

Panama

By Tom Kirvan

THE BRIDGE OF THE AMERICAS

Panama, a narrow strip of land connecting Central and South America, is a country of rich biodiversity, fascinating history, and vibrant culture. Known for its famed Panama Canal, Panama offers much more than just a passageway for ships. From cosmopolitan cities and pristine beaches to lush rainforests and indigenous heritage, Panama is a destination that promises unforgettable experiences for every traveler.

Panama has a population of approximately 4.4 million people, with a mix of indigenous groups, mestizos (mixed European and Indigenous ancestry), Afro-Panamanians, and people of European and Asian descent. This cultural blend is reflected in Panama's cuisine, music, and festivals.

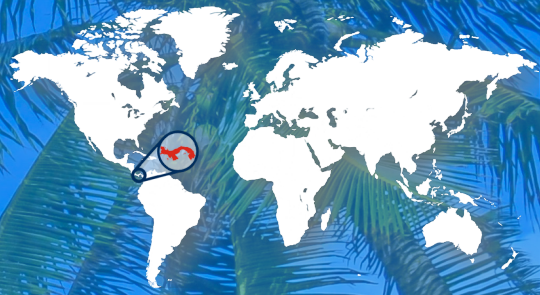
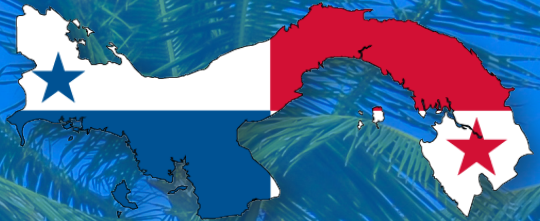
Geographically, Panama is a land of contrasts. Bordered by Costa Rica to the west and Colombia to the east, it has coastlines along both the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. The country is known for its mountainous interior, dense rainforests, and extensive river systems. The Panama Canal, a marvel of engineering, cuts through the country and plays a pivotal role in global trade. The Darién Gap, a dense and roadless swath of jungle, marks the boundary between Panama and Colombia and is one of the most biologically diverse regions in the world.

Panama's history is deeply tied to its strategic location. Indigenous peoples, including the Guna, Emberá, and Ngäbe-Buglé, have inhabited the region for thousands of years. The Spanish arrived in the early 16th century, making Panama a critical part of the Spanish Empire's trade route between the Americas and Europe.

In 1903, Panama gained independence from Colombia with the support of the United States, which subsequently oversaw the construction of the Panama Canal. Completed in 1914, the canal revolutionized global maritime trade by linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Control of the canal was transferred to Panama on December 31, 1999. Today, the canal remains central to Panama's economy and international significance.

Panama's economy is one of the most robust in Latin America, driven by services related to the Panama Canal, banking, commerce, and tourism. The Panama Canal generates substantial revenue through tolls paid by ships passing through its locks.

Panama City is a major financial center, with an economy bolstered by international banking and commerce. The Colón Free Trade Zone is the second-largest duty-free zone in the world, attracting businesses from around the globe. Additionally, tourism plays an essential role in the economy, with visitors drawn to Panama's beaches, rainforests, and cultural heritage.



Fast Facts

Capital: Panama City

Population: 4.4 million

Highest Point: Volcan Baru (11,401 feet)

Trivia: The ship Arcon was the first to transit the Canal in August 1914

Primerus Member: Quijano & Associates

Quijano & Associates, a full-service law firm located in Panama City.

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Panama City, the capital and largest city, is a dynamic metropolis where modern skyscrapers stand alongside colonial-era architecture. The city's skyline, featuring sleek high-rises, reflects its status as an international hub for finance and trade. The capital city also serves as the gateway to the Panama Canal and offers alluring nightlife, world-class dining, and rich cultural experiences. The historic district, Casco Viejo, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site known for its cobblestone streets, colorful buildings, and lively plazas.

Top 5 Must-See Tourist Destinations

- **Panama Canal and Miraflores Locks:** No visit to Panama is complete without seeing the Panama Canal. The Miraflores Locks, located just outside Panama City, provide an up-close view of ships navigating the canal. The visitor center offers interactive exhibits detailing the canal's history, construction, and operation. Watching the massive ships pass through the locks is a captivating experience that highlights the canal's importance in global trade.
- **Casco Viejo (Old Quarter):** Casco Viejo, the historic heart of Panama City, is a charming neighborhood filled with colonial architecture, churches, and colorful plazas. Visitors can explore narrow streets lined with cafes, boutiques, and art galleries. The area comes alive at night with rooftop bars offering stunning views of the city skyline. Key landmarks include the Metropolitan Cathedral, the Presidential Palace, and the Plaza de Francia.
- **San Blas Islands:** The San Blas Islands, an archipelago of more than 350 islands and cays, are a paradise of white-sand beaches, crystal-clear waters, and vibrant coral reefs. The islands are home to the Guna Yala people, who manage the territory and preserve their cultural traditions. Visitors can relax on secluded beaches, snorkel among the marine life, and learn about the Guna way of life.

- **Boquete and the Baru Volcano:** Nestled in the Chiriquí Highlands, Boquete is a picturesque town known for its coffee plantations, hiking trails, and cool climate. Adventure seekers can hike to the summit of Baru Volcano, Panama's highest peak, for a chance to see both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea on a clear day. Boquete also offers opportunities for white-water rafting, canopy tours, and visits to lush gardens.
- **Bocas del Toro:** Located on the Caribbean coast, Bocas del Toro is a laid-back destination known for its rich culture, lush rainforests, and beautiful beaches. The archipelago offers excellent opportunities for surfing, snorkeling, and diving among coral reefs teeming with marine life. The main town, Bocas Town, features Caribbean architecture, lively bars, and waterfront restaurants.

