ballet, belly dancing and classical theater.

Constitution And Government: Republic that gained its independence from Colombia in 1903. Both the unicameral 72-member legislature (*Asamblea Legislativa*) and the executive president are elected for 5 years. The president appoints a cabinet of ministers.

Head of State and Government: President Mireya Elisa Moscoso De Arias since 1999.

Population: 2,839,177 (2000)

Religion: Almost all Christian; 86 per cent Roman Catholic.

Fiestas: The *Fiestas* in the various cities are all worth attending, particularly the one in Panama City during the Carnival. This is held on the four days before Ash Wednesday. Others are held to celebrate local patron saints. *Las Balseñas*, a Ngöbé-Bugle Indian celebration held in Chiriquí Province every February, includes feasts and a contest in which the young men toss Balsa logs at one another; those who emerge unscathed may choose their partners.

COMMUNICATIONS

Language: The official language is Spanish, but English is widely spoken.

Phone: IDD is available. Country code: 507. There are no area codes. Outgoing international code: 00.

Post: Airmail to Western Europe takes 5 to 10 days. Main post offices have *Poste Restante* and EMS (Express Mail Services) facilities. *Post office hours:* Mon-Fri 0800-1600, Sat 0800-1300.

Internet: Internet cafes such as Ruta 57 (www.ruta57.com) exist in main urban areas.

ELECTRICITY

120 volts AC, 60Hz, and plugs are the flat two-pin American type.

HOLIDAYS

- Jan 1 New Year's Day.
- Jan 9 National Martyrs' Day.
- Feb 24 Carnival Tuesday.
- Apr 9 Good Friday.
- May 1 Labor Day.
- Nov 1 Childrens' Day.

Nov 3	Independence Day (from Colombia).
Nov 4	Flag Day.
Nov 10	First Call for Independence from Spain.
Nov 28	Independence Day (from Spain).
Dec 8	Mothers' Day.
Dec 24	Christmas Eve (half day).
Dec 25	Christmas Day.
Dec 31	New Year's Eve (half day)

Note: (a) For public holidays falling on a Sunday, the following Monday will be observed as a holiday.

GEOGRAPHY

Panama forms the land link between the North and South American continents. Panama borders Colombia to the east, Costa Rica to the west, and the Caribbean and the Pacific Ocean to the north and south. The country forms an S-shaped isthmus which runs east-west over a total length of 772km (480 miles) and is 60-177km (37-110 miles) wide. The landscape is mountainous with lowlands on both coastlines cut by streams, wooded slopes and a wide area of savannah-covered plains and rolling hills called *El Interior* between the Azuero peninsula and the Central Mountains. The Caribbean and the Pacific Ocean are linked by the man-made Panama Canal, cut into a gap between the Cordillera de Talamanca and the San Blas mountain range and stretching for over 65km (40 miles); the length of the Canal is often referred to as 80km (50 miles) as this is the distance between deep-water points of entry. Only about a quarter of the country is inhabited. The majority of the population live either around the Canal and main cities of Panama City and Colón (the two cities which control the entrance and exit of the Canal) or in the Pacific lowlands and the adjacent mountains

ECONOMY

Panama has a relatively prosperous economy based on agriculture, light industry, revenues from the Panama Canal and the service sector. Over half the land area is given over to agriculture: the main cash crops are sugar cane, coffee and bananas, while the main food crops are rice, maize and beans. Commercial cattle-raising is also prominent. The country has significant reserves of timber, particularly mahogany, and good fishing stocks, shrimp being a major and valuable export earner. Local industries include food processing, clothing, paper and building materials. Panama also exports petroleum refined from imported crude oil. Further revenue is obtained from tolls levied on ships passing through the Panama Canal (which came under full Panamanian control in 2000) and from registration fees for a plethora of 'offshore' companies exploiting Panama's strict banking and commercial secrecy laws (although the Government has recently instituted measures to permit disclosure in suspected cases of money-laundering). Other important sources of revenue include the Colon Free Trade Zone established near the Canal through which 30 per cent of all Panamanian trade passes, an 'open' shipping registry (ie a flag of convenience) and a rapidly growing tourist industry now worth more than US\$500 million annually. A major reform program undertaken during the 1990s saw the privatization of many state enterprises, reform of the tax and social security systems, and the removal of price controls and import tariffs. The economy was stagnant during 2002 with annual GDP growth and inflation both around 1 per cent, although there are signs of a pick-up.

Panama is a member of the Inter-American Development Bank. About 40 per cent of two-way trade is with the USA and Japan; Costa Rica and Germany are the country's other important trading partners. Panama is also attracting growing interest from Hong Kong-based commercial concerns.

HISTORY

Under Spanish rule from 1501, Panama was a pivotal trade route and collection point for Spanish commerce from the New World. This abundance of transient wealth also attracted many foreign pirates and buccaneers, such as Henry Morgan and Sir Francis Drake. Throughout the colonial period, Panama belonged to the Vice-Royalty of New Granada. The region achieved independence in 1821, as a region of Gran Colombia, which also included Colombia Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. However, when Gran Colombia collapsed in 1830, Panama became part of modern Colombia. Unhappy with this status, the Panamanians found an ally in the United States, which had strategic interests in the region – specifically, the construction of an Atlantic-Pacific link. A deal was signed with the Americans in 1846, allowing for the construction of a railway. But it was not until 1903 and the achievement of full independence that the Americans embarked on the construction of the Panama Canal. Colombia withheld recognition of the new state until 1921, when the USA agreed to pay compensation of US\$25 million.

The Panama Canal Zone became an American Protectorate. The canal was completed on 15 August 1914, although Panama remained under effective American control until 1939. The country's domestic politics were reasonably stable until the 1968 military coup, led by General (later Brigadier-General) Omar Torrijos Herrera. He held effective power, despite surrendering the presidency during his later years, until his death in plane crash in 1981. Four years earlier, the Americans had agreed to turn over the canal to full Panamanian control at the turn of the century.

During most of the 1980s, the country was run by Torrijos' former intelligence chief, now the head of the armed forces, Manuel Noriega. The general's policies and his personal activities, including alleged involvement in drug trafficking, produced very strained relations with the USA. American development aid and military assistance were cut but with little effect. US intervention became more likely after the Panamanian presidential election of May 1989. This was won by the principal opposition candidate, Guillermo Endara Galimany, who took 62 per cent of the vote. However, the election was almost immediately annulled. After an attempted coup in October 1989 – believed to have had US backing – Endara was quickly crushed by Noriega's forces. The only means of getting rid of the troublesome dictator was military intervention. So, in December 1989, US President Bush authorized an invasion of the country. After a few days of fierce fighting, US forces secured control of the country and the capture of Noriega, who had taken refuge with the Papal Nuncio. As Noriega was flown to the USA – where, in April 1992, he was tried, convicted and sentenced to 40 years of imprisonment – Guillermo Endara was installed as the head of a new administration drawn from the ADOC coalition, which had won the May 1989 election. After a slow start caused by chronic lack of finance, the Endara government gradually started to put the country back on its feet. Early discontent was reflected in a number of coup attempts during 1991 and 1992, although all were easily subdued.

Endara's term ended in 1994. At the presidential election held that May, the victor was Ernesto Perez Balladares, backed by a three-party centre-left coalition under

the banner of Pueblo Unido. Five years later, Panamanians reverted to the conservative bloc, which took control of the national assembly, where a four-party coalition is in government. The party leader, Mireya Elisa Rodríguez, also won the presidential race. Rodríguez presided over the defining event in recent Panamanian politics – the return of the Panama Canal Zone to Panama under the terms of the agreement negotiated by the Panamanians and the US Carter administration in 1980. (The prospect of Noriega enjoying unrestricted control of the canal had been an

REGIONS AROUND PANAMA

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.

Panama Canal: The Panama Canal, to the west of the city, is Panama's main tourist attraction and naturally draws many visitors; recommended is a train or bus ride alongside or a boat trip on the Canal – the scenery is beautiful, and the mechanics of the Canal equally fascinating. There is a new Panama Canal Museum in the Casco Viejo area. The Canal was opened in 1914, and an average transit takes eight hours to complete. On December 31 1999, Panama took over full control of the canal from the USA. Some 50km (30 miles) northwest of the capital lies Barro Colorado, the largest island in Gatun Lake, a man-made stretch of water created during the construction of the Panama Canal (and one of the world's largest artificial lakes). The island is a biological reserve managed by the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute and reputed to be one of the world's leading natural tropical laboratories. Day trips to the island from Panama City take visitors to the small town of **Gamboa** from where special tours (either on foot or by boat) can be arranged.

Balboa: A rather Americanized suburb between the Canal quays and Ancón Hill. An hour's launch ride away is the island of Taboga, where fine beaches and quality hotels abound. The main method of transport is by water taxi, known locally as panga. A longer trip by launch is necessary to get to the Pearl Islands, which are visited mainly by sea-anglers.

Bocas Del Toro: The Bocas del Toro province lies in the northwest of the country and includes an archipelago (of the same name) consisting of seven large islands and hundreds of smaller ones. Many of the islands lie in the Laguna de Chiriqui, which is particularly popular with diving enthusiasts. Parts of the province are located in two national parks: the International Friendship Park, administered jointly by Panama and Costa Rica; and the Bastimientos Island Marine Park, a

important reason behind the US invasion). Despite obvious US irritation at the unusual phenomenon of ceding territory to a foreign government, the USA pulled out on schedule, in a low-key ceremony in December 1999. Since the Panamanians took over the canal, the main development has been the announcement of a restriction on the draught of vessels using it. This is due to a regional drought, for which the weather phenomenon known as El Niño is held responsible.

marine nature reserve located on one of the islands. Small planes from Panama City arrive daily at the town of Bocas del Toro and, although the area currently remains fairly undeveloped, it is being targeted for major tourist development.

Chiriqui: Located some 450km (270 miles) west of the capital, the Chiriqui province is characterized by volcanic highlands with many waterfalls, rivers and spectacular mountain scenery and is known for its cattle and thoroughbred horses as well as banana and coffee plantations. The province also contains the dormant Baru Volcano (3,475m/11,400 ft), located near the popular resort town of Boquete and the mountain resort Cerro Punta. Also nearby is the Baru National Park, famous for its many Quetzal birds. There are several daily flights from Panama City arriving at David (travel time – 1 hour).

Colón: The second-biggest city in Panama lies on the Caribbean end of the Canal, visitors should see the cathedral and the statues on the promenade known as the Paseo Centenario. Front Street is famous as a shopping centre for duty-free luxuries, though it is now rather run down. The city is bustling and quite rough – most visitors just pass through rather than spend a lot of time here.

Darién Gap: This is a sparsely populated wilderness area linking central and southern America and also the only break in the Pan-American Highway (which runs from Alaska to Argentina). Much of this region lies within the Darién National Park, which contains an exceptional variety of habitats, ranging from sandy beaches, rocky coasts, mangroves and swamps to tropical rainforest. The park is also home to two Choco Indian tribes. Trips to the park are available, but visitors are strongly advised to use an experienced guide; the area around the Colombian border, in particular, is a dangerous guerrilla flash point and kidnappings of Western tourists have been reported.

San Blas Islands: An interesting trip can be made from Colón to the San Blas archipelago which comprises 365 islands. It is the home of the Cuna people, the most politically organised of the native groups in Panama, who live on about 40 of the islands and who administer their own autonomous province. The Cuna also operate the region's hotels and can assist visitors in organising trips to nearby villages. There are no roads, but small planes fly to several landing strips. For details on how to organise overnight stays, contact the Panamanian Institute of Tourism.

Portobelo: Situated 48km (30 miles) east of Colón, Portobelo was a Spanish garrison town for two centuries with three large stone forts facing the entrance to the harbour. Also in the town are an old Spanish cannon, and the treasure house where gold and silver from Peru and Bolivia were stored before being shipped to Spain. Along the Caribbean coast, between Portobelo and San Lorenzo, are numerous notable 17th- and 18th-century military fortifications.

Azuero Peninsula: Much more relaxed and peaceful than Panama's cities is the Pacific Peninsula de Azuero, where charming small colonial towns, quiet villages and near-empty beaches await visitors who do not expect to find big hotels.

SUGGESTED READING LIST

In addition to the many comprehensive and readily available guides produced by Lonely Planet, Fodor, Insight, The Rough Guide, and others, there are many books relating to Panama. Here are a few selections we thought might interest you. These books may be obtained through most bookstores or on the World Wide Web.

Path Between the Seas:

The Creation of the Panama Canal, 1870-1914

by David McCullough

On December 31, 1999, after nearly a century of rule, the United States officially ceded ownership of the Panama Canal to the nation of Panama. That nation did not exist when, in the mid-19th century, Europeans first began to explore the possibilities of creating a link between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans through the narrow but mountainous isthmus; Panama was then a remote and overlooked part of Colombia.

All that changed in 1848, when prospectors struck gold in California. A wave of fortune seekers descended on Panama from Europe and the eastern United States, seeking quick passage on California-bound ships in the Pacific, and the Panama Railroad, built to serve that traffic, was soon the highest-priced stock listed on the New York Exchange. To build a 51-mile-long ship canal to replace that railroad seemed an easy matter to some investors. But, as McCullough notes, the construction project came to involve the efforts of thousands of workers from many nations over four decades; eventually those workers, laboring in oppressive heat in a vast malarial swamp, removed enough soil and rock to build a pyramid a mile high. In the early years, they toiled under the direction of French entrepreneur Ferdinand de Lesseps, who went bankrupt while pursuing his dream of extending France's empire in the Americas. The United States then entered the picture, with President Theodore Roosevelt orchestrating the purchase of the canal--but not before helping foment a revolution that removed Panama from Colombian rule and placed it squarely in the American camp.

THE PANAMA HAT TRAIL

by Tom Miller, Tony Hillerman (Foreword)

This book draws a wonderful and accurate picture of South America, in particular Ecuador, as seen through the eyes of a Westerner. Especially for anyone who has back-packed in these areas in the seventies and eighties, the country comes alive and one finds oneself transported back there through the author's straightforward style, gentle humor and empathy with the people and landscape. The story of the making of Panama hats, from growing the straw through to retailing the product in quality outlets throughout the States is fascinating. The life styles, understanding and expectations of the various people in the chain are portrayed in a way that captures the imagination and surrounds the reader with their reality. At the same time, one's awareness is drawn in a gentle manner and without accusation, to the situation of the "plebs" of third world countries, exploited by and dependent on the West. A satisfying book to read, it was very interesting and an enjoyable way to learn some of the history of the area.

PANAMA

by Carlos Ledson Miller

PANAMA captures the sweep of this country's tumultuous history. Moving between past and present--from pivotal events in Panama's past to the American withdrawal in 1999--this is the fast-paced saga of a man and a nation searching for their identities.

THE PANAMA CANAL (WONDERS OF THE WORLD)

by Fernando Rangel (Illustrator), Elizabeth Mann

Grades 3 - 6: A solid, approachable introduction to the often amazing story of the Panama Canal, complete with full-color illustrations and historical photos. Mann traces the starts and stops of the undertaking from its French origins to its completion by the Americans, fueled throughout by the labor of workers from all over the world. The construction of the canal, with its locks and dams, is not an easy subject to relate. However, the author manages to render the technical language in the simplest of terms. She also addresses the unfair working and living conditions of the many laborers from the Caribbean. A pull-out illustration of how the canal works is included. Tim McNeese's *The Panama Canal* (Lucent, 1997) is more thorough, but for younger readers, Mann's book more than suffices.

CLOTHING / PACKING CHECKLIST

Check the items below to be taken with you on your trip. Additional items may be added in the blank spaces provided. This is not intended as an all-inclusive list, but only as a suggested packing guide.

CLOTHING - WOMEN

- Comfortable outfit for air travel
- Sandals or casual shoes
- Walking shoes or tennis shoes
- Rubber thongs (shower)
- Hat
- Windbreaker or jacket
- Pullover sweater or sweatshirt
- Long pants *
- Shorts *
- Socks
- Short sleeve shirts *
- Long sleeve shirts *
- T-shirts
- Pajamas
- Light-weight robe/cover-up
- Swim-suit/cover-up
- Casual slacks/skirt
- Blouses
- Belt(s)
- Underwear
- Scarves
- Costume Jewelry

CLOTHING - MEN

- Comfortable outfit for air travel
- Sandals or casual shoes
- Walking shoes or tennis shoes
- Rubber thongs (showers)
- Hat
- Windbreaker or jacket
- Pullover sweater or sweatshirt
- Long pants *
- Shorts *
- Underwear
- Socks
- Short sleeve shirts *
- Long sleeve shirts *
- T-Shirts
- Pajamas
- Light weight robe/cover-up
- Swim trunks
- Casual slacks
- Shirts
- Belt(s)

* ***Clothing should be comfortable***

TOILETRIES

- Anti-malarial pills
- Vitamins
- Aspirin/Tylenol
- Motion sickness pills
- Short-acting sleeping pills
- Decongestant
- Antibiotic
- Lomotil / Pepto-Bismol
- Antacid
- Antibiotic ointment
- Insect repellent
- Sun screen/Sun block
- Lip balm
- Shampoo & Conditioner
- Prescription medications
- Band-Aids
- Deodorant
- Toothpaste & toothbrush
- Feminine Hygiene supplies
- Dental floss
- Mouthwash
- Hairbrush/comb
- Razor
- Q-Tips/cotton balls
- Nail clippers
- Nail file
- Tweezers
- Make-up
- Hand lotion

CAMERA EQUIPMENT

- Extra Batteries/Charger
- Camera/Lenses
- Stick-on labels for film
- Plenty of film
- Lead Protective Film Bags
- Camera bag
- Lens filters
- Cleaning Fluid/Tissues
- Lens Brush/Puffer
- Flash & Flash batteries
- Zip-lock bags
- Camera instruction book
- Video camera / Charger
- Blank Video Tapes

SUNDRIES

- Passport
- International Certificate
- Vaccinations-Health Card
- Airline tickets/vouchers
- Money Pouch
- Credit Cards
- Travelers Checks
- Small calculator
- Sunglasses
- Prescription glasses
- Eyeglass case
- Converter/plug set
- Small Alarm Clock
- Binoculars
- Small flashlight
- Sewing kit
- Small scissors
- Kleenex
- Handi-wipes
- Zip-lock bags
- Travel clothes line
- Pillowcase for dirty clothes
- Small notebook or journal
- Pen
- Deck of cards
- Books/Magazines
- Address book for postcards
- Photocopy of passport & Airline tickets
- Hard candy
- Bandana
- Extra small, collapsible bag
- Neck pillow for airline travel

OTHER

NOTES