

The Best of Panama

For such a thin squiggle of land, Panama offers travelers a surprisingly diverse selection of landscapes, cultures, and experiences. In Panama City alone, modern skyscrapers contrast with 18th-century architecture, and a 10-minute cab ride from downtown puts you deep in rainforest teeming with wildlife. From the cool, fertile highlands in the Chiriquí region to the thick lowland jungle and white-sand beaches of Panama's tropical islands, this tiny nation allows you to pack a lot of fun and adventure into a short period of time. Also, unlike Costa Rica, its more popular neighbor, Panama boasts a rich history and a melting pot of cultures, including seven indigenous groups, many of whom maintain their customs today. Best of all, the country is gloriously free of tourists—but get here soon because Panama is far too attractive to be kept a secret for long.

The following is a list of the best that Panama has to offer, including hotels, natural areas, adventures, restaurants, and more, but expect new places to appear soon as tourism explodes and more travelers discover this fascinating crossroads of the world.

1 The Best of Natural Panama

- **Metropolitan Park** (Panama City): Panama City is the only metropolis that boasts a tropical rainforest within its city limits. Travelers with ample time will want to visit national parks like Soberanía, but there's no denying the appeal of hopping in a cab and, within 10 minutes, exchanging the city streets for a steamy jungle teeming with wildlife. See p. 121.
- **Soberanía National Park** (near Panama City): This national park is very accessible from Panama City—just 40 minutes by car—yet it feels worlds away. The undulating, pristine rainforest that defines Soberanía is protected in part because it acts as a watershed that provides the water to keep the canal in operation. What's unique about the park is that wildlife species from North and South America and migratory birds meet here,

creating a hyper-diverse natural wonderland. A series of nature trails here include the historic Camino de Cruces, which links the two coasts, as well as the famous Pipeline Road, a trail revered by bird-watchers for the more than 500 species of birds that live in the area. See p. 140.

- **Volcán Barú National Park** (Chiriquí Highlands): The rugged, 3,505m (11,500-ft.) Barú Volcano, the highest point in the country, is this national park's centerpiece and a "bioclimatic island." It's home to a wild, dense rainforest packed with bamboo gardens and towering trees dripping with vines and sprouting bromeliads and orchids from their trunks and branches. In higher reaches, an intermittent cloud forest evokes an eerie, prehistoric ambience. The park is very popular with bird-watchers, who come to

glimpse the famous resplendent quetzal. One of the most enjoyable full-day hikes in Panama is here along the Quetzal Trail, which links the towns of Guadalupe/Cerro Punta with Boquete, and the crystalline rivers that descend from the volcano provide thrilling white-water rafting. On a clear day, hikers can see both oceans from the summit of the volcano. See p. 230.

- **La Amistad International Park** (Chiriquí Highlands): Like Isla Coiba, UNESCO rated this park a World Heritage Site because it is one of the most biodiverse regions in the Americas. The park is “international” because half of it is in Costa Rica, and it’s managed by both nations. Characterized by virgin forests, La Amistad’s rugged Talamanca Range is home to more than 400 species of birds and 100 species of mammals, many of them endangered. The park is mostly inaccessible, except near Cerro Punta, where there are several outstanding walking trails suitable for all ability levels, and enjoyable rain or shine. See p. 222.
- **The Darién Wilderness** (Darién Province): This tremendous swath of forest and swampland is considered to be one of the last untouched wilderness regions in the Americas. Even the Darién National Park is largely inaccessible, and the surrounding wilderness is so thick that the “missing link” of the Pan-American Highway, known as the Darién Gap, is here. If you like your nature ruggedly wild and remote, this is your place. The Darién is rated as a world-class bird-watching site for its flocks

of colorful macaws, among other showcase species, but you’ll need to join a tour and grab a chartered flight to the Cana Field Station. See p. 293.

- **Isla Coiba National Park** (Chiriquí Gulf): Formerly the site of an infamous penal colony for Panama’s worst criminals, Isla Coiba is now an untouched paradise for divers, snorkelers, and nature lovers. The national park and UNESCO World Heritage Site protects 38 pristine islands and marine waters so rich in diversity that the area is commonly referred to as the Galápagos Islands of Panama. Isla Coiba boasts the second-largest coral reef in the eastern Pacific, and its waters teem with huge schools of colorful fish, hammerhead and nurse sharks, dolphins, manta rays, tuna, turtles, whales, and other gigantic marine species—even saltwater crocodiles. See p. 248.
- **The Kuna Yala Comarca:** This tropical island paradise, with more than 350 idyllic islands and islets ringed in white sand, coral gardens, and mangrove swamps, is often populated with not much more than slender coconut palms and a few thatched-roofed huts of the Kuna indigenous community. Given the lack of modern development in the region, the views here are not marred by towering hotels and resorts, allowing the natural beauty of the Comarca to shine through. Along the coast, some of Panama’s wildest jungle can be explored on hikes arranged by local tour guides, but most visitors come just to soak in the warm breeze and cool turquoise waters. See p. 282.

2 The Best Beaches

In spite of the hundreds of kilometers of coastline on both the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean, Panama’s beaches are less than noteworthy. The coastal area sur-

rounding Panama City is mud flats; farther west the sand is dark and the water dirty-green until you reach the pretty beaches at Santa Clara and Farallón. The

Azuero Peninsula and parts of the Caribbean coast are, sadly, receptacles for trash carried by currents from South America and beyond. There are a few exceptions, but to find glorious tropical beaches, you'll need to visit Panama's islands. There are more than 1,000 on the Pacific Side and a little more than half that number on the Caribbean, so you have a lot to choose from. ***A word of caution:*** Panama is renowned for its riptides. No matter how refreshing the water looks, analyze conditions, stay out of choppy water, or head to a beach known for calm water.

- **Comarca Kuna Yala:** This is the premier beach destination in Panama, with 350 islands scattered off the Caribbean coast that offer picture-postcard beaches with powdery white sand, coral reef, piercing turquoise water, and clusters of swaying palm trees. The colorful Kuna indigenous population administers this province, and their fascinating culture is part of the reason to visit the region, too. The glitch is that scuba diving is prohibited, and lodging is mostly Robinson Crusoe rustic, but all you'll want to do here anyway is swim, sun, and swing in a hammock. See p. 282.
- **Isla Bastimentos National Park, Bocas del Toro:** Cayos Zapatillas, or the "Slippers Islands" (so-called because they resemble footprints), not only fulfill the beach lover's fantasy with their soft sand backed by a tangle of jungle; they are also surrounded by a rich display of coral that attracts hordes of fish, providing good snorkeling. The park's main island, Isla Bastimentos, offers terrific beaches with clean sand and blue water, such as **Red Frog Beach, Wizard Beach, and Playa Larga**, which can be reached by a short walk or hike, or by boat during the calm-water season from August through October. See p. 275.

• **Santa Clara & Farallón, Pacific Coast:** These two are the most beautiful beaches, and the best for swimming, that lie within a 2-hour drive of Panama City. The beaches' water is bluer and the sand cleaner and whiter than that of its neighbors closer to the city. The Decameron Resort produces throngs of beachgoers at Farallón, but for the most part this long stretch of sand sees few crowds outside of weekends. Self-catering cabins, midrange bungalows, and seafood restaurants are abundant. See p. 181.

- **Las Perlas Archipelago:** Despite this Pacific archipelago's proximity to Panama City, its top-notch snorkeling, white-sand beaches, and calm-water swimming conditions, the Pearl Islands are a relatively unsung beach destination. Outside of holidays and the hard-core summer, you won't find crowds here, even during weekends. It's also drier here during the rainy season. **Isla Contadora** offers lodging and day trips for fabulous snorkeling and visits to uninhabited beaches, and there is a luxury lodge, **Hacienda San José**, on Isla San José.
- **Isla Coiba National Park:** Beyond ranking as Panama's number-one diving site, Isla Coiba National Park boasts fine beaches backed by dense jungle. Tiny islands such as **Granito de Oro** are so idyllic that midsize cruise ships make a stop here (which could spoil your day if you're here independently). Even the beach fronting the park station seems too perfect to be true. See p. 248.
- **Las Lajas, Chiriquí Province:** It's not the most beautiful beach in Panama, but the water is the perfect temperature, and produces just the right amount of waves for bodysurfing—though there's little current. All of which means that Las Lajas is ideal for swimming, and since the beach

measures more than 13km (8 miles) in length, you can walk forever. Rustic shacks and cheap restaurants are clustered on the beach at the end of the road, but it's best to bring your own snacks. If you're looking for a beach closer to David (and Boquete), try **La Barqueta**. Strong currents at this black-sand beach mean the water is not ideal for swimming, but it is lengthy like Las Lajas and good for walking, and there is a nature reserve here, too. See p. 215.

- **Playa Los Destiladores & Playa Venado, Azuero Peninsula:** Of the multitude of beaches lining the coast

of the Azuero Peninsula, these two are the cleanest and the most attractive, and they are within a 20-minute drive from each other. However, given the deforestation in the area, they are less "tropical" than other Panamanian beaches. Currents will occasionally churn up the water along the golden sand at Playa Destiladores, but a protected cove at Playa Venado means it's calm enough for a toddler, and farther east crashing waves have converted the beach into a surfing hot spot. A major bonus here is the nearby picturesque town of Pedasí, and three gorgeous lodges. See p. 203.

3 The Best Adventures

- **White-water Rafting & Kayaking the Chiriquí and Chiriquí Viejo Rivers:** Depending on which section you raft, these two rivers produce serious white-water ranging from technical Class III to Class V, some portions of which are so difficult they've been named "Fear" and "Get Out if You Can." There are plenty of tamer floats on Class II rivers, such as the Esti, for families and beginners. Virtual solitude, beautiful views, and lush surroundings are part of the tour, too. Contact **Chiriquí River Rafting** (© 720-1505; www.panama-rafting.com) in Boquete or, for kayaking, **Panama Rafters** (© 720-2712; www.panamarafter.com). See p. 232.
- **Zipping through the Treetops on a Canopy Adventure:** It's all the rage in Costa Rica, and now Panama has joined in to offer this adrenaline-fueled and exhilarating adventure. Participants climb high to a treetop platform, where they are strapped into a harness and then descend quickly using a pulley attached to a cable. Part of the experience is observing wildlife, mostly birds, from

different vantage points in the forest. Both **Canopy Adventure** (© 264-5720; www.canopylodge.com), in El Valle, and **Boquete Tree Trek** (© 720-1635; www.canopypanama.com), in Boquete, offer canopy rides. See p. 184.

- **Surfing Bocas del Toro:** There are plenty of surfing hot spots along the Pacific Coast, especially at Santa Catalina, but Bocas is where surfers find everything from beginner-friendly waves to monster, Hawaii-style waves that reach more than 6m (20 ft.). What's special about Bocas, too, is that the water is clear blue, allowing you to see the reef as you race over it, and there are lots of lodging options, restaurants, and thumping nightlife, unlike in Santa Catalina. Another perk is that the Caribbean tides fluctuate only .9m (3 ft.), whereas the Pacific's fluctuate five times that amount. The waves here are powerful beach breaks, and long, barreling reef point breaks; for organized tours, contact **Panama Surf Tours** (© 6671-7777; www.panamasurftours.com). See p. 253.

- **Diving around Isla Coiba:** This national park only recently opened to the traveling public—a notorious penal colony that closed here in 2004 kept tourists away, and now the park's virgin waters rate as *the* best diving site in Panama. Isla Coiba is often described as the Galápagos Islands of Panama, and although the snorkeling is outstanding, diving gets you close to pelagics such as white-tipped sharks, sailfish, turtles, manta rays, dolphins, and so much more. Coiba is home to one of the largest coral reefs in the Pacific Coast of the Americas. Day excursions involve a minimum of 3 hours round-trip to get here, which is why many multiday excursions include onboard lodging, or at the park ranger's cabins on the island. See p. 246.
- **Trekking the Camino Real:** Centuries before the Panama Canal, the Spanish built a 80km (50-mile) cobblestone path to transport looted gold from the Pacific to galleons waiting in the Caribbean Sea. You can trace their path, much of which still exists in stone, in about 3 days, beginning with a canoe ride up the Chagres River, an overnight in an Emberá Indian Village, and a tramp through earthy jungle full of birds and wildlife to Nombre de Dios, near Portobelo. Lodging is in tents, and the return trip is by railroad to give you an idea of how revolutionary the railroad's construction was to increasing coastal access. **Ancon Expeditions** (© 269-9415; www.anconexpeditions.com) is the company to call. See p. 148.
- **Reeling in a Billfish off the Pacific Coast:** Panama's Pacific Coast is legendary for sport fishing, and anglers can battle monster species such as marlin, sailfish, and tuna in the Gulf of Chiriquí and the Gulf of Panama. Near Piñas Bay, the **Tropic Star Lodge** has broken more International Game and Fish Association world records than anywhere else on the planet. There are a handful of fishing lodges at Boca Chica, near David, and as many live-aboard fishing operations that use charter yachts or barges as home base. Check out "Fishing" in chapter 4.
- **Kayaking in the Kuna Yala Comarca:** Considering that diving is prohibited in the Kuna Yala, kayaking fills the "sports void," and offers travelers a way to intimately explore the mangrove swamps and the undeveloped beauty of the tiny islands this region is famous for. Along the way, kayakers stop at traditional Kuna communities for cultural tours, land-based hiking, and snorkeling. **Xtrop** (© 317-1279; www.xtrop.com), or "Expediciones Tropicales," is the company to call; they are a well-respected company and the only outfitters with special permission from the Kuna chief to kayak in the Kuna Yala. They employ local guides. See p. 287.
- **Bird-Watching by Dugout Canoe on the Mogue River** (Darién Wilderness): The tour outfitter Ancon Expeditions offers a bird-watching and nature adventure near Punta Patiño that takes travelers up the Mogue River in a motorized dugout canoe, winding past dry forest and ancient mangrove swamps for an absolutely authentic jungle experience. From here, it's off to find the harpy eagle, Panama's national bird, and then spend the night with Emberá Indians in one of their rustic communities. For more information, contact Ancon at (© 269-9415; www.anconexpeditions.com). See p. 297.

4 The Best Day Hikes & Nature Walks

- **The Quetzal Trail** (Volcán Barú National Park): Panama's foremost day hike takes visitors around the northeastern flank of Volcán Barú and through primary and secondary tropical forest and cloud forest that provides a dazzling array of flora and fauna. The trail's namesake resplendent quetzal lives here, too. The trail is mostly downhill from the Cerro Punta side to Boquete, and is the recommended direction unless you really crave a workout. What's unique about this trek is that travelers lodging around Cerro Punta can send their luggage to their next hotel in Boquete, and walk there. See p. 221.
- **Walk to Pirre Mountain** (Darién National Park): This is a serious jungle trail, located in one of the most remote wildernesses in Central America. Pirre Mountain rises above the Cana Field Station in the Darién National Park, and is a moderate-to-difficult trail beloved by nature enthusiasts and bird-watchers for its dense concentration of fauna. Howler monkeys, spider monkeys, sloths, even snakes are easily and frequently spotted, but just as exciting is the wild sensation that comes from the magnificent jungle surrounding you. At the peak's summit, there is a lookout point with sweeping views. See p. 297.
- **Pipeline Road** (Soberanía National Park): As mentioned elsewhere, Pipeline is a bird-watcher's haven, but this trail also provides outstanding opportunities to see wildlife and just to delve into steamy, wild jungle. The farther you walk or bike, the better your chances of seeing monkeys, coatimundis, sloths, and other mammals. The best time to go is early morning, before 9am if possible, when birds and animals are most active. See p. 140.
- **Finca Suiza** (on the road between Almirante and David): The Swiss owners of this tiny ranch-style hostel offer some of the best hiking trails in Panama, both for beauty and because they are so well-maintained and marked. There are three loop trails that connect with one another; all are moderate to difficult but worth the initial climb for the expansive views of the coast and lowlands of the Pacific, and into the peaks of Costa Rica. The trails pass through verdant rainforest, and there are waterfalls with bathing pools for taking a dip. You can visit for the day, or bunk in their simple but attractive rooms (© 6615-3774; www.panama.net.tc). See p. 244.
- **La Amistad International Park** (Chiriquí Highlands): Visitors here can walk a quick 15-minute easy path near the ranger station, or an hour-long (but still easy) path through bamboo gardens and thick jungle, and past clear-water creeks. Another 2-hour hike takes visitors to a series of lookout points with mountain and valley views, and a crashing 49m (160-ft.) waterfall; a detour here to a lookout point offers a view that stretches to the Caribbean. Gung-ho hikers can hack through a narrow trail up to a peak for a coast-to-coast view. Finish it off with a delicious lunch at the local co-op cafe near the ranger station. See p. 222.

5 The Best Bird-Watching

- **Watching Macaws in Flight Over the Forests of Darién National Park:** Few places in the world rival the Darién National Park for bird-watching. The .5 million hectares (1.3 million acres) of rainforest here provide a home for four species of macaws, including blue and gold, red and green, great green, and chestnut-fronted. These noisy and colorful birds sail over the **Cana Field Station**, a converted research facility and bird-watcher's sanctuary run by **Ancon Expeditions** (© 269-9415; www.anconexpeditions.com); they'll take you up Pirre Mountain, where, if you're lucky, you'll glimpse the golden-headed quetzal. Also expect to see a rainbow of tanagers, toucans, oropendolas, and black-tipped cotinas. See p. 297.
- **Looking for More Than 500 Species of Birds Along Pipeline Road in Soberanía National Park:** This is the "celebrity" bird-watching trail for the immense number of species found here. In fact, for several years Pipeline Road has set the world record for 24-hour bird counts. Even non-birders can't help getting caught up in the action with so many colorful show birds fluttering about, such as mot mors, trogons, toucans, antbirds, colorful tanagers, and flycatchers. The farther you walk or bike along the rainforest trail, the better your chances of spotting rare birds. Contact **Advantage Tours** ★★ (© 6676-2466; www.advantagepanama.com); Guido Berguido can provide you with a bird-watching tour. See p. 66.
- **Catching Sight of the Resplendent Quetzal in the Cloud Forests of the Chiriquí Highlands:** The iridescent green resplendent quetzal is widely considered to be the most beautiful bird in the Americas, and it was revered by the Aztecs and the Mayans. Today bird-watchers are the ones who marvel at a sighting, especially of the male quetzal for his breeding plumage and tail feathers that can reach nearly .6m (2 ft.). Nonbirders, too, can't help getting caught up in the excitement of seeing a quetzal. From December to May, the best place to see a quetzal is in the cloud forests of **Volcán Barú National Park**, but if you want a near guarantee that you'll see one, head to **Finca Lérida** (© 720-2285; www.fincalerida.com) in Boquete and have them book the bird-watching guide **Santiago "Chago" Caballero** (© 6626-2200; santiagochagotours@hotmail.com) or one of his protégés—they're the best in the quetzal-spotting business. See p. 230.
- **Being Taken Aback by the Size of the Harpy Eagle in Punta Patiño Nature Reserve:** The harpy eagle is Panama's national bird and one of the largest eagles in the world, with a wingspan that can reach more than 1.8m (6 ft.). You can't help being struck by this creature's size, though now that they've made the endangered list, they're not the easiest bird to spot. Head to Punta Patiño, and your chances soar. **Ancon Expeditions** (© 269-9415; www.anconexpeditions.com) has a lodge here and organizes bird-watching trips. Short on time? Visit the harpy eagles at **Summit Gardens Park & Zoo** (© 232-4850; www.summitpanama.org), near Panama City. See p. 144.
- **Grabbing a Cab to View 200+ Species in the Metropolitan Park:** Panama City's Metropolitan Park is the only protected tropical forest

found within the city limits of a major urban area in the Americas—a 10-minute cab ride and you're there, checking out orange-billed sparrows, green honeycreepers, rufous and white wrens, and thrush tanagers, among more than 200 other species. Head to the top of the Cerro Mono Titi hilltop to view canopy birds down the slope, not to mention a pretty spectacular view of the city. See p. 121.

- **Discovering Trogons, Blue Cotinas, and Chestnut-Mandible Toucans on the Little-Known Achioite Road:** The Atlantic Coast village of Achioite, about a 1½-hour drive from Panama City, is quietly revered as a bird-watching mecca by those in the know—the Audubon Society holds their Atlantic Christmas Bird Count

here and has counted up to 390 species in a single day. Also fluttering around Achioite are orange-chinned parakeets, barbets, and flocks of swallowtail kites. Check out their website at www.panamaaudubon.org to see if they've got any day trips planned to the area. See p. 150.

- **Delving Into the World of Bird-Watching at the Canopy Lodge or Canopy Tower:** These two lodges live and breathe bird-watching, with day trips, viewing platforms, expert guides, and a fully stocked bird-watcher's library. The lodges are located in prime bird-watching spots in Soberanía National Park and the cloud-forest foothills of Valle de Antón (© 264-5720 or 6687-0291; www.canopystower.com). See p. 145.

6 The Best Destinations for Families

- **Panama City:** If you're using Panama City as a base for day excursions to the Canal Zone, the **Country Inn & Suites Causeway** (© 211-4501) is a good bet for families for its safe, quiet location, outdoor pools, bicycle rental, and long walking/jogging shoreline path that connects with the Amador Causeway. On the causeway, visit the **Smithsonian's Marine Exhibit Center** (© 212-8793) to view and touch sea creatures. Kids and adults get a kick out of seeing the colorful **Mercado de Mariscos** (Fish Market), and kids like the **Kuna Cooperative**, where Kuna women affix their traditional beaded bands to the arms and legs of tourists. See p. 124.
- **The Canal Zone:** The Panama Canal, Lake Gatún, and the surrounding rainforest overflow with kid-friendly activities, and parents can either base themselves in Panama City or at **Gamboa Rainforest Resort** (Gamboa; © 877/800-1690), a kid-pleaser for its swimming pools, games center,

butterfly farm, reptile displays, and aerial tram. Families can also rent a bicycle for a ride up the Pipeline Road to view wildlife and birds. See p. 145.

- **Jungle Adventure Cruises:** Half-day jungle cruises are fun for families because of wildlife sightings, and also because cruises put participants shockingly close to massive tankers crossing the Panama Canal. Cruises visit Monkey Island, where it is almost guaranteed you'll see four different species; also keep an eye out for capybaras, crocodiles, and sloths. Gamboa Rainforest Resort has their own tour, or try **Ancon Expeditions** (© 269-9415) for their fun guides. See p. 142.

- **Summit Garden & Zoo** (near Panama City; © 232-4850): Wildlife is notorious for shying away from humans, but you can view jaguars, monkeys, tapirs, harpy eagles, and other species endemic to Panama at this zoo. It's not a fancy attraction, but there are extensive lawns and gardens,

and the zoo is undergoing a progressive renovation during the next few years. See p. 144.

- **Emberá Villages** (Chagres River, near Panama City): This adventurous trip is fun for kids because it involves traveling a jungle-choked Chagres River by motorized dugout canoe to an Emberá Indian village. Along the way, guides keep an eye out for wildlife. The Emberá's rustic villages, handcrafts, and temporary *jagua*-stain "tattoos" fascinate kids and adults alike. Give **Ecocircuitos** (© 314-1586) a call. See p. 144.
- **Isla Contadora** (Archipiélago de las Perlas): What's special about this island are the dozen beaches that offer calm-water swimming conditions, the best snorkeling in Panama, day excursions to uninhabited islands, fishing trips, and more. The **Hotel Contadora Resort** (© 264-1510), while certainly not the nicest hotel on the island, does front a perfect beach and offers day passes that include lunch and the use of kayaks and other sports equipment; they also have a minizoo with monkeys. See p. 167.
- **El Valle de Antón:** Just 2 hours from Panama City, this mountain village provides families with a host of activities, including horseback riding, hiking, canopy adventures, a serpentarium, and El Nispero Zoo, with its

new amphibian center. The most family-friendly hotel here is the **Crater Valley Adventure Spa** (© 983-6167), with a climbing wall, bicycle rental, and kids' activities, as well as an elegant pool and minispa for adults. See p. 186.

- **Bocas del Toro:** Three distinctively different lodges on Isla Bastimentos in Bocas offer family-friendly activities. Go to Bahía Honda to see bat caves, sloths, monkeys, and caimans; snorkel around Cayos Zapatilla, kayak through mangroves or on a Class I inland river, and more. Check out **The Jungle Lodge** (© 6592-5162), **Tranquilo Bay** (© 6620-4179), and **Casa Cayuco** (© 509/996-4178 in the U.S.). See p. 278, p. 279, and p. 280.
- **Chiriquí Highlands:** Many B&Bs in the Chiriquí do not accept kids, so book at the **Manatíal Spa & Lodge** (© 771-5126) near Bambito; they have a canopy line, trout fishing, outdoor pools, and kids' activities. A short, kid-friendly trail is in La Amistad International Park. The **Quetzal Trail** offers fairyland rainforest and birds, and is downhill from west to east. If staying in Boquete or Bambito, book a Class II white-water rafting trip with **Chiriquí Rafting** (© 720-1505). See p. 229.

7 The Best Luxury Hotels & Resorts

- **The Panama Marriott Hotel** (Panama City; © 210-9100): Of all the upscale options in Panama City, the Marriott consistently outshines its competitors. The hotel is in excellent shape, chock-full of facilities and amenities; guest rooms are roomy and comfortable, and the staff provides outstanding service. A central location close to restaurants and shops is an added bonus. See p. 94.
- **The Bristol Panama** (Panama City; © 265-7844): It's button-up luxury with conservative textures and hues, English furniture, and carpeted guest rooms, but still the ambience at the Bristol feels cozy rather than stuffy. The Bristol is known for its bend-over-backward service and fine dining at Las Barandas Restaurant, though it doesn't have a pool. See p. 93.

- **Intercontinental Playa Bonita Resort & Spa** (Playa Bonita; ☎ 800/424-6835): If you're looking for a full-scale resort with all the trimmings yet not too far from Panama City, this brand-new destination resort fills the bill. Set on a small inlet on the Pacific Coast, and backed by lush jungle, the Inter-Continental feels more exclusive than other resorts on the Pacific Coast. The beach itself is just a step above mediocre, but the swimming pools, outdoor activities, and sybaritic spa will keep you busy enough. The Intercontinental is so close to Panama City that you can dine there at night; and they offer access to the Tucán Golf Course. See p. 174.
- **Islas Secas** (Isla Secas; ☎ 805/729-2737 in the U.S.): Casual elegance and an eco-conscious design using deluxe, solar-powered yurts for lodging are the hallmarks of this exquisite boutique resort, located on a private island in the blue waters of the Gulf of Chiriquí. Expect outstanding cuisine, impeccable service, access to world-class sport fishing and diving, and the smug feeling of having escaped the crowds. Islas Secas offers a bevy of activities, or they can leave you "stranded" on an uninhabited island for the day or back at home base at their spa. See p. 248.
- **Coral Lodge** (Colón Province; ☎ 317-6754): Spread around a dreamy inlet ringed with white sand and backed by coconut palms and thick jungle, this is a diver's and snorkeler's paradise, and one of the more luxurious and handsome lodges in Panama (it's eco-conscious, too). Lodging is in cozy individual thatched-roof *casitas* with snorkeling just outside your door—and the property is close enough to the Comarca Kuna Yala to tie in a visit there. See p. 159.
- **Hacienda del Mar** (Isla San José; ☎ 866/433-5627): If you're looking for a lodge in a pristine island setting that isn't too far from Panama City, but that offers plenty of outdoor activities—this place fills the bill. Accommodations are in individual bungalows spread across a promontory and offering dynamite views. The overall ambience is intimate and romantic, making it an ideal place for a honeymoon. See p. 169.
- **Villa Camila** (Los Destiladores; ☎ 232-6721): It's one of Panama's finest hotels and one of its most exclusive, tucked away on the wooded shore of the Azuero Peninsula. French architect Gilles Saint-Gilles employed traditional, local woodworking and iron casting techniques to build a gorgeous and sophisticated hybrid of a hacienda and Moroccan villa, with locally produced furniture, individually designed rooms, and a wide veranda with wonderful views out to the sea. Surprisingly, the hotel is little-known, and with so few guests you can expect a high level of intimacy and privacy. Villa Camila prides itself on eco-friendly practices. See p. 207.
- **Tropic Star Lodge** (Piñas Bay, Darién Province; 800/682-3424; www.tropicstar.com): For more than 40 years, the Tropic Star Lodge has drawn VIPs, sports stars, and actors for its world-renowned sport fishing—which is the focus of this lodge. If you're not a VIP, that's okay; this lodge just wants fishing fans, and they openly welcome families to get the kids interested in this high-adrenaline sport. The luxurious Tropic Star is located in the Darién Province on the Pacific Coast, and must be reached by small plane. See p. 299.

8 The Best Ecolodges & Wilderness Resorts

These days, the term “ecolodge” is used so frequently that it has come to mean anything from a converted research station with no electricity to a “sustainable luxury” lodge. Ecolodges, by definition, should employ environmentally sound practices such as proper waste management, and contribute back to the local economy through jobs and an incentive to protect the environment for tourism. Ecolodges should also offer guided nature tours and provide in-depth information. The Gamboa Resort is the least “eco” of the following lodges, but its location, guided tours, and wildlife displays still place it in this category.

- **Canopy Lodge & Canopy Tower** (El Valle de Antón & Soberanía National Park; ☎ 264-5720): Birders flock to these two ecolodges for their focus on our feathered friends and their location in habitats friendly to a wide range of species. The **Canopy Tower**, a remodeled military radar station in thick jungle, is a cross between a stylish B&B and a scientific research center. It's just 25 minutes from Panama City but feels worlds away, and the 360-degree observation deck here provides stunning views and a platform with scopes. The **Canopy Lodge** is more luxurious, with minimalist design that blends into the forested surroundings. Outstanding birding guides, a well-stocked library, day trips, and chats are a part of the stay. See p. 188.
- **Gamboa Rainforest Resort** (Gamboa; ☎ 877/800-1690): They bill themselves as an eco-resort, but the Gamboa is better called a “destination megaresort” that appeals equally to travelers seeking contact with nature to those who just want to be surrounded by nature while kicking back at the pool. Guided nature tours

include jungle boat cruises, an aerial tram ride through the rainforest, and a minizoo of reptile, butterfly, and marine species exhibits. There's also a full-service spa. See p. 145.

- **The Jungle Lodge** (Bocas del Toro; ☎ 6592-5162): No other lodge envelops you more in nature than this one—it's like playing Tarzan and Jane for a night. Sleeping in an open-air, thatched-roof bungalow, of course, is not for everyone, but the cabins are stylish, and two sit high in the forest canopy, with sweeping views and wildlife sightings. There are guided nature and cultural visits with Ngöbe-Buglé Indians, organic meals, and an on-site butterfly farm. See p. 279.
- **Cana Field Station** (Darién National Park; ☎ 269-9415): Originally a research facility, this rustic lodge is nestled in the Darién, the wildest and most remote region of Panama and renowned as one of the best birding sites in the world. Ancon Expeditions owns and runs the lodge, but birding specialty tour operators book here, too. Rooms are basic, with shared bathrooms, and meals are shared communally. They include an overnight at the Pirre Tent Camp in the cloud forest. See p. 298.
- **Punta Patiño Lodge** (Darién Province, Gulf of San Miguel; ☎ 269-9415): This hilltop lodge looks out over the Pacific, and though it's rustic, it is a step up in comfort compared to the Cana Field Station, with air-conditioning and private bathrooms. It's also owned by Ancon Expeditions, but international tour outfitters book here, too. The lodge puts travelers close to wetlands, Emberá indigenous communities, sightings of the harpy eagle, and adventurous jungle rides up rivers in dugout canoes. See p. 296.

- **Sierra Llorona Panama Lodge** (Colón Province; ☎ 442-8104): This intimate, family-run lodge is a good bet for birders seeking a less-expensive option than the Canopy Tower. The lodge is nestled in 202 hectares (500 acres) of lush rainforest that is home to more than 150 species of birds, and there are walking trails, a natural bathing pool, and day trips in the surrounding area. Rooms are simple but spotless. See p. 144.
- **Tranquilo Bay** (Bocas del Toro; ☎ 620-4179): Embraced by lush, vibrant jungle and fronted by a thicket of mangroves, this resort, a haven for adventurers, is the most upscale lodging option in Bocas del Toro. The idea here is to provide activities that go where no other tour operator goes, including river kayaking on the mainland, snorkeling in remote areas, jungle hikes, and visits to isolated beaches. The cabins, though simply designed, offer plush interiors with high-quality beds and spacious bathrooms. See p. 280.
- **Trinidad Spa & Lodge** (near Penonomé; ☎ 786/206-0219 in the U.S.; www.posadaecologica.com): The drop-dead views and the fact that this spa and lodge is known to few outside of Panama City make the Trinidad Spa & Lodge a real find. The lodge is nestled in thick, green jungle and dominated by a torlike hill called Cerro La Vieja. Spa services are reasonably priced, and there are walking trails, mule rides, and other outdoor excursions. They serve delicious, organic cuisine, too. See p. 193.
- **Los Quetzales Lodge & Spa** (Guadalupe; ☎ 771-2291): Although the main lodge is in town, there are several rustic wooden cabins set deep in lush rainforest that swarms with colorful birds. The cabins are large enough for groups, and they provide travelers with the wildest independent lodging option in the country. The cabins can be self-catering, or they'll send a chef up to cook for you. Walking trails and horseback-riding trips are options for those who stay here. See p. 225.

9 The Best Small Hotels & B&Bs

- **The Coffee Estate Inn** (Boquete; ☎ 720-2211; www.coffeeestateinn.com): Gorgeous views of Volcán Barú, cozy bungalows with full kitchens, and owner-managed, friendly service tailored to your needs are the hallmarks of The Coffee Estate Inn. The bungalows are enveloped in native forest, fruit trees, and flowers that attract myriad birds. The romantic ambience is ideal for honeymooners. See p. 237.
- **Boquete Garden Inn** (Boquete; ☎ 720-2376; www.boquetegardeninn.com): The price is nice, and the pretty manicured gardens and comfy cabin-style rooms make this B&B an irresistible deal. The setting, on the outskirts of town, is quiet, save the sound of a babbling creek. The cabins are newly renovated and have kitchinettes. See p. 239.
- **Cielito Sur** (Nueva Suiza; ☎ 771-2038; www.cielitosur.com): The first thing you'll notice at this lovely country inn is the dozens of hummingbirds whizzing around the property. The Cielito is an ideal place for travelers seeking a pastoral setting, snug guest rooms, and easy-to-plan excursions. The inn also has lots of common areas, including a living area with lounge chairs and a well-stocked library. See p. 223.

- **Perla Real Inn** (Isla Contadora; ☎ 250-4095; www.perlareal.com). This new gem of an inn is owned by a Californian who modeled the decor after Spanish missions from his home state. The Perla is fresh and cool, and a good value, too. Independent travelers can buy their own supplies and book a suite with a kitchenette. The inn looks over a small patio courtyard with a bubbling fountain. See p. 167.
- **Vereda Tropical Hotel** (Isla Taboga; ☎ 250-2154; www.veredatropicalhotel.com): This artfully designed, Mexican-style inn is a welcome addition to an island destination that was formerly starved of decent lodging. Expansive views, an indoor atrium patio, and swirling iron balustrades are key features, and their restaurant, on a breezy veranda, is one of Panama's best spots for a lunch or an afternoon cocktail. See p. 162.
- **La Casa de Lourdes** (El Valle de Antón; ☎ 983-6645; www.lacasade lourdes.com): Perched on a gently sloping hill and offering picturesque views of the Antón crater, this deluxe boutique hotel is also home to one of Panama's best restaurants. The Tuscan-style hotel recently opened a high-end spa, and they rent bikes and arrange tours. See p. 188.
- **Park Eden Bed & Breakfast** (El Valle de Antón; ☎ 983-6167; www.parkeden.com): It's the true definition of a B&B: owner-run; lots of charming, country decor; hearty breakfasts; and warm, gracious service. There are doubles and a full house for a group. The storybook setting is amid flowering gardens and forest. See p. 189.
- **Posada los Destiladores** (Playa los Destiladores; ☎ 6675-9715; www.panamabambu.net). These rustic yet ultrastylish, individual bungalows offer one of the most romantic places to stay on the Pacific Coast of Panama. Secluded among 8.1 hectares (20 acres) of tropical plants and teak trees, the bungalows feature bamboo, thatched roofs, and intricately carved, custom-made furniture using local materials. There is a pool and private access to a beautiful beach. See p. 206.
- **Villa Marina** (☎ 646/383-7486 in the U.S.; www.playavenado.com). Best described as a family home that happens to rent out rooms, this beachfront B&B is a find, located on the shore of surfing beach Playa Venado. The colonial-style home, set on 89 hectares (220 acres) of private land and boasting beautiful sunsets, is elegantly appointed—but the ambience is easeful, not fussy. Villa Marina is best rented with a group, but individual reservations are accepted, too. See p. 206.

10 The Best Restaurants

- **Manolo Caracol** (Panama City; ☎ 228-4640): The city's most innovative restaurant features an adventurous and creative daily menu that embraces in-season products and the freshest and most exotic fish of any restaurant in town. Sit back in the colonial, artsy ambience and wait for a "surprise" of 12 courses to be slowly ushered to your table—you never know what you're going to get, but you know it will be good. See p. 106.
- **Limoncillo** (Panama City; ☎ 263-5350): This little gourmet bistro is headed by a top chef who earned her stripes in New York, and brought that city's dining concept to Panama City: creative taste combinations, chill-out background music, an artsy ambience, and high-end prices. The food

is mostly contemporary Mediterranean and Italian, and the cocktails are divine. See p. 103.

- **Palms** (Panama City; ☎ 265-7256): It's one of the hippest restaurants in Panama City, with a tropical-chic and sleek decor, and delicious, well-conceived dishes that expertly blend Mediterranean, Asian, and Latin American flavors and ingredients. Upstairs is an ultra-modern bar for a nightcap. See p. 104.
- **Las Barandas** (Panama City; ☎ 265-7844): Panama City's best boutique hotel also has one of its best restaurants. At the helm is "Cuquita," nationally famous as the Martha Stewart of Panama, who adapts traditional Panamanian recipes to modern gourmet tastes, and serves her delicious creations in a cozy and sophisticated dining area. They have Sunday brunch, too. See p. 108.
- **Madame Chang** (Panama City; ☎ 269-1313): Few diners are aware that some of the best Chinese food outside of China is here in Panama, and Madame Chang is where you come to savor it. The Peking duck is the restaurant's showcase dish, and they serve potent martinis. The owners have merged Old China with new, both in terms of cuisine and their smart-casual atmosphere. See p. 109.
- **La Casa de Lourdes** (El Valle de Antón; ☎ 983-6450): The cuisine is so to-die-for good that some residents of Panama City endure the 4-hour round-trip to El Valle de Antón just to have Sunday lunch. Ultra-fresh ingredients and exotic fruits are used to create updated takes on Panamanian and Latin American fare. Dining is alfresco: under the archways of a Tuscan-style manor house, next to an outdoor swimming pool. See p. 190.
- **Restaurant Vista Mar** (Vista Mar; ☎ 215-1111): This brand-new restaurant is run by a renowned French chef, and sports a Moroccan decor that is fresh and chic, plus outdoor dining with ocean views. The Mediterranean-style seafood is well-conceived and bursting with flavor. The restaurant is within the Vista Mar residential community, on the Pacific Coast. See p. 177.
- **Panamonte Inn Restaurant** (Boquete; ☎ 720-1324): This sanctuary of gourmet cuisine is located within the clapboard walls of the oldest hotel in Boquete. The food is inventive and consistently good, and service is attentive and courteous. You can bypass their more formal dining area for a comfy seat in their fireside bar and still order off the main menu. See p. 243.
- **La Ballena** (Bocas del Toro; ☎ 757-9089): A wine bar serving fine Italian food is an incongruous element in the rum-and-beer Caribbean, but that's what makes La Ballena so good. Homemade pastas and thin-crust pizzas; a warm, candlelit ambience; and a pirate's cache of hundreds of wines can be found here. See p. 270.
- **Restaurant Yasinori** (Bocas del Toro; no phone): There's nothing much to this place other than a thatched roof and plastic chairs and tables in the sand, but the simple Panamanian and creole dishes are straight-from-the-sea fresh, and the fruit juices are delicious. Caribbean views also help make this a wonderful spot. See p. 273.