

BIG FIVE®

TOURS & EXPEDITIONS

Enriching Lives Through Distinctive Journeys

Destination Information Guide

Panama



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Welcome to the World of Big Five!

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.

Big Five Tours & Expeditions is pleased to welcome you on this exciting adventure. We take great care to insure that your travel dreams and expectations are well met. Our distinctive journeys allow you to experience the finest aspects each destination has to offer. We also aim to provide you with a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the places you'll visit and the people you'll meet.



Panama City, Panama

Elevation: 43 feet Latitude: 08 59N Longitude: 079 13W

Average Temperature

Years on Record: 13

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

Average High Temperature

Years on Record: 13

YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	
°F	87	89	90	90	89	87	86	87	86	86	85	86	87

Average Low Temperature

Years on Record: 13

YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
°F	77	76	76	77	78	78	77	77	77	76	76	76

WEATHER

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.

TIME ZONE

Eastern Standard Time (EST), GMT – 5

PASSPORTS & VISAS

Passports: For international travel, a passport valid for at least six months from date of departure, containing at least 3 blank pages are necessary.

Visas: Many countries require travelers to obtain visas prior to arrival. Big Five Tours & Expeditions has appointed Trivisa to process required visas for our passengers. You can find the necessary forms from Trivisa's website at: www.trivisa.com. Please use account code JP1551, and follow the directions.

Important: Even if you do not need a visa prior to departure, please check your passport well in advance of departure to insure:

- 1) It is valid for at least six months after the date of travel.
- 2) You have sufficient blank pages for visa/entry 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.*

Note: Remember to carry with you in a safe place photocopies of all important documents in the event your passport or other documents are lost or stolen. Also, it's a good idea to have a passport photo with you. As a tourist, you will need to produce your passport when booking in at hotels, changing money or travelers' checks and prove your identity whenever requested by a policeman.

AIRPORT FORMALITIES

Upon arrival, proceed through immigration and baggage claims and customs. *Upon arrival at the International Airport, you will need to clear immigration. Please make sure you have filled in your immigration entry form (\$5.00 tourist card) and customs declarations form (available at check-in at the airport or onboard the plane).* Big Five personnel or their representatives will assist you with your baggage, escort you to your hotel, and assist with check-in.

Departure tax: US\$40.00 departure tax on all passengers of international flights leaving Panama City; payable at the airline counter.
Note: Some international airlines already included this tax.

Important notice: For the domestic flights:

- Each passenger is entitled to carry 25 pounds of baggage (12.5 kilograms)
- Hand baggage on all flights should not exceed 5 pounds.

The international airport in Panama City has excellent duty free shops.

PANAMA CUSTOMS

The following items may be imported into Panama without incurring customs duty:

- 500 cigarettes or 50 cigars or 500g tobacco.
- Three bottles of alcoholic beverage.
- Perfume and eau de cologne in opened bottles for personal use.
- Gifts up to the value of B/.50.

PROHIBITED IMPORTS

Fruit, vegetable and meat animal products including shrimp larvae, post larvae and normal shrimp.

U.S. CUSTOMS

Returning U.S. residents are allowed to bring back \$800 worth of merchandise duty-free. There are limits on some items. Regulations frequently change. For a list of exempt items and more information contact your nearest Customs office or write the U.S. Customs Service, Box 7407, Washington, DC 20044.

HEALTH REQUIREMENTS

International travelers should be in generally good health. Talk with your personal physician about any shots or boosters recommended depending on your personal health profile and your itinerary. Tetanus and polio vaccines should be up to date. No immunizations are currently required for entering Panama.

All vaccinations that you do have should be recorded on an International Health Certificate, available from your physician or health department.

- If you are coming from any area other than the United States, Europe, or Canada.
- If you are traveling between countries, and one of those countries have areas where Yellow Fever can be found.

Malaria risk exists throughout the year, mostly in the benign vivax form, in the rural areas below 700m, especially in the cantons of Matina, Los Chiles (Alajuela province) and Talamanca (Limón province). Lower transmission risk exists in 20 cantons in the provinces of Guanacaste, Alajuela and Heredia. There is negligible or no risk of malaria in the other cantons of the country. There have been many confirmed cases of dengue fever in the areas of Puntarenas and Guanacaste on the Pacific Coast, and Limón on the Atlantic Coast. Travelers should take prevention measures against mosquito bites, by using repellents and by wearing sleeved shirts and long trousers.

Other risks: Hepatitis A, B and C occur. Paragonimiasis (oriental lung fluke) and lymphatic and bancroftian filariasis have been reported in Costa Rica. Cutaneous and mucocutaneous leishmaniasis have also been reported. Rabies is widespread throughout Central America. For those at high risk, vaccination before arrival should be considered.

Please note: If you are on medication, be sure to bring enough for the duration of the trip. Prescription medicines should always be carried in their original containers in your hand luggage. If you wear contact lenses or glasses, we suggest you bring an extra pair and cleaning fluid.

Health insurance is strongly advised during any foreign travel. *Please check the latest regulations with your local health office or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention hotline for international travelers at 1-877-FYI-TRIP (1-877-394-8747); fax: 1-888-CDC-FAXX (1-888-232-3299), or their main telephone number in Atlanta, 404-332-4559. To receive these documents, call 404-332-4565 and follow the prompts. You can also visit the CDC's website at www.cdc.gov/travel.*

CLOTHING

*For general clothing information, please review the **Travel Handbook** in your pre-departure materials. See pre-departure information for general packing check list.*

In general, lightweight, fast-drying clothing is preferable. Many people choose all cotton but cotton/synthetic blends are also cool to wear. Rainwear is advisable, particularly in the rainy season. Warmer clothes are needed in the highlands. City attire: Even though Panama is generally an informal city, we recommend that men wear pants (jeans are suitable), and women skirts, pants or Bermuda-length shorts. For the evening meal, men should wear nice slacks and a cotton shirt. Women will feel comfortable in a nice, casual evening outfit. The highland areas can be cold, and a sweater is recommended. For the lowland jungle areas light, loose-fitting shirts and long pants are essential. If hiking in the national parks, bring two pairs of boots or hiking shoes, since one pair can be worn while the other dries from the previous day's use. Sunglasses and a hat or cap are essential. If you are planning to go river rafting, make sure you wet shoes. At all-inclusive beach resorts, resort wear is best; casual is the rule.

LUGGAGE

*For general baggage information, please review the **Travel Handbook** in your pre-departure materials.*

Please note that as of this writing the luggage restriction on domestic flights within Panama is 25 pounds per person, including carry-on.

Hand baggage on all flights should not exceed 5 pounds. Limits are always set by each government and are subject to change without notice.

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

MONEY

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.

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.

LANGUAGE

Spanish is the official language, however, English is widely spoken, particularly in urban centers, and a growing number of professionals in the tourism business speak French, German and other languages.

ELECTRICITY

120 volts AC, 60Hz, and plugs are the flat two-pin American type. US electrical items can be used without adapters.

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 should be done at your discretion and as a reward for good or exceptional service.

For general tipping guidelines please refer to: www.cntraveler.com/travel-tips/travel-etiquette/2008/12/Etiquette-101-Tipping-Guide

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.

Shopping hours: Mon-Sat 0900-2000. Some supermarkets are open 24-hours

OVERVIEW 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.

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, cobblestoned 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 colorful public market. The most interesting museum in town is the Museum of the Panamanian Man north of the market and near the shopping centers. 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.

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 Bastimentos Island Marine Park, a 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.

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.

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 organized 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 organizing trips to nearby villages. There are no roads, but small planes fly to several landing strips. For details on how to organize 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 harbor. 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

Many comprehensive and readily available guides produced by Lonely Planet, Fodor, Insight, The Rough Guide, etc., many books relating this destination. Here are a few selections we thought might interest you. Longitude Books at <http://www.longitudebooks.com> has an extensive collection of books, searchable by country.

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.

PANAMA

By Carlos Ladson 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.

RIVER OF RUIN

By Jack Du Burl

In the heart of Panama, a volcanic lake feeds a serpentine river - its stone banks laid by the Incas, who took back the gold and jewels plundered from them by the conquistadors. Legend has it that the Twice-Stolen Treasure has been buried for centuries in the Panamanian jungle. Discovering it means surviving the black waters of the River of Ruin... It begins at a Paris auction house, with a favor granted by an old high school friend to geologist Philip Mercer: the opportunity to buy a rare diary written during the French attempt at digging the Panama Canal. But Mercer isn't the only one who wants it. Three Chinese assassins have been dispatched to get it, forcing Mercer into a subterranean game of cat and mouse. Mercer realizes he has uncovered an intricate Chinese plot to trigger a deadly shift in the world's balance of power.

Panama

By Shelby Hiatt

Young Adult

She is fifteen, ready for something- anything- to happen. What happens is Panama. The U.S. government has asked her father to help build the canal. The whole family will go, be a part of this historical event. But Panama isn't as she imagines. Americans live in the Zone, which has been designed to look and feel just like an American town.