

Panama Fast Facts



Area: 75,990 square kilometers (29,684 square miles)

Population: 3,191,319 (July 2005, estimated)

Population density: 42 per square kilometer (17 per square mile)

Capital: Panama City

Population: 416,000 as of 2000

Geography: Panama is located on the narrowest and lowest part of the Isthmus of Panama that links North America and South America.

Panama's two coastlines are referred to as the Caribbean (or Atlantic) and Pacific, rather than the north and south coasts. To the east is Colom-

bia and to the west Costa Rica. Because of the location and contour of the country, directions expressed in terms of the compass are often surprising. For example, a transit of the Panama Canal from the Pacific to the Caribbean involves travel not to the east but to the northwest, and in Panama City the sunrise is to the east over the Pacific.

The Caribbean coastline is marked by several good natural harbors. However, Cristóbal, at the Caribbean terminus of the canal, had the only important port facilities in the late 1980s. The numerous islands of the Archipiélago de Bocas del Toro, near the Costa Rican border, provide an extensive natural roadstead and shield the banana port of Almirante. The over 350 San Blas Islands, near Colombia, are strung out for more than 160

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Prepared by the staff of International Living (www.InternationalLiving.com)



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kilometers (100 miles) along the sheltered Caribbean coastline.

The major port on the Pacific coastline is Balboa. The principal islands are those of the Archipiélago de las Perlas in the middle of the Gulf of Panama, the penal colony on the Isla de Coiba in the Golfo de Chiriquí, and the decorative island of Taboga, a tourist attraction that can be seen from Panama City. In all, there are some 1,000 islands off the Pacific coast.

The Pacific coastal waters are extraordinarily shallow. Depths of 180 meters (590 feet) are reached only outside the perimeters of both the Gulf of Panama and the Golfo de Chiriquí, and wide mud flats extend up to 70 kilometers (43 miles) seaward from the coastlines. As a consequence, the tidal range is extreme. A variation of about 70 centimeters (28 inches) between high and low water on the Caribbean coast contrasts sharply with over 700 centimeters (23 feet) on the Pacific coast, and some 130 kilometers (80 miles) up the Río Tuira the range is still over 500 centimeters (16 feet).

The dominant feature of the country's landform is the central spine of mountains and hills that forms the continental divide. The divide does not form part of the great mountain chains of North America, and only near the Colombian border are there highlands related to the Andean system of South America. The spine that forms the divide is the highly eroded arch of an uplift from the sea bottom, in which peaks were formed by volcanic intrusions.

The highest point in the country is the Volcán Barú (formerly known as the Volcán de Chiriquí), which rises to almost 3,500 meters (11,500 feet). The apex of a highland that includes the nation's richest soil, the Volcán Barú is still referred to as a volcano, although it has been inactive for millennia.

Nearly 500 rivers lace Panama's rugged landscape. Mostly unnavigable, many originate as swift highland streams, meander in valleys, and form coastal deltas. However, the Río Chepo and

the Río Chagres are sources of hydroelectric power.

The Río Chagres is one of the longest and most vital of the approximately 150 rivers that flow into the Caribbean. Part of this river was dammed to create Gatun Lake, which forms a major part of the transit route between the locks near each end of the canal. Both Gatun Lake and Madden Lake (also filled with water from the Río Chagres) provide hydroelectricity for the area of the former Canal Zone.

The Río Chepo, another major source of hydroelectric power, is one of the more than 300 rivers emptying into the Pacific. These Pacific-oriented rivers are longer and slower running than those of the Caribbean side. Their basins are also more extensive. One of the longest is the Río Tuira, which flows into the Golfo de San Miguel and is the nation's only river navigable by larger vessels.

Panama's tropical environment supports an abundance of plants. Forests dominate, interrupted in places by grasslands, scrub, and crops. Although nearly 40% of Panama is still wooded, deforestation is a continuing threat to the rain-drenched woodlands. Tree cover has been reduced by more than 50% since the 1940s. Subsistence farming, widely practiced from the northeastern jungles to the southwestern grasslands, consists largely of corn, bean, and tuber plots. Mangrove swamps occur along parts of both coasts, with banana plantations occupying deltas near Costa Rica. In many places, a multi-canopied rain forest abuts the swamp on one side of the country and extends to the lower reaches of slopes in the other.

Climate: Panama has a tropical climate. Temperatures are uniformly high--as is the relative humidity--and there is little seasonal variation. Diurnal ranges are low; on a typical dry-season day in the capital city, the early morning minimum may be 24°C (75°F) and the afternoon maximum 29°C (84°F). The temperature seldom exceeds 32°C (90°F) for more than a short time. Temperatures on the Pacific side of the isthmus are somewhat lower than on the Caribbean, and breezes tend to rise after dusk in most parts of the

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country. Temperatures are markedly cooler in the higher parts of the mountain ranges, and frosts occur in the Cordillera de Talamanca in western Panama.

Climatic regions are determined less on the basis of temperature than on rainfall, which varies regionally from less than 1.3 to more than 3 meters (4-10 feet) per year. Almost all of the rain falls during the rainy season, which is usually from April to December, but varies in length from seven to nine months. The cycle of rainfall is determined primarily by two factors: moisture from the Caribbean, which is transported by north and northeast winds prevailing during most of the year, and the continental divide, which acts as a rainshield for the Pacific lowlands. A third influence that is present during the late autumn is the southwest wind off the Pacific. This wind brings some precipitation to the Pacific lowlands, modified by the highlands of the Península de Azuero, which form a partial rainshield for much of central Panama. In general, rainfall is much heavier on the Caribbean than on the Pacific side of the continental divide. The annual average in Panama City is little more than half of that in Colón. Although rainy-season thunderstorms are common, the country is outside the hurricane track.

Government: Constitutional Democracy

Head of State & Government: President Martin Torrijos since 2004.

Language: Spanish (official), English 14%; note - many Panamanians are bilingual

Religion: Roman Catholic 85%, Protestant 15%

Electricity: 120 volts AC, 60Hz. Plugs are the flat two-pin American type.

Currency and exchange: Panamá adopted the US dollar as its currency in 1904, and has not printed any paper currency since. Dollars are referred to interchangeably as dólares or balboas. Panamá does mint its own coinage: 1, 5, 10, 25 and 50 centavo pieces, which are the same shape and size as – and are used alongside – US coins.

Fifty cents is also referred to as a "*peso*", and five cents as a "*real*", so 35 cents, for example, can also be described as "*siete reales*". US\$100 and US\$50 bills are often difficult to spend, for fear of forgeries or simply because change is difficult to come by, so it's best to make US\$20 bills the largest you carry.

It is difficult to change foreign currency in Panamá, and you should change any cash into US dollars as soon as you can. In Panamá City there are Banco Nacional branches at the airport and on Via España in the El Cangrejo district, or you could try Panacambios, a *casa de cambio* also on Via España. Foreign banks will generally change their own currencies.

Traveler's checks are the safest way to carry your money and are easy to change so long as they are issued by major companies (Visa, MasterCard) and are in US dollars. The three major banks in Panamá – Banco Nacional, Banco del Istmo and Banco General – will all change these, as will some of the international banks in Panamá City. Most banks are open from 8 or 8.30 a.m. to 3 or 4 p.m. Monday to Friday, and some also open from 9 a.m. to noon on Saturday; almost all branches now have ATMs. Major credit cards are accepted in the more upmarket hotels and restaurants in Panamá City and the larger provincial towns. Visa is the most widely accepted, followed by MasterCard.

Sales tax: VAT is currently 5% (10% for imports)

Communications:

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

Mobile telephone Roaming agreements exist. The main network provider is *Cable & Wireless* (website: www.cwpanama.com). Coverage is good. Panama's cell providers offer older digital TDMA 800 and new GSM 850 technologies. Travelers from GSM 900/1800 countries who are interested in a roaming agreement with a GSM

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850 carrier should make sure their phone is tri-band (850/1800/1900).

Panama's GSM 850 cell phone networks allow the use of SIM cards. Cards with various payment options are readily available for use; however, before making a purchase, ensure that your cell phone is not locked to a specific network.

Fax Main post offices and hotels have facilities.

Internet/email Internet cafes are very common and inexpensive, normally less than \$1 per hour. Some restaurants and coffee shops are now providing wireless hot spots.

Telegram Facilities exist in main post offices of Panama City and other major cities and hotels. A tax of 50 cents is levied against each telegram.

Press *Crítica Libre, La Estrella de Panamá, El Matutino, El Panamá América, La Prensa, La República, El Siglo and El Universal* (all in Spanish) are the largest daily newspapers.

Mail Mail to North America takes up to one week. Airmail to Western Europe takes five to 10 days. Main post offices have *Poste Restante* and EMS (Express Mail Services) facilities. Post office hours: Mon-Fri 8:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m., Sat 8:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.

More about telephone/fax *Cable and Wireless Panamá* (www.cwpanama.com) is the British company that provides telephone service and Internet service in Panama. They offer plans that run from about \$6 per month to \$40 per month, depending on whether or not you would like "free" local calls. There is also a \$40 installation charge. You can see the plans here: www.cwpanama.com/cwp/Residencial/Voz/Planes

To get the service you have to provide

- Original passport and a photocopy.
- Proof of residency. Either present your property registration if you are the owner (escritura) or a rental contract for your residence with the MIVI seal (Housing Ministry)

and deposit number (could also be a private rental contract with the signatures notarized.)

Note: there are several other documents you may present if you don't have either of these. You can send someone else to request the service if you send a notarized letter.

International calling cards are available and many Internet cafes also offer VoIP calls. The calling cards are all cards that you use from any telephone by dialing the unique ID number on the card. You may purchase \$5, \$10 & \$20 cards which are valid for 15, 30 & 45 days respectively.

Phoning from Panama to other countries (international long distance)

- Prefix used to make an international call from Panama: 0
- To call a country from Panama dial 0 + country code + area code + local number
- Examples:
- To USA 0 + 1 + area code + local number
- To UK 0 + 44 + area code + local number
- To Hong Kong 0 + 852 + area code + local number

Considering the Panama Canal, and its significance to the international business community, it is no wonder that the phone system, as well as the public telephones themselves, is easy to use and readily available. The Panamanian phone system ranks high compared with many of its neighbors'. Both coin- and card-operated telephones exist throughout Panama for public use. Coin-operated telephones accept 5, 10 and 25 centavos coins.

For directory assistance: Dial 102

Time Zone: GMT-5

Pets: Have your veterinarian prepare a standard International Health Certificate preferably no more than 10 days before travel to Panama which means you may have to use an express delivery service to complete the following... The certificate needs to indicate the pet's name, breed, owner's name and current country of residency. It should state that the pet is healthy and free of parasites. It must contain a list of inoculations

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including type, manufacturer and batch number.

Police: If you are robbed or otherwise become the victim of a crime, you should report it immediately to the local **police** station, particularly if you will later be making an insurance claim. If treated respectfully, Panamanian police are generally honest and helpful. In Panamá City the **tourist police** (*policia de turismo*) are better prepared to deal with foreign travellers and more likely to speak English – they wear white armbands and are often mounted on bicycles.

Emergency numbers: Police 104; Fire 103; Tourist Police 226 7000 ext. 280 or 269 8011

Tippling: 10 to 15 per cent is customary in hotels (where it is not added automatically) and restaurants. Taxi drivers do not expect tips, and rates should be arranged before the trip.

Siesta time: Shopping hours vary, but most of the stores and shops open from 9:00 am to 6:00 p.m. and some even up to 10:00 p.m. from Monday to Sunday. There is no midday break.

Smoking: There are non-smoking rooms in hotels, and non-smoking areas in restaurants.

Drugs: Panama is a key area for the transit of cocaine, heroin and precursor chemicals. Drug shipments pass through Panama by land, sea, and air routes. Fishing vessels, cargo ships, and "go-

fast" boats transit Panamanian waters and either continue on to other Central American countries or drop off their cargo in Panama. After cocaine arrives in Panama, traffickers repackage it either for transportation northward along the Pan-American Highway or for sea freight transport. Cocaine entering Panama from air routes is brought in by small planes that enter Panamanian airspace to drop the drugs off in remote, lightly populated areas along the Caribbean coast. Couriers transport smaller amounts of heroin and cocaine on commercial air flights, particularly to Spain, the Netherlands, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

The government of Panama continues to demonstrate its willingness to combat transnational drug trafficking. In 1999, Panamanian agencies seized 2,576 kilograms (5,680 pounds) of cocaine, 1,558 kilograms (3,435 pounds) of marijuana, 600 liters (158 gallons) of acetic anhydride, 46 kilograms (100 pounds) of heroin and made 131 arrests for international drug trafficking related offenses. Heroin seizures continue to increase, further establishing Panama as a principal link in the chain that funnels Colombian heroin to the United States.

Note: *International Living* has an office in Panama City, and staff there can answer any questions you may have about Panama. E-mail Panama@InternationalLiving.com.



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