

Panama

The Best Things to See & Do



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Panama Travel Guide

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1. Introduction

Panama is the most developed country in Central America. In Latin America, only Chile and Argentina were ranked higher in the 2019 Human Development Index. The high living standard is especially visible in the capitol Panama City, but even if you leave the big city for rural areas, you will find roads in often excellent condition and people living in conditions that are far higher compared to other Central American countries.



One source of Panamanian wealth is, you guessed it, the Panama Canal. Being a democracy for more than 30 years, Panama has built the largest financial center in Central America. It certainly has helped that Panama was known as a tax haven for many years and to some extent still is. Panama is also greatly profiting from being part of the Colón Free Trade Zone, which is the largest free trade zone in the Western Hemisphere.

Panama has a tropical climate and with it comes a large area of tropical rainforest and a large biodiversity. The temperatures rarely exceed 90°F (32°C) for an extended period of time.

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On top of that, Panama has incredible beaches. Taking all this into account, it is easy understandable that Panama's tourist industry is constantly growing.

Besides tourism, Panama is also offering generous retirement benefits and has therefore long been a favorite for US, Canadian and European retirees.

Other things to know about Panama:

- Capital: Panama City

- Flag:



- Official language: Spanish
- Time zone: EST (Eastern Standard Time), Daylight Savings Time is not observed
- Currency: US dollar (the official currency is the Panamanian Balboa. One Balboa is the same as 1 US dollar and only Balboa coins are minted, no bills. With the exception of the 1 Balboa coin, all other Balboa coins are the same size and weight as the respective US coins). Everybody accepts US dollars.
- Country code: 507
- Population: 4.25 million (2019)
- Cars drive on the right side of the road
- Internet sites: .pa
- Independence from Spain: November 28, 1821

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This travel guide gives you a 2 week sample itinerary with detailed information on the individual destinations.

To help you find out what best fits you, I have added lots of photos and links to additional reviews.

This is not an in-depth Panama guide. You can buy those from the big travel guide companies.

My goal is to help you Make Memorable Moments on a relaxing Iceland trip by helping you build the perfect itinerary for you.

Please also check out the other exciting destinations and travel guides on our [Backpack & Snorkel](#) website.

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2.1 Disclaimer

In this guide I am doing my best to give you the most accurate information. Over time, however, prices, times, and even attractions are subject to change. Therefore, I and backpackandsnorkel.com cannot be held responsible for the experiences of users while traveling. I strongly suggest that you write or call the attractions you plan to visit for confirmation when you make your travel plans.

Also, please stay alert, be aware of your surroundings and keep an eye on your belongings. Pickpockets and other criminals can easily ruin even the best planned vacation.

2.2 Copyright

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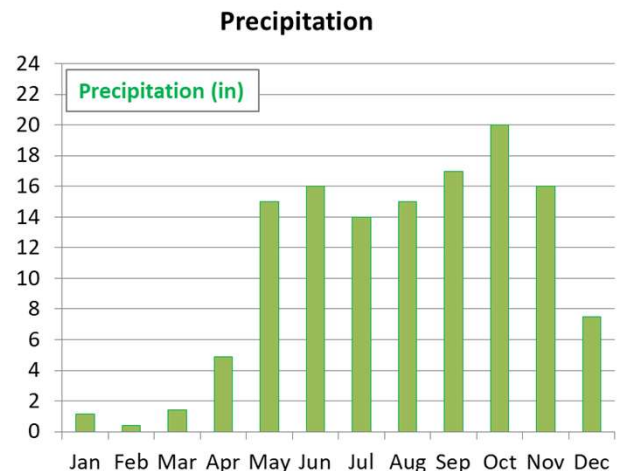
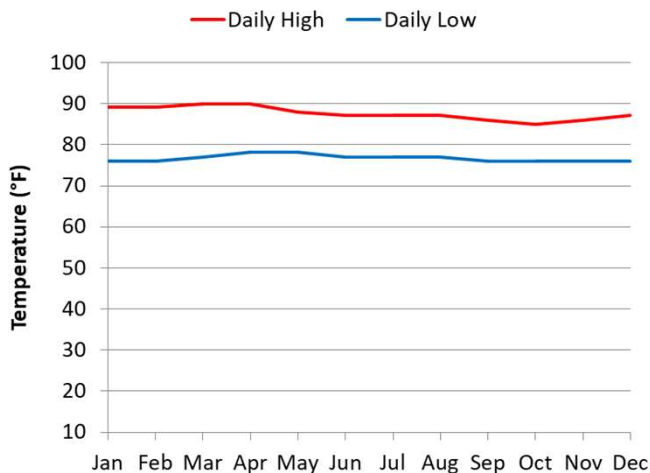
3. Best Time to Visit Panama

As a country with a tropical climate, Panama has a dry season and a wet season. The driest months are typically December through April and the wettest months May through November.

Be advised that the rainy season is not a total washout, however. You will often have sunny skies for much of the day but there is a good chance for sudden, short-lived but heavy thunderstorms at around noon or in the early afternoon. Some rural areas may be difficult to reach during the rainy season.

As for the temperatures, the difference between daytime temperatures is higher than between the seasons. Please be advised that, the higher the elevation, the cooler it gets.

Climate in Panama City



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5. Highlights of Panama City

Panama City (Spanish: Ciudad de Panamá) is the biggest city in Panama with a population of just under 900,000 and 1.5mio people in its metropolitan area. It is the country's capital and its most developed city.

Founded in 1519, Panama City became part of the trade route through which much of the gold and silver was transported that Spain robbed the natives. In 1671, the city burned down when it was attacked and plundered by pirates. Two years later, Panama City was reestablished about 5 miles (8km) from its original location. The original burned-down location still exists and is now a tourist attraction called "[Panamá Viejo](#)" (Old Panama) or "Panamá la Vieja".

The new location is another place you should not miss. It is called "[Casco Viejo](#)" (Old Quarter).

In 1855, the Panama Railroad opened as a means to transport people and freight between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Although it was built under direction of the US, who controlled it, it brought a lot of wealth to the city.

Even more wealth was brought to the region more than a half century later when the Panama Canal opened in 1914. Like the Panama Railroad before, the canal was built by the US and was under US control until December 31, 1999. Even today, the Panama Canal is one of major revenue sources for the country. In fiscal year 2019, the canal generated almost 2.6 billion U.S. dollars revenue from tolls, up from 1.9 billion US dollars five years earlier.

5.2 Panama Viejo (Old Panama) ([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#), [map of the site](#))

Panamá Viejo, or Panamá la Vieja, are the remains of the original Panama City settlement that was looted by pirates in 1671 and subsequently burned down. It was declared a World Heritage Site in 1997 and is one of the top tourist attractions in Panama City.

Settled in 1519, it was the first permanent European settlement on the Pacific Ocean. In 1521, it was promoted to become a “city” and it became a launching point for expeditions to Peru and, later on, an important part of the route on which much of the gold and silver the Spaniards robbed from the natives was transported to Spain.

Over the years, the city has suffered through multiple fires, attacks from pirates and indigenous people and even an earthquake. But nothing was as devastating as the fire in 1671 that the city, which now counted 10,000 inhabitants, suffered after the Welsh pirate Henry Morgan looted the city with his army of 1,400 men. It is unclear if the pirates set the city ablaze or if General de Guzmán caused the fire by exploding the gunpowder magazines.

The ruins were never rebuilt and instead, Panama City was reestablished about 5 miles (8km) away from this spot two years later at a place that is now known as [Casco Viejo](#).

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The ruins that you see today in Panamá Viejo are just that: ruins. But they shed a light into how buildings looked about 450 years ago.



Hours of Operation: Tuesday to Sunday, 8:30 am to 4:30 pm

Admission: non-Panamanian adults: \$15 (Visa and Master Card accepted with photo ID)

Recommended time: 2h

Parking: free parking

Tours: Guided tours are available, but need to ask at front desk

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6. Conjunto Conventual de La Concepción (La Concepción Convent) ([map](#))

This Our Lady of Conception church was the headquarters of the only female religious congregation in Panama and it is one of the largest in Panama Viejo. It was founded in 1598 by four nuns who arrived from Lima. The original building was heavily damaged by the 1621 earthquake and construction of a new stone church started in 1640. When the 1671 fire broke out, it was still unfinished.

Today, you can still see ruins of the masonry walls and four vaults supported by stone arches and columns surrounding the only cistern in Panama Viejo which held more than 124,000 liters of water.



7. Conjunto Conventual de La Compañía de Jesús (La Compañía de Jesús Convent) ([map](#))

The ruins that you see today are the church and the main cloisters which were built after the 1621 earthquake. The original structure was built of wood and converted to stone walls in the early 17th century using drawings that Father Andrés Alonso de Valladolid, who was an architect, created in 1610.

The church had two entrances: the main entrance toward the East and a second on Empedrada Street. A third door connected to the cloisters. The refectory was on the ground floor and it is speculated that the cells were on the upper floor. The church three naves and the main cloisters a wooden gallery.

Stones were fit together using clay instead of lime mortar.

The location at [Plaza Mayor](#) between Empedrada and Obispo Streets points at the high status of the church. It was probably only surpassed by the Cathedral and it was actually used as a replacement when the Cathedral was under construction or renovation.

The Jesuit order residing here was dedicated to public education and to catechizing indigenous people.



8. Casas Oeste (West Houses) ([map](#))

Located to the West of [Plaza Mayor](#), the houses between Carrera and Empedrada streets were most likely detached two story residences. Due to their proximity to the Main Square, it is likely that they belonged to the upper class.

It appears that the houses had wooden walls built on stone bases.

What you can see today are the stone bases of the original columns.

9. Casas Terrín (Terrín Houses) ([map](#))

Built in the 17th century by Francisco Terrín, the ruins of a few high class houses remain. The houses had stone bases, wooden walls on top, small inner courts, open-air kitchens, separate quarters for servants, and a large arch towards [Plaza Mayor](#).



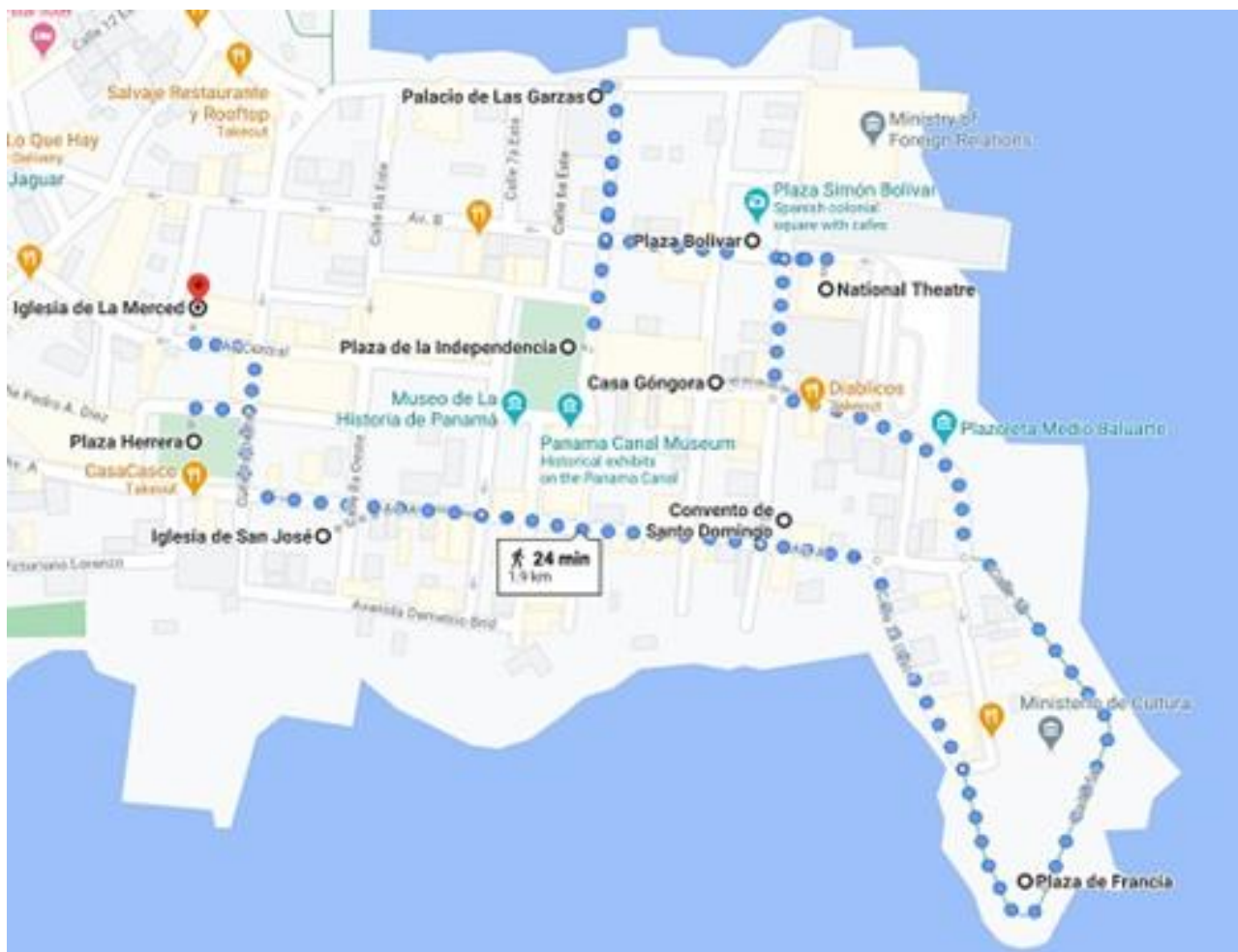
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5.3 Casco Viejo (Old Quarter) ([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#))

Two years after the original Panama City settlement, [Panama Viejo](#), burned down and was abandoned, it was resettled at what is now Casco Viejo (also called Casco Antiguo or San Felipe).

As of 1997, Casco Viejo is a World Heritage Site which preserves the beautiful buildings of the “Old Quarter” and it is one of the top tourist attractions in Panama City.

Casco Viejo is best explored on a self-guided walking tour. Parking is difficult to find and you can start the self-guided walking tour at any point.



([google map](#))

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1. Plaza de la Independencia ([map](#))

On this plaza on November 3, 1903, Panama declared its independence from Colombia.



Bordering the plaza to the west is **Catedral Metropolitana (Metropolitan Cathedral)** ([map](#), [reviews](#)) or “Cathedral Basilica of Santa María la Antigua” with its grey ashlar-stone facade and white neoclassical bell towers on either side. It is the episcopal see of the Archdiocese of Panama. Construction started in 1688 and it was finally consecrated in 1796. Go inside to take a look at the stained glass windows, the rest of the interior is very plain.

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Bordering the plaza to the south is **Museo del Canal Interoceánico** ([map](#), [reviews](#), [website in Spanish](#)). This neoclassical building was originally built as the Gran Hotel in 1875. The French converted it into the Canal Headquarters in 1881 and later it was used as offices for the US Canal Commission. In 1997, it was refurbished and reopened as the Canal Museum, which is considered to be one of the best museums in Panama City. Few of the exhibits on the first floor have English translations, but everything on the 2nd floor is in Spanish. It is said that bilingual tours are available.

Opening hours: Tuesday to Sunday 9am to 5pm

Admission: Non-Panamanian adults: \$10; students and children under 5 years: \$5



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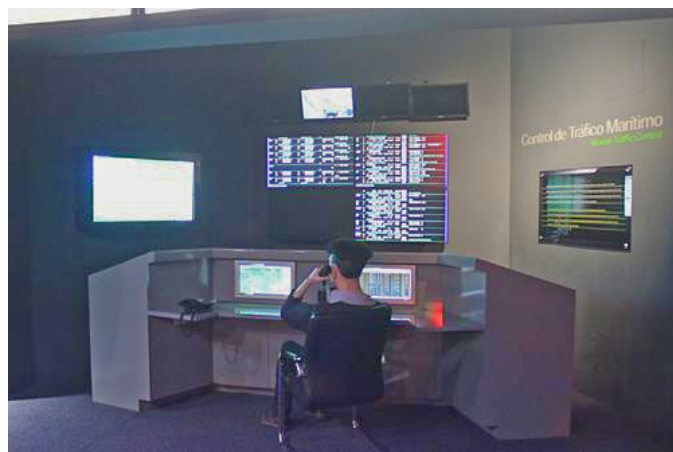
6. Plaza de Francia ([map](#), [reviews](#))

The Plaza de Francia (French Plaza) and the elevated walkway on top of las bóvedas (the vaults, originally a Spanish dungeon and later a jail, storehouse, and offices) are one of the highlights of Casco Viejo. With statues and stone tablets, it celebrates the story of approx. 22,000 French construction workers from France, Martinique and Guadeloupe who passed away during construction of the Panama Canal.

On the elevated walkway, you will see street vendors selling local art and you can see the Clinta Costera, the highway that encircles Casco Viejo and, in the distance, the Bridge of the Americas and the ships that are waiting for their turn to enter the canal.



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This was a sand bank in the middle of the ocean that was about 2ft deep under water and surrounded by sea grass. Except for 2 starfish and a stingray, there was nothing else to see or do. A member of the other group walked and later snorkeled through the sea grass and confirmed that there were no fish or other starfish. The boat personnel handed out snorkeling equipment to anyone who wanted it, but it was useless as there was nothing else to see.



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After 20 minutes or so, we continued on to another island (again, we were told no name) where we were told we should relax for the next 90min. This island was fairly small and besides spending a few minutes to walk around the island, sitting in the provided chairs or hammocks, there was nothing else to see and do. I tried to get in the water and snorkel, but the sea floor was rocky and difficult to walk on if you did not have water shoes. The water had low visibility and I did not see any fish or corals.



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After a bit over 90min we boarded the boat again and were brought to **Isla Pelicano** ([map](#)) which is a beautiful island but was even smaller than the previous island. Isla Pelicano has a beautiful sandy beach with clear turquoise water and good swimming and snorkeling. This island is a piece of paradise and exactly the reason why we did the tour! Unfortunately, the stop was only 30min, which was way too short.



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7. Bocas del Toro: Panama's Prime Beach Location ([map](#), [website 1](#), [website 2](#))

7.1 General Information

Bocas del Toro is a province of Panama. When tourists talk about Bocas del Toro, they typically mean the Bocas del Toro Archipelago, which is a group of 50 cays and about 200 tiny islets in the Caribbean Sea.

The main settlement is Bocas Town and the best way to travel to Bocas Town is by plane. Bocas del Toro "Isla Colón" International Airport (airport code BOC) is located in [Bocas Town](#) and in easy walking distance to many hotels, restaurants and tour boats.

Bocas Town is also served by ferries from Almirante, Changuinola, and Chiriquí Grande from the mainland.

Christopher Columbus arrived here in 1502 on his 4th (and final) voyage to the New World looking for a passage between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Isla Colón, where Bocas Town is, was settled for banana production in the early 1900s and Bocas Town became their regional headquarters. In the 1920s, there were more than 20,000 people living here and Bocas Town was one of the most prosperous towns in Panama. Then banana blight hit and operations were shut down and moved to the mainland. Today, the local population is about 4,000.

Tourism is responsible for approx. 95% of the region's economy. Unlike many other Caribbean destinations, Bocas del Toro does not have large hotels that line the beaches or big resorts that cover entire islands. Instead, you will find many small hotels and pensions.

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7.2 Bocas Town ([map](#))

Bocas Town is the informal name for the main settlement whose full name is Bocas del Toro, just like the name of the province in which it is located. The town is small enough that you can walk everywhere, including from and to the airport.

Bocas Town only has basic medical service and water is not potable. Much of the downtown area consists of restaurants, small stores and tour providers which offer a multitude of diving, beach, sightseeing, fishing and other tours.

While many hotels accept credit cards these days, be advised that many restaurants only accept cash. There is one bank in Bocas Town and it only has two ATMs ([location](#)), so bring plenty of cash as both ATMs run out of cash especially on the weekends and/or when you need money.



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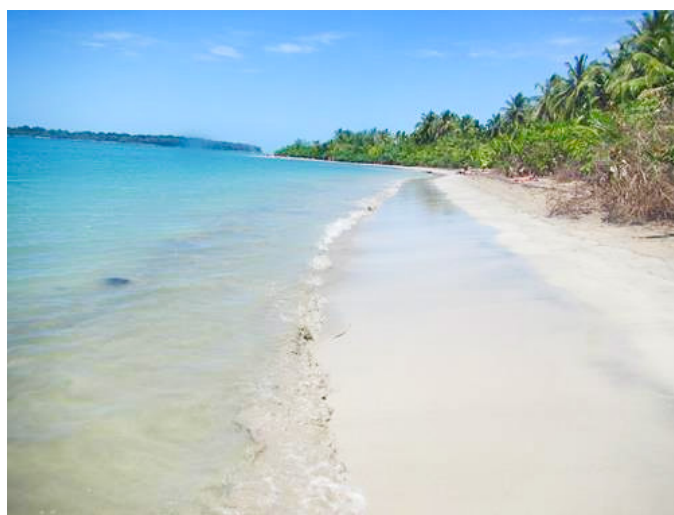
Boca del Drago is a picture perfect beach with white sand and turquoise water and plenty of starfish in the water. Please admire them and don't touch or even remove them from the water. Their population has dwindled over the last years as tourists keep engaging in this type of irresponsible behavior.

There is plenty of shade under palm and other trees at Boca del Drago and a restaurant and bar are directly on the beach.

Snorkeling for starfish is good, but you will not see many colorful fish.



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8. Las Perlas: Panama's Secret Beach Destination ([map](#), [reviews](#))

8.1 General Information

The archipelago of Las Perlas is a group of 90 named islands and more than 100 unnamed islets about 40 miles (65 km) south east of Panama City in the Gulf of Panama. It was named after the many large pearls the Spaniards found here when they discovered the islands in 1513. The Pearl Islands have world-class beaches with white sand and turquoise waters. Isla Contadora is the best-known island and most affordable island. It can be reached from Panama City by a 15min flight with a small aircraft or a 90min to 1h 45min [ferry ride](#).

Contador means Bookkeeper in Spanish and the name comes from the fact that the Spaniards used Contadora Island to take inventory of the valuables they plundered from the new world before it was shipped to Spain.

Three US Survivor seasons were filmed here: Survivor: Pearl Islands, Survivor: All-Stars and Survivor: Panama and several seasons from other countries' Survivor programming (Bulgaria, France, Israel, South Africa, Ukraine). There are several other series that were filmed here, among them is the BBC TV series "The Real Swiss Family Robinson".

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8.3 Playa Larga ([map](#), [reviews](#))

As the name suggests, Playa Larga is the largest beach (2,000ft; 650m) on Isla Contadora. It is also our favorite. It has white sand and turquoise water. Be advised that at low tide, it can be hundreds of feet until you reach the water. And at high tide, the water covers almost all the sand. So, be careful when you leave your valuables unattended.

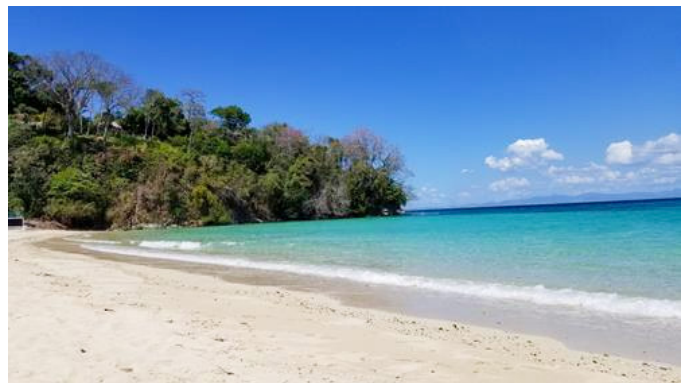
The water may get them.

There is fairly good snorkeling by the rocks to the north. And only if you are a strong swimmer, you can even discover a tiny hidden beach around the corner to the north ([map](#)).

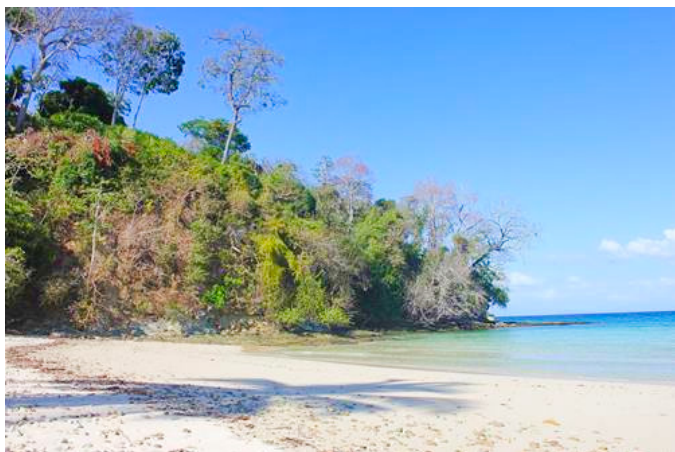
If you walk south on the beach then you will pass the ruins of an abandoned resort ([map](#)) and further south you come to the remnants of an abandoned boat that is covered with graffiti ([map](#)).

Best of all, we sometimes had the beach all to ourselves. The most people we have shared the beach with were maybe 7 or 8.

Since the [ferry from Panama City](#) is now arriving and departing from here, you will see more activity here twice a day.



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8.5 Playa Cacique ([map](#), [reviews](#))

Playa Cacique is a beautiful white sand beach with turquoise water in an upscale neighborhood with beautiful buildings. Be advised that the water is flooding the beach fast when the tide comes in. I

underestimated the speed twice and my valuables, including my cell phone, got wet twice.

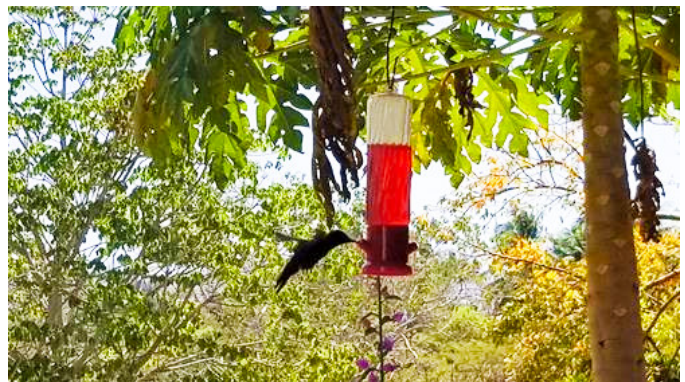
There is some snorkeling by the rocks, but it is not as good as it is at [Playa Larga](#).

This was the busiest beach that we have seen on Isla Contadora.



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Long story short: Hotel Gerald is a nice hotel in a great location and I would stay there again.



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Fuerte de San Jerónimo ([map](#))

This is the best-preserved fort in town. It was built in different stages between 1596 and 1779 to protect the ships that transported the robbed gold and silver from South America to Spain. The original fort was completed in 1596 and substantially upgraded after 1758. It is the largest fort on the bay.

You can still see 16 rusty cannons in the fort and the remains of the old officers' quarters and barracks.



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Iglesia de San Felipe ([map](#))

Iglesia de San Felipe is famous for its "Black Christ" statue which is the source of Portobelo's largest festival which takes place every year on October 21. According to legend the statue was left behind by a ship that was headed to Cartagena, Colombia. When a cholera epidemic threatened Portobelo, its residents started praying to the statue and the city was spared. So, every year pilgrims with ornate purple robes walk to San Felipe Church to give thanks or pray.





10 Closing Remarks

ABOUT RUDY FROM BACKPACK & SNORKEL

I was born in Germany and emigrated to the US in 2003. My wife and I are a truly multinational couple: I, with my German background, and she with her Chinese heritage. Both of us live in the USA.

Sadly, working in the US means we have much fewer vacation days compared to other countries like e.g. Germany and thus we cannot travel very frequently.

Through a lot of trial and error, we have found our ideal travel and vacation style. **Making Memorable Moments** by focusing on important destinations, planning time for meeting the locals and, of course, for relaxation are our priorities.

We have also learned to appreciate local foods and try to eat as many local dishes as possible. Just for fun, we try to eat at one Chinese restaurant in each country we visit. It is absolutely amazing how different Chinese food is all over the planet.



MAKING MEMORABLE MOMENTS

You may take 10,000 photos during your vacation, rush from one attraction to the next, but what you will remember in your heart is how you were **Making Memorable Moments**.

For me, that was e.g. Spider Rock in Canyon de Chelly (ever heard of this US National Park?). When I first saw it, I was blown away by this majestic natural obelisk and the beautiful canyon that it sits in. I have been there two more times and still feel the same.

Or think of Isla Mujeres, a small island outside Cancun, Mexico. On the surface, Playa Norte is supposedly Mexico's most beautiful beach and it is always crowded and the boats that anchor there play loud music. Below the surface, Isla Mujeres is very relaxed, quite walkable and it has friendly locals, good authentic Mexican food and good international cuisine and is often very affordable.

Isla Mujeres is our personal paradise!



PACK YOUR BACKPACK & SNORKEL AND LET'S GO

Our travel style has evolved over the years. We are packing light these days when we travel and typically only need a small backpack per person - see my [Traveling Light Guide](#).

With this guide, I want to provide value to you and help you plan your own relaxing vacations with the goal of **Making Memorable Moments!**

Please contact me if you have any questions or comments.