

## **Endless beaches, phenomenal shopping, natural attractions, and a diverse culture put Panama on the snowbirds' map**

**By Wanda Popadynetz, Travel Consultant, Calgary Co-op Richmond Road Centre**

### **THE DESTINATION**

Panama serves as the link between North America and South America, boasting 760 kilometers of Caribbean coastline and 1225 kilometers of Pacific coastline. But there's far more going on here than just a canal. Panama is a small country with a rich heritage and a tropical climate, featuring an abundance of rainforests, scenic mountain trails, and plenty of wildlife. The cosmopolitan capital, Panama City, treats visitors to a remarkable skyline, great nightlife, and intriguing museums, churches, and cathedrals.

Both coasts are home to spectacular beaches. Just 80 kilometers from Panama City are 64 kilometres of Pacific coastal beaches. On the Caribbean side, the Costa Arriba is renowned for the beach destinations between Colon and Palenque. In the interior, the Azuero Peninsula is the keeper of the Hispanic era's traditions, and is a great place to take part in carnival celebrations.

Shopping is one of the country's most powerful lures. Panama is home of the second-largest Free Trade Zone in the world (Hong Kong is number 1). You can find just about anything from electronics to jewelry for a fraction of the cost of what you would pay in the United States. The range of shops is diverse, complete with big-name designer boutiques.

The climate in Panama is amazing! The average temperature is 30° C year round. In the mountains, temperatures are lower, ranging from 10° to 18° C. Humidity is usually above 70 per cent. Panama is far from hurricane territory, and since record-keeping began in 1851, not a single hurricane has touched its shores. Panama is also free of natural disasters such as earthquakes and tornadoes.

My visit was all too brief: a 3-day bus tour designed to introduce travel experts to Panama, a new destination offered by Nolitours. Although my trip was short, my experience convinced me that an in-depth exploration of Panama is definitely in order!

### **ATTRACTIONS & ACTIVITIES**

The following options were offered by Decameron Explorer, a major tour operator in the area.

#### Panama Canal, "Eighth wonder of the World"

Touring the Panama Canal is a definite must, and is the most popular visitor attraction. Originally envisioned by Spain's King Carlos V in 1524, it wasn't until 1880 that the

French first started to work on the massive project. The US took over in 1904, and the Canal opened in 1914. We spent an hour at the visitor centre at the Miraflores Locks, viewing a short film on the Canal's history and looking at the locks. The canal has several locks, the largest being Gatooe on the Atlantic. You can do a tour to the Miraflores locks or take a boat and do a partial canal transit through the Miraflores Locks and the Pedro Miguel Locks.

### Chagres National Park

Travel up river to the Embera Village, to experience firsthand the traditional life of the indigenous Embera community. Discover their traditions and culture, and learn about medicinal herbs from their Shaman.

### Cocle

Cocle is a province in central Panama where traditional crafts are still an integral part of daily life. The tour includes a trip to the charming city of Penomone. You'll enjoy visiting a cathedral and city market, and exploring El Cano's San Antonio district and archaeological museum.

### Yayas Falls

Surrounded by a lush forest filled with exotic birds and amazing flora, you'll stroll to Yayas Falls, where water rushes down huge volcanic rocks, and enjoy a swim in the natural pool formed by the Falls.

### Canopy Adventure

This is an activity for the adventurous tourist looking for a new challenge. Ascend to the treetops and embark on a journey through the air, while observing the flora and fauna of the tropical rainforest from a unique perspective.

### Jungle Boat Tour

The perfect experience in the Gatun Lake! From the shores of the world's most famous man-made lake, you're transported by motorboat through a magnificent natural environment surrounded by lush rainforest.

### Caribbean Beach and Panama Canal Railway

After a 90-minute ride, you arrive in the city of Colon, Panama's commercial capital and the Western Hemisphere's largest Free Trade Zone. You'll visit Portobelo, a city whose location makes it a trading crossroads. You'll also swim in the crystal waters of the Caribbean Sea and take a panoramic tour of Colon before returning to Panama City on the Panama Canal Railway, the world's first inter-oceanic railway.

### Golf

Duffers will love the 18-hole Royal Decameron Golf Course, which was designed by internationally renowned expert Randall Thompson.

### Birdwatching on the Pipeline Road

The Pipeline Road is in the heart of the Parque Nacional Soberania, 45 minutes from Panama City, making it one of the most accessible tropical forests in the world. The forest is as diverse as the birdlife; there are approximately 1,300 species of trees, 105 species of mammals, 55 species of amphibians, and 79 species of reptiles.

#### Villa de Anton in the Anton Valley

This picturesque village features a market with a diverse offering of flowers, fruits, and vegetables, as well as crafts handmade by the villagers.

#### Chiva Parrandera – The Party Bus

The ultimate party! This evening tour of the city takes place aboard a brightly painted "chiva," the folkloric Panamanian means of transportation. In the background are the sounds of a "murga," a live Panamanian band playing traditional music. The bartender is at your disposal.

#### Additional Options

There are many more tours and activities on offer, such as a folkloric show and traditional dinner, hiking and wet rappelling, Bubba Gump boat-fishing Tour, surfing at El Palmar Beach, rafting down the Rio Grande, horseback riding in La Pintada Mountains, party with the pirates in the Bay of Panama, and diving at Drake Island, Taboga or Taboguilla Island.

## **ACCOMMODATION**

Panama offers a good range of hotels and resorts, and there is accommodation tailored to almost every preference and budget. Here's a quick look at the properties I had an opportunity to tour:

**Royal Decameron Golf, Beach Resort & Villas** – This large, all-inclusive 4-star property 137 km from Panama City is ideal for families and groups of friends. The rooms are very basic, but the activities and the food make up for the rooms. For avid golfers, the villas on the golf course are a good choice, but are a long walk from the beach. There are buses and trains to get you around. This resort is not recommended for those with limited mobility.

**Radisson Decapolis** – Located in Panama City, this upscale new 4-star hotel features a wide array of world-class services and amenities. It's just steps away from the Multicentro, home of the Majestic Casino and Central America's largest shopping mall. The property is "almost" all-inclusive; buffet breakfast, lunch, dinner, unlimited domestic and selected international drinks, and house wine are included.

**Playa Blanca Hotel & Resort Cameleon Select** – This all-inclusive 4-star property is located on the nicest beach on Panama's Pacific coast, approximately 130 km from Panama City. Expect a lively atmosphere, attentive service, and great dining.

**Gamboa Rainforest Resort** – A great spot for outdoor enthusiasts, this 3-star hotel puts you in the heart of Soberania National Park on 340 acres of property overlooking the Historic Chagres River and the Panama Canal. The main attractions are the Rainforest Aerial Tram and Observation Tower, Monkey Island Boat Tour, fresh-water fishing, Ella Puru Embera Indian Village Tour and bird watching. The resort also includes the Gamboa Spa, which pampers guests in a serene environment. The property is “almost” all-inclusive; buffet breakfast, lunch, dinner, unlimited domestic and selected international drinks, house wine, and select non-motorized water sports are included.

**Intercontinental Playa Bonita** – This all-inclusive 4-star property is set on Panama’s Pacific coast, approximately 10 kilometers from Panama City. It’s a smaller, quieter luxury resort, perfect for couples and families, and it was my personal favourite. It features 2 km of private beach and a spa, and offers a variety of tours and recreational activities.

**Hotel El Panama** – In the heart of Panama City, this 4-star hotel boasts a wonderful location for shopping, touring Panama City, and enjoying the night life. There’s a nice pool area, and a casino next door. Daily breakfast is included.

## **DINING**

The food was wonderful! There is plenty of fresh seafood along with a tempting variety of international foods.

## **GETTING AROUND**

Registered taxis are recommended, though local taxis are available at lower rates. Panama City has a bus system of privately owned buses; local bus travel is not recommended. A train operates once a day from Panama City to Colon and back. Panama City is planning to build a transit system, which is scheduled for completion in 2014. Car rentals are available; however, I would not recommend car travel because of the poor driving conditions.

## **GETTING THERE**

In the winter months, Air Transat flies direct from Calgary with Nolitours; the flight is approximately 7.5 hours. Other options are American Airlines through Dallas or Continental through Houston.

## **TRAVEL TIPS**

- Many Canadians and Americans own property in Panama. It’s a safe place, and a relatively rich nation because of the canal, but it *is* a third-world country. Don’t

carry large sums of money, don't wear valuable jewelry, and keep your passport secure. You are required to carry identification with you at all times.

- Spanish is the official language, but English is widely spoken.
- Ask permission before taking photographs of individuals, particularly children and women. When photographing indigenous persons, it is not uncommon to be asked to pay a small fee.
- The local currency is the Balboa, which is equivalent to a US dollar. US cash or travellers' cheques are recommended. ATM's are available in hotel lobbies but there is a fee to use them.
- A Canadian passport is required; passports must be valid 6 months beyond travel dates. Canadians must also have a visa or tourist card. Tourist cards valid for 30 days are handed out upon arrival. You can request an extension prior to the expiry date.
- Visitors must have the equivalent of \$500 US or a credit card, plus a return or onward ticket.
- An airport tax of \$20 US (cash only) is charged upon departure, although it is often included in the price of the airline ticket.
- Travel vaccines or preventive medications may be necessary. Check with your family doctor or a travel clinic six to eight weeks prior to departure.
- All hotels in Panama are non-smoking. No smoking is permitted in rooms, bars, restaurants or lobbies. The only areas designated for smoking are room balconies and the beach. Non-compliance is subject to a fine.

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

Fly south – direct from Calgary – and discover a destination that's out of this world. To find out why Panama's on everyone's map this winter, call Wanda Popadynetz at 403-299-4370, or email [wpopadynetz@calgarycoop.com](mailto:wpopadynetz@calgarycoop.com). Or visit any Calgary Co-op Travel Office; dial our Call Centre (403-299-4144) for service after hours, Sundays and holidays; or book online 24/7 via [www.calgarycoop.com](http://www.calgarycoop.com).