

A photograph of the Panama skyline at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and grey. The city skyline is silhouetted against the bright orange horizon. Several tall buildings are visible, including a prominent one with a curved, sail-like top. In the foreground, the water is calm, reflecting the colors of the sky. A few small boats are visible on the water.

Panama

Where virgin jungle meets urban jungle

By Mark Johanson

It's a crucial cog in global trade, the linchpin of the Americas and a vital link between the Atlantic and Pacific, but Panama has so much more to offer than its crosswise canal.



Panama is a nation racing towards the future, all while curating its cultural output and protecting its natural assets. Nowhere is this flurry of activity more apparent than in Panama City, the beating heart and financial engine behind Latin America's fastest-growing economy.

Skyscrapers sprout out of Panama City's thick air like beanstalks, but the most exciting addition to the skyline comes from Pritzker Prize-winning architect Frank Gehry. His crayon-coloured Biomuseo opened within an angularly erratic building in October 2014, and is your perfect introduction to the nation's incredible biodiversity.

When the glitz and glam of modern Panama City begins to wear you down, take time to enjoy the quieter charms of Casco Viejo. Situated along the southwestern tip of town – and overlooking the canal's Pacific entrance – this UNESCO World Heritage Site is virtually all that existed of the city when construction began on the Panama Canal in 1904.



Casco Viejo's glory days may be long gone, but its cobbled streets and crumbled buildings are undeniably enchanting. After decades as an urban slum, this historic quarter is now in the midst of a fabulous restoration and gentrification project spurred by Panama's international community.

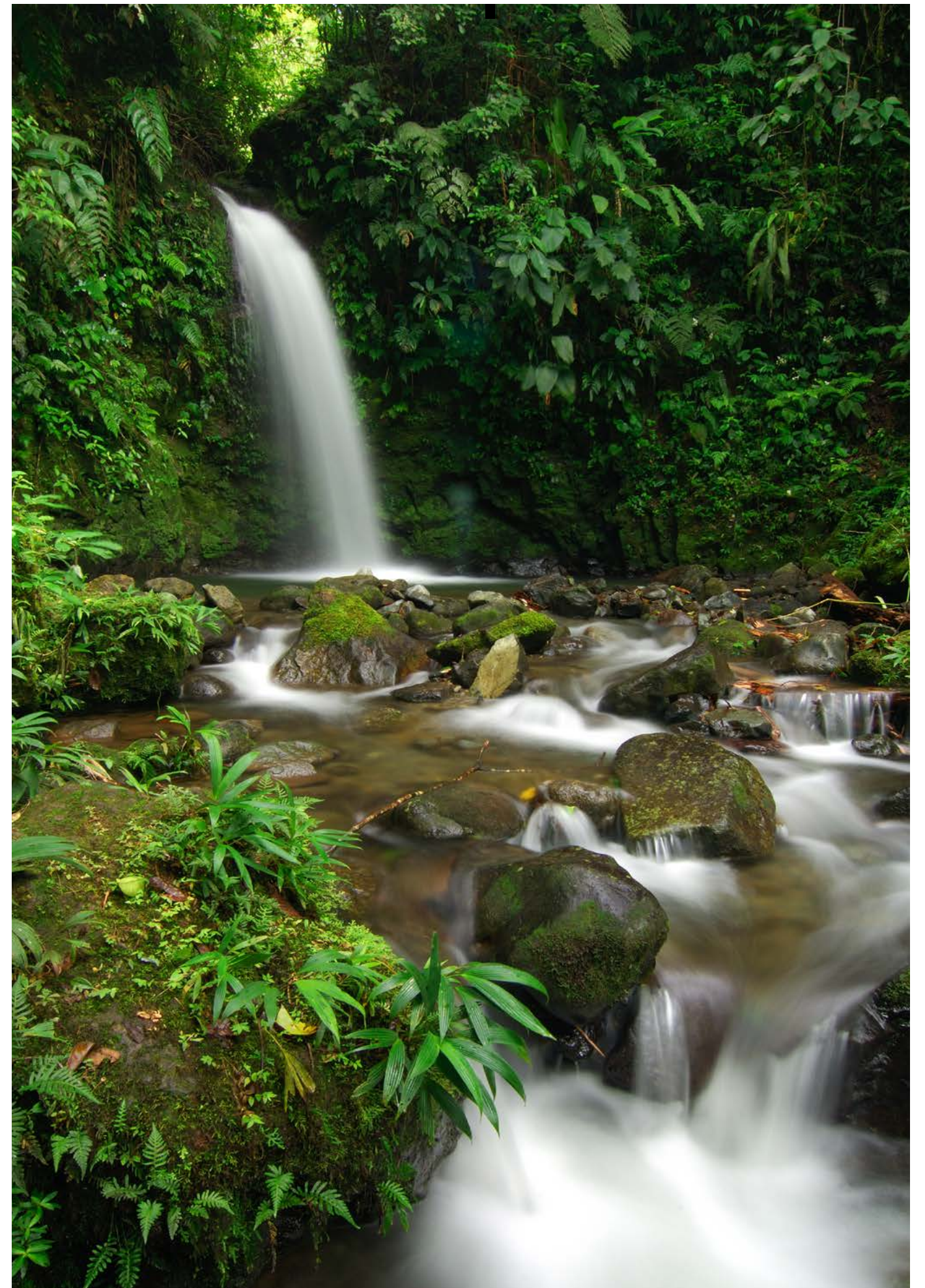
Explore the neighbourhood's rich and sordid history on a stroll along the old colonial wall. Then walk past beautiful art deco facades, gape at the magnificent Metropolitan Cathedral and have a look around the excellent Canal Museum. Along the way keep an eye out for Karavan Gallery, home to colourful textiles made by the indigenous Kuna community and stop for lunch in the old quarter's top café, Super Gourmet, whose globetrotting menu is sure to please. You'll also find two of the city's best designer hotels here: Las Clementinas and the American Trade Hotel.

Panama City's urban attractions are great, but one of its best features is its proximity to virgin forests, according to Rob Harper, who organises bespoke holidays for

Panama Vacations. "Panama City is really interesting because it's the most cosmopolitan city in Central America and yet there is this thick rainforest that comes right up to its border," Harper explained. "You can literally go out into the rainforest and rough it during the day, and then come back to a really high-end hotel, some fantastic food and a great tropical vibe."

Just beyond city limits – and lining either side of the Panama Canal – lie a series of national parks and protected forests that are a world away from the urban hubbub of the capital. One of the best reserves for tourists, Soberania National Park, is just a 30-minute drive from the city centre.

A menagerie of exotic mammals roam wild in Soberania, including white-faced capuchin monkeys, red-crested tamarins and two-toed sloths. Some 525 species of birds also reside here, making it an ideal stop for birders in search of tanagers, trogons or toucans.



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The canal opens up into the man-made Gatun Lake as you head northwest towards the Caribbean port of Colon. Trips out into the lake are another favourite among nature lovers, who often book full-day excursions from Panama City that include kayaking along the perimeter to view sloths, monkeys, iguanas and even the occasional crocodile.

‘Panama’ means ‘abundance of fish’ in the indigenous Cueva language and some of the most phenomenal angling takes place right in Gatun Lake. A local businessman accidentally introduced peacock bass to these waters in 1967 and they’ve since become the dominant game, fuelling a burgeoning sports fishing industry. Book a charter from Colon, Arenosa or Gamboa, the latter of which is just 45 minutes by car from Panama City.

Panama boasts the largest rainforest system in the Western Hemisphere outside the Amazon basin and an even larger swath of it lies within the Darien Gap. The jungle here is so impenetrable that it’s the only stretch of land preventing the Pan-American Highway from linking Alaska with Argentina by road. As a

result – and due to safety concerns along the border with Colombia – most travellers stick to the rainforests closer to the canal.

When the nouveau riche of Panama City want a bit of sun and sand, rather than rain and wilderness, they make a beeline for Bocas Del Toro. This postcard-perfect archipelago along the forested frontier with Costa Rica epitomises the best beach getaway Panama has to offer with perky palms, sugary sands and crystalline Caribbean waters.

Biologists have called Bocas Del Toro “the Galapagos of the 21st century” and low-impact development is the key to its continued success. Not only are the islands home to a complex and diverse ecosystem, but also an eclectic mix of indigenous, Latin and West Indian cultures.

Punta Caracol Acqua Lodge is one of a growing number of luxury eco-resorts in the region to pair unrivalled tranquillity with an untouched ecosystem. Its well-appointed cabins were built using the traditional methods of the archipelago and hover above the water on stilts, coexisting

with an aquamarine bay thanks to a pollution-busting biodigester and advanced systems of renewable energy.

Equally intoxicating options include Monkey Tree Casitas, a private nature retreat a la ‘The Swiss Family Robinson’, and Casa Cayuco, an eco-adventure resort nestled amid a virgin forest.

Isla Colon is the most populated island in Bocas del Toro and the only one with an airstrip. Others like Isla Bastimentos, home to Isla Bastimentos National Marine Park, are accessible by either water taxis or ferries.

Whether you explore the islands of Bocas del Toro, the rainforests along the canal or the urban jungle of Panama City, this Central American nation promises a holiday as rustic or chic as you want it to be because it truly lives up to its moniker as ‘the Crossroads of the Americas’. It may have one foot firmly planted in the future, but the other is still playing around in the sand.

