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4 Reasons Why You Should Visit Panama



Central America's Gem

4 Reasons Why... You Should Visit Panama

A relatively small country, about the size of Maine, U.S. It has only one international airport and several private airports dotting the country here and there. The roads have plenty of holes and can get extremely congested in certain parts, especially in the downtown area.

Is this a pretty picture?

Let's be frank here. It's not. But this only represents one side of Panama – the stark, gray side. If you flip the cover back, you are faced with a thousand options and a thousand possibilities. It is up to you if you want to stay long enough to appreciate what this Central American gem has to offer.

Panama's Subtle Attraction

While many eco-tourists flock its Costa Rica neighbor, Panama actually has more to offer in terms of diversity in animal and plant life. Panama is home to over 940 registered species of birds, and that's not counting the several sightings of unregistered migratory bird species in the country's many offshore islands. Its rainforests remain remarkably pristine and untouched by development, even as some of them are located just a few steps away from the busy metropolis of Panama City.

With no less than two oceans bordering its coastlines, Panama has some of the best beaches that are excellent getaway places, whether for romance or relaxation. Panama's Caribbean side sparkles with white sand beaches and turquoise waters, while its North Pacific coastline are joy for surfers and water sports lovers alike.

So why visit Panama?

Here are seven top reasons why you should:

Reason #1 ECOTOURISM: Get in Touch with Panama's Natural Beauty

It has to do with its unique geographical position. A natural land bridge connecting two continents, Panama harbors a greater diversity of wildlife than any country in Mesoamerica.

From its name alone, which means “an abundance of fish and butterflies,” you can immediately imagine how this narrow strip of land sitting on an isthmus connecting South and North America can be home to many South American species as well as North and Central American wildlife.

Catching on to this rare attraction, the government of Panama has taken positive steps to preserve much of the country's natural beauty. At this moment, about 29% of Panama's land area is protected.

Expect no less than 14 national parks, more than a dozen forest reserves and 10 wildlife refuges. In addition to the almost 1000 species of birds that find their natural habitat in Panama, the country's spectacularly diverse animal life includes 220 mammals and 354 reptiles and amphibians.

With all that ecological bounty and some hundreds of islands and miles of protected coral reef, Panama is becoming one of the most exciting ecotourism destinations in the Americas – if not the world!

You have a wide variety of ecotourism choices, from the remote, pristine rainforests of ***Darien National Park*** to the ***Metropolitan Park***, a little piece of jungle right in the middle of a busy metropolis.

If you are into bird-watching, Panama doesn't disappoint. The country has a large number of world-renowned birding sites, including *Cana* in the Darien, the rugged *Cerro Azul* mountain range. Stunted forests in the Cerro Azul provide shelter to unique species, such as the Tacarcuna Bush Tanager. Be sure to bring your copy of Ridgely's "Birds of Panama" because the diversity of bird species is astounding.

Ecotourism day trips may last from 3 to 14 days. Most are done on foot (the better to appreciate nature when you're stepping right on it) or by dugout canoe in the Darien, where you can visit the Embera and Waunana indigenous groups.

You may also travel by horseback if you are coming from *Cerro La Vieja* in Cocolé down to the Caribbean coast where beaches aplenty are waiting for you.

And in the *Valle de Anton*, you can whiz through forest canopy while hanging some 30 feet above the ground – nothing like a good adrenaline rush to keep the blood pumping before you head on to look for one of the rarest amphibians in the world – Panama's golden frog.

There are many more places you can check out when on an ecotourism adventure in Panama. One of the best things about this country is that, no matter which part of Panama you visit, you can surely expect to find an abundance of wildlife and superb facilities, guaranteed to give you a superb ecotourism experience.

Reason #2 RICH HISTORY: Catch a Glimpse of Panama's Unique Heritage

Again, it has to do with its unique global position. As a land and ocean crossroads, Panama is strategically located to serve as a meeting point of two

different cultures and traditions, resulting in a country with a rich historical heritage that few Central American countries can top.

Panama City, founded in 1517, is the first city founded on the Pacific coast of the Americas, thus making it the oldest city, also. Due to its strategic position, fronting the Pacific Ocean, the Spanish used this city as their departure point for all their conquest activities.

Up to now, you can still see remnants of Spanish colonial architecture adorning Panama City, serving as backdrop to the more modernized highrises, bank buildings, and shopping centers.

The early 16th century saw a lot of gold and silver and other treasures sacked by the Spanish from the Incan Empires exchange hands in Panama City. These riches were later on taken by donkey across the isthmus on the Camino de Las Cruces trail and deposited in a huge treasure house in the Caribbean bayside town of **Portobello**, where ships were waiting to take to the treasure back to the Old World.

Today, Portobello remains a beautiful seaside town on the Atlantic coast. The treasure house has been restored, as well as the ruins of four Spanish forts.

News of Panama City's wealth soon attracted the attention of pirates, who picked the city as their favorite target for looting Spanish wealth. After several successful pirate raids, Panama city and the port city of Portobello finally fell.

The ruins of Panama Viejo, a reminder of a time when the English pirate Sir Henry Morgan ransacked Panama City and burned it to the ground, can still be seen today.

After gaining its independence from Spain in 1821, Panama became a province of the country of Colombia. Years later, during the California gold rush, thousands

of “49-ers” seeking to strike it rich in California and tired of fighting Indians on their way across the American Great Plains, found an alternative route to the West coast through the ***Panama Canal Railway***.

Built in 1849 by an American company, the Panama Canal Railway became the world’s first transcontinental railway, giving 49-ers a chance to save travel time as well as avoid danger.

The first person to ever attempt to build a canal in Panama was Ferdinand De Lesseps, the French builder of the world-renowned Suez Canal. However, the project turned out to be a catastrophic failure due to malaria and yellow fever, which claimed the lives of 22,000 people.

In 1903, Panama declared its independence from Colombia, with the support of President Theodore Roosevelt, whose administration soon after built the new ***Panama Canal***. Learning from the mistakes of the French, the Americans successfully built the Panama Canal through brilliant engineering feats.

Today, the Panama Canal is hailed as one of the eight Wonders of the World.

Reason #3 MARINE LIFE: Experience Panama’s Array of Diving Possibilities

With history and economy linked to the sea, you can expect Panama to be a maritime country par excellence. And indeed, it is, even as not many diving enthusiasts are aware of this fact...*yet*.

Panama’s 1,207 kilometers of Caribbean coastline and 17,006 kilometers of North Pacific coastline – both important marine and coastal zones – are full of aquatic and land ecosystems, from marshes to beaches and coral reefs that form incredible landscapes of submarine flora and fauna on both coasts.

In Panama, even Caribbean specialists are astonished with its extraordinary submarine beauty. The ***North and South Zapatilla Keys*** in the province of Bocas del Toro within the Maritime National Park of Bastimento Island are especially excellent places to go scuba diving or snorkeling. Other dive sites of note include the following:

- Punta Vieja (*Old Point*)
- Punta Hospital (*Hospital Point*)
- Donato
- Crawl Cay
- Stern Island
- Tiger Cay
- Wild Cane Cay
- Agua Oeste Cay

All of these are located on the same island of Bastimento. A few miles away is the Colon Island where tour operators provide you with equipment and guides for safe scuba diving any time of the year.

Another good site is the ***San Blas Archipelago***, a group of wonderful islands world famous for their coralline origin and crystalline waters. Here, the main activities are obviously scuba diving and snorkeling, although the clear waters are perfect enough for a short dip or a some water frolicking. The best months to visit the San Blas Archipelago are April, May, November, and December, especially if you are there mainly to dive and experience Panama's submarine beauty.

Reason #4 EXTREME SPORTS: Check out Panama's Adrenaline Rush

With so much natural abundance, Panama is paradise to the adventurer at heart. Whether you are braving the mighty Pacific waves or fighting the white water rapids of Panama's fast rivers, there is never a shortage of adrenaline-pumping activities here.

Panama has two oceans and one sea – the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans and the Caribbean Sea. With all these great bodies of water, the country offers the most exciting sea encounter, whether you are a professional surfer or a “mere” surfing fan.

This surfing appeal of the Panamanian Pacific has attracted many surfers from the world over, so much so that national and international matches of high technical and professional quality have been held annually in Panama for a number of years.

Some of the more famous surfing beaches are the ***Santa Catalina*** and ***Mariato*** in the Veraguas Province. ***Playa Venao***, located in Los Santos Province, is also a scene of important regional surfing matches.

The specialists in this challenging sports have selected several beaches in Panama for the exciting practice of “riding” waves. These include:

On the Pacific Side –

- Lajas
- Coiba
- Cebaco Islands
- Punta Brava
- Cambutal
- Raya

- Guanico
- Desfiladero
- Madroño
- Rio Mar
- El Palmar
- Teta
- Serena
- Malibu
- Jaque

On the Caribbean Side –

- Playa Palenque
- Isla Grande
- Maria Chiquita (Colon Province)
- Bocas del Toro Province
- Bluff
- Dumpey
- Punch

Besides surfing, Panama also has world class river rafting. The ***Chiriqui Viejo*** is internationally known for excellent rafting that has all – virgin forest, water falls, and wild life unsurpassed anywhere in Central America. The river is located near the Panama-Costa Rica border. It has some of the best rapids in the world. Rafting up or down this river can run on day trips or two night camping trips.

There are many more reasons why you should visit Panama. We've only given you four and those four, though among the most exciting things about Panama, are

but a small percentage of what this beautiful Central American country has to offer.

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