

Panama 101:

Your Beginners Guide To Life In Panama

By the Editors of Live and Invest Overseas

ELECTORAL SYSTEM →

IMPORT
A PET
→

HOW TO BRUNCH →

HOW TO
GET A
LICENSE

CELEBRATE
CHRISTMAS
→

FURNISH A HOME →

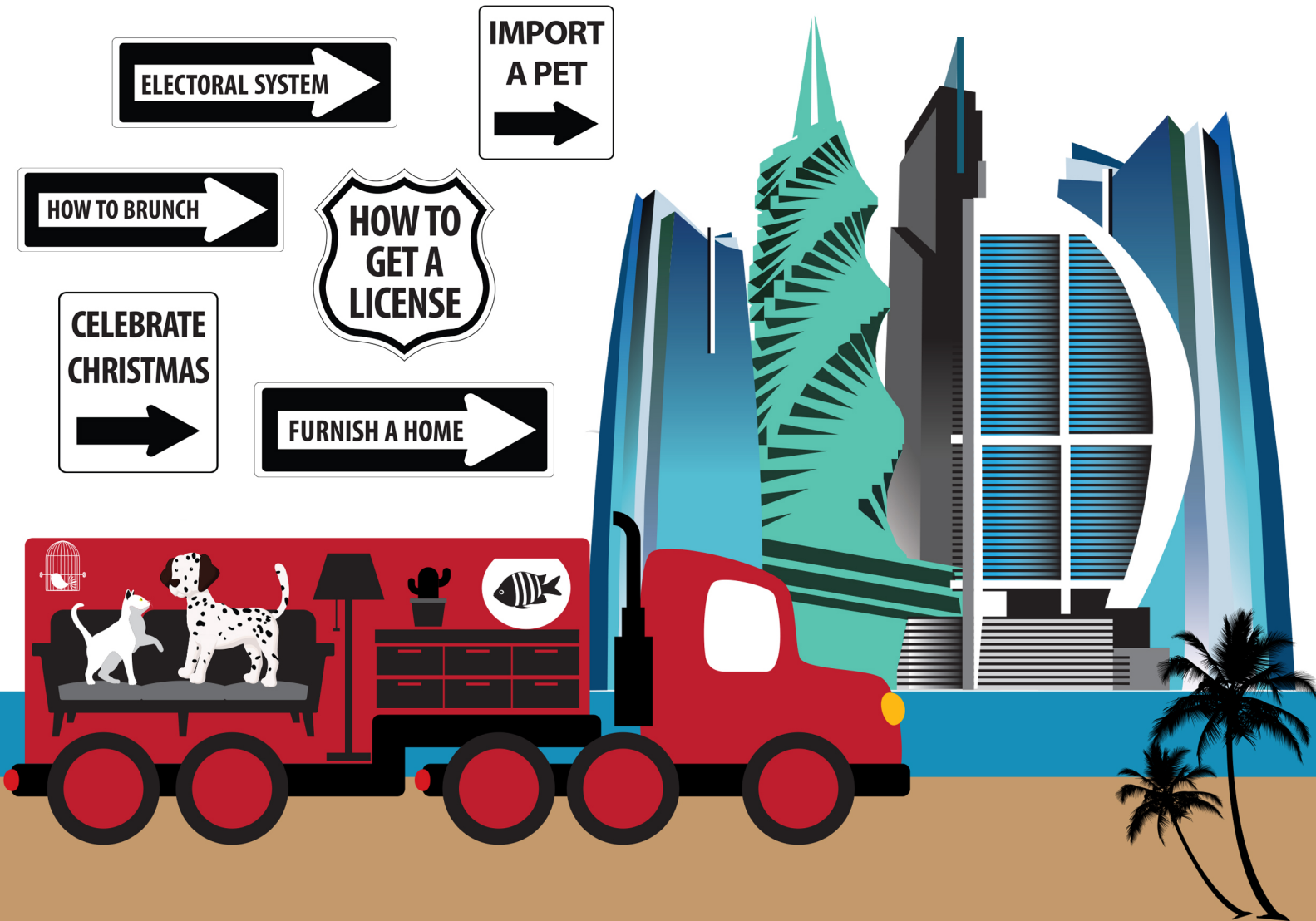


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Coming To Panama

So you've decided to come to Panama? Great! Your hardest decision has been made... but how to proceed? This first section helps you get your feet (and your family's feet) on the ground in Panama...



Every global hotel chain in the world seems to be opening doors in Panama City lately. The options are many, but how to choose? To make it easy, we've come up a list of the best hostels and hotels in Panama City for reference.

These picks are divided into four categories: hostels, mid-priced, high-end, and luxury hotels. It's hard to narrow the long list down, but the following recommendations are based on location, value, amenities, and originality. For the most part we've stayed away from the often-sterile, big-name hotel chains, which left room on the list for lesser-known brands that offer a memorable experience unique to Panama City.



How To Find A Place To Stay In Panama City

Top Picks On A Budget

Hostels

US\$14 to US\$40 a night

Luna's Castle Calle 9a Oeste, Casco Viejo



Luna's Castle is by far my favorite hostel in Panama. It's located right at the entrance of historic Casco Viejo, so you're surrounded by the city's top bars and restaurants, plus the city's coolest underground bar, Relic, is right downstairs. This is one of the most popular spots for backpackers to hole up, so it's a great spot to meet new and interesting people.

Magnolia Inn Calle 8a and Calle Boquete, Casco Viejo



Magnolia Inn is a luxury hotel and hostel nestled right in the heart of Casco Viejo. If you're looking for a nice hostel that's still affordable, this is your best option. Each bed has its own electrical outlet and wall lamp, so you can charge your devices while you sleep or read up on the next day's adventures without disturbing your fellow guests.

Magnolia Inn is perfect if you want to stay in lively Casco Viejo but aren't interested in the kind of party-all-night atmosphere Luna's Castle is famous for.

Hostal Siriri Calle Las Acacias, Marbella



Hostal Siriri is on Calle Las Acacias in Marbella—right in the city and much more central than Casco Viejo. From this central location, guests have easy access to nightlife on Calle Uruguay, shopping at Multicentro mall, and activities on the Cinta Costera waterfront park. All of Panama City's other hotspots are just a short bus or cab ride away.

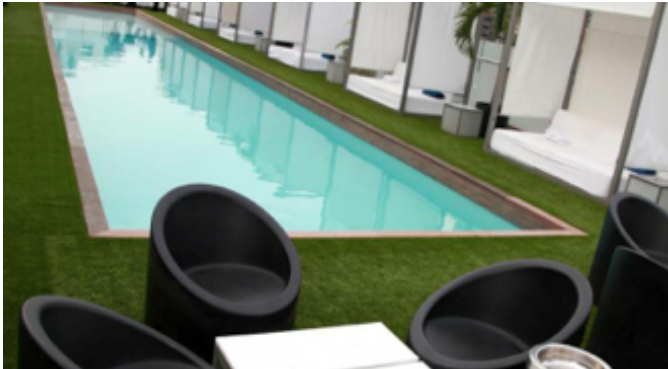
Hostal Siriri has air conditioning in every room and

also offers female-only dorms, which can be difficult to find in Panama. The biggest plus for this little hostel though? The fantastic backyard swimming pool.

Mid-Range

US\$80 to US\$130 a night

Manrey Calle Uruguay, Marbella



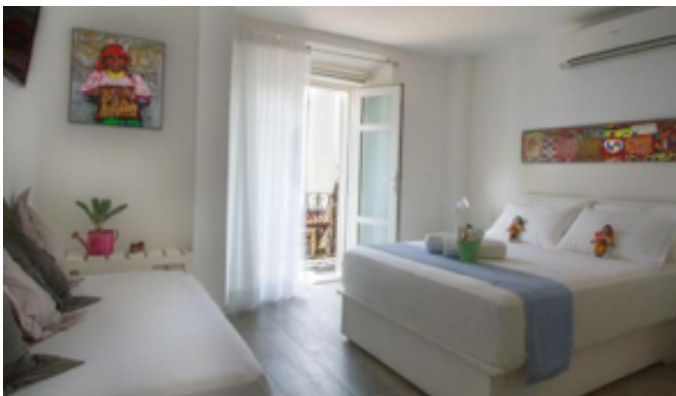
Manray Boutique Hotel is a 35-room, South Beach-style hotel with a beautiful rooftop pool. The hotel is perfect for business travel, but it's also located right on Calle Uruguay, one of Panama City's most exciting nightlife and restaurant hotspots.

Casa Antigua Calle 9, between Avenida Eloy Alfaro and Avenida B, Casco Viejo



With eight suites and two guest rooms in a carefully restored Spanish-colonial-era building, Casa Antigua is a great choice for apartment-style lodging. You can make the most of the kitchen facilities in the suites or enjoy the delicious breakfast included with every booking.

Casa Nuratti Avenida B and Calle 8, Casco Viejo



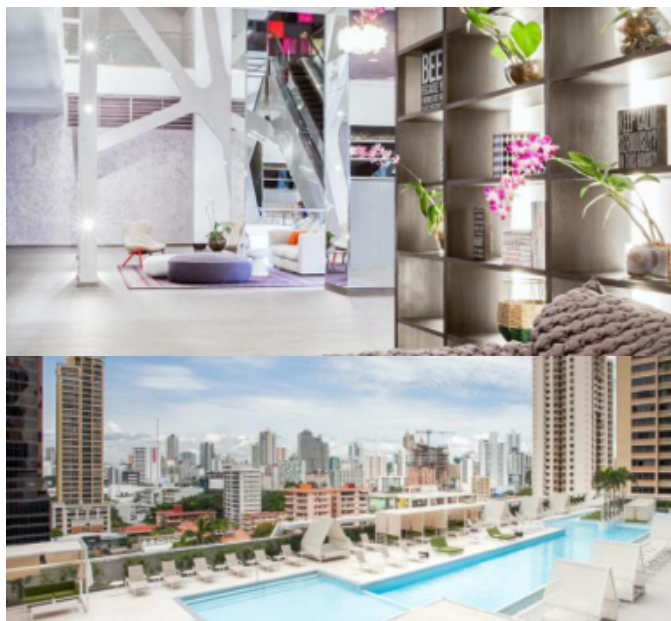
Casa Nuratti is a perfect little boutique hotel located near the entrance to Casco Viejo. This location is ideal for restaurants and nightlife, plus breakfast is included with every booking.

Rooftop bar Gatto Blanco offers fabulous views of the Panama City skyline, but noise-sensitive travelers beware: You'll probably hear any rooftop partyers back in your room.

High-End

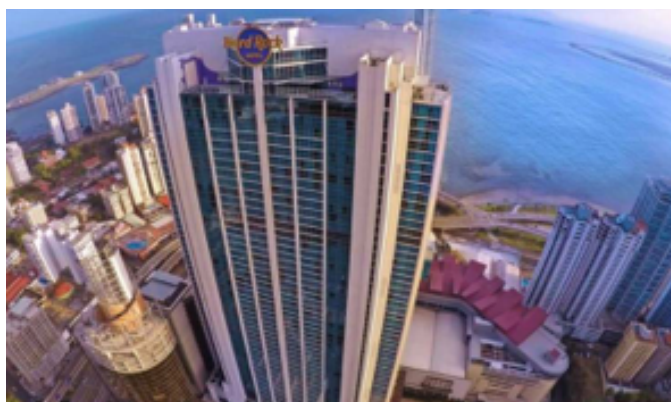
US\$140+ per night

Sortis Calle 56 and 57, Obarrio



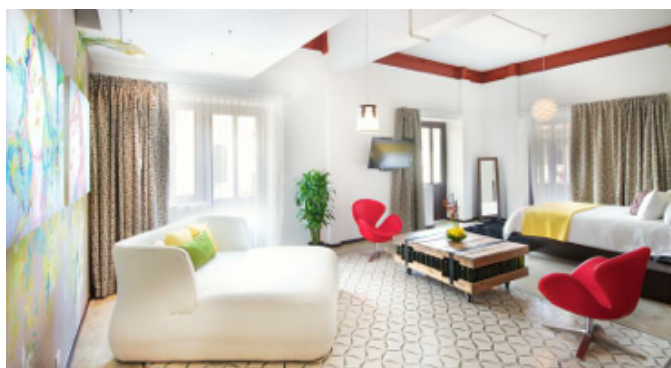
A chic, recently opened hotel, Sortis Panama City offers a casino, several excellent restaurants, and, importantly, one of the best pools in Panama City. On top of that, the location is also superb. Sortis is just a few blocks away from the new luxury SOHO mall, Calle 50, and the Via Argentina metro station and is within an easy cab ride to anywhere else you might want to go.

Hard Rock Hotel Avenida Balboa and Via Israel, Marbella



Party like a rock star in one of Panama's Rock Suites from the Hard Rock Hotel. Rock Suites are quite spacious, with bedroom, living room, two bathrooms, a kitchenette, and a full balcony. The hotel is also home to a nightclub, a popular rooftop bar with incredible views, an awesome swimming pool, and a variety of great restaurants. Plus this central location makes it a great choice for travelers.

Tantalo Avenida B and Calle 8, Casco Viejo



Tantalo is one of the hippest boutique hotels in Casco Viejo. Tantalo's uniquely designed rooms feature the best of Panamanian and international design. With a highly regarded restaurant downstairs and a popular rooftop bar upstairs, Tantalo is not to be missed.

Luxury

American Trade Hotel Avenida Central and Calle 10 Oeste, Casco Viejo



The American Trade Hotel is one of the most beautifully restored buildings in Casco Viejo. With a gym, rooftop swimming pool, excellent dining options, Aesop toiletries, and Unido coffee, your every need will be catered to.

The hotel is also home to Danillo's Jazz club and regularly hosts live music in the lobby.

Trump Ocean Club Calle Punta Chiriqui, Punta Pacifica



Donald Trump has made his mark in Panama City's most prestigious neighborhood, Punta Pacifica. This urban oasis features several restaurants, a world class casino, and the most stunning ocean-view pool area in Panama City.

Las Clementinas Calle 11 and Avenida B, Casco Viejo



Las Clementinas is a luxury boutique hotel in Casco Viejo. The restored hotel, originally built in the 1930s, is truly a hidden gem. With a courtyard garden and private rooftop overlooking the glittering skyscrapers, Las Clementinas offers a rare chance to escape the chaos of the city. Plus, the spacious apartment-style chambers feature fully equipped kitchens.

Short-Term Apartment Rentals

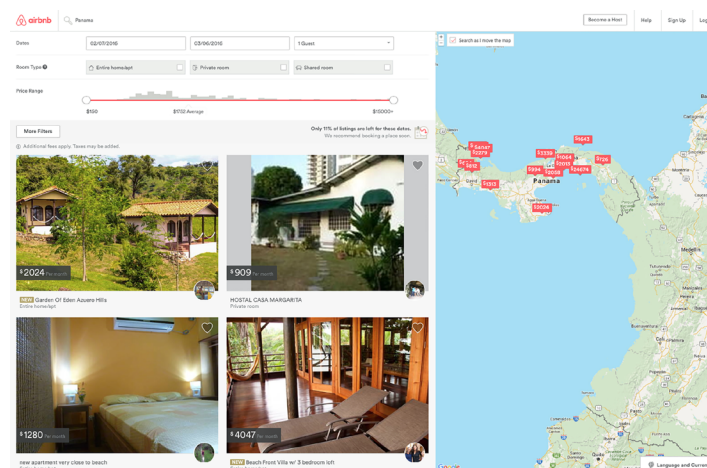
Short-term apartment rentals (less than 45 days) are illegal in Panama City. Having said that, there are plenty of short-term rentals on the city market. The penalty for breaking the law lies with the landlord, not the renter, but still, you should be aware of this local law.

Staying in an apartment in Panama City is tempting if you want to feel really at home or are looking to save money. Being able to cook your own food and having access to a washer and dryer makes life a good bit more comfortable, especially if you plan to stay longer than a few days.

Outside the city, a short-term stay is par for the course and perfectly legal. Nearly all accommodations in the interior are rented on a nightly or weekly basis. They aren't hard to find, and many of the owners or managers are gringos to boot.

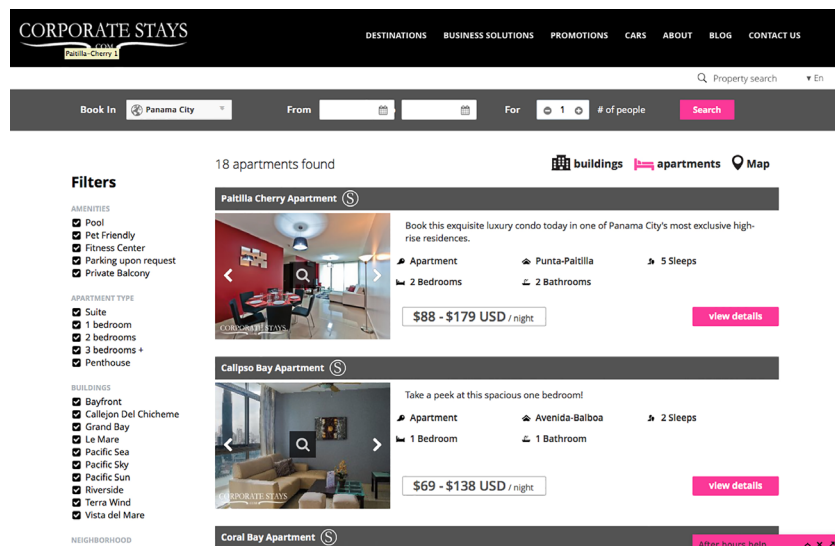
Short-term rentals in Panama are available through following sites:

Airbnb



Airbnb lets hosts list their entire apartment or just an extra room for rent. It's a great way to have a more local stay in Panama, and, if you opt for staying in someone's spare room, you have a host who can give you the inside word on what to do in the city.

Corporate Stays



Corporate Stays specializes in high-end apartments in Panama City and several other destinations around the world. They even have a concierge service to help out with all your needs during your stay.

How To Bring Your Four-Legged Family Members To Panama

Moving a pet across international borders can be a daunting process, but not an impossible one. There are only a few steps, but the timing is what will prove difficult. From the USDA to the Panamanian consulate, take our advice, follow this guide, and bring that loving pet along.

Dogs and Cats

1. Step one is to set up an appointment with your vet. Don't do this step too early. You need to have your appointment with the vet inside of a two week window from your departure date. This is a requirement in Panama. The vet should have the required International Health Certificate form that must be filled out, but call in advance to give them notice that you will be needing it for international travel.
 - a. This certificate must be sent to the USDA for review and authentication. There will be a fee associated with this that varies from state to state, usually around US\$25.
 - b. Once you have done this, you need to print and fill out the form for requesting home quarantine once you are in Panama. It can be [found here](#). When it is filled out, this must be certified by the nearest Panamanian consulate. As of this writing, the cost is US\$30. To find the Panamanian consulate is nearest you, go [here](#). This step saves you the cost and stress to your animal of spending 40 days in quarantine at the hospital.
 - c. The health certificate, after being authenticated by the USDA, must be apostilled. This can be done at the local Secretary of State office. It must be done for an international document. There will be a fee involved that, again, varies from state to state. You can find a local USDA office using [this map](#).
 - d. Helpful Hint: When you send your home quarantine request to the consulate, pay the extra for overnight shipping and send your other document (International Health Certificate) with it. Ask them to review and verify that it is correct. You will be glad that you have the extra time to correct any errors that they may find.
2. Step two is to get ready for the flight. You will need to check directly with your airline to make sure that you have everything they require for traveling with a pet. These guidelines are pretty relaxed, for the most part, but it is necessary to operate inside of them. Some airlines have specifications for kennel types and food and water being available for the pet. Again, check with the airline and they will be glad to provide this information.
3. Step three might be the easiest of all. Take your completed, reviewed, authenticated, apostilled documents with you to the airport. Get on the plane and fly to Panama. Once you arrive in Panama you will provide the documents to the veterinarian on duty. They have lists of all people flying in with pets, and often(not always) stay late to make sure that each pet is taken care of. You will give the vet your home quarantine request and the health certificate. He will review it and let you leave once you have paid the US\$130 fee. Please note that if you do not have your paperwork with you and correct, the pet will be quarantined for 40 days at the airport at a cost to you of US\$10 a day.

The process can seem convoluted, but if you follow the steps slowly and methodically, you will be just fine. The only thing that we cannot prepare you for is the wave of heat and humidity that you will feel when you and your pet step out of Tocumen Airports front doors. You'll have to figure that out for yourself.

Check the [Embassy of Panama website](#) to make sure that the requirements have not changed.

Setting Up Your Household In Panama

Congratulations, you finally moved to Panama! Now what...? The following lessons offer ways help you get settled after first arriving...

How To Set Up Your Utilities

First things first: Find a permanent address in Panama, come to Panama. Utilities cannot be set up while you're in another country. You need a lease agreement or property title for your residence along with a passport.

Many condos and apartments already have gas connections hooked up and running, included in the HOA fees. No work is needed on your part. For homes, gas tanks can be ordered from a local gas company, and they usually show up two to five days after being called. When your tanks is empty, simply call the company and request a refill. Two options in Panama City for gas companies are Tropigas and Panagas. A 10-pound tank of gas costs between US\$5 to US\$7, depending where in the country you are located.

To set up your electricity, take your lease agreement or property title as well as your passport to the electricity company (likely Union Fenosa). A deposit is expected to be made, depending on your expected usage. An appointment is set for them to come to your residence and make the connection, but it usually takes a week or two for them to show, so be prepared for that. Every month the bill is left near the front of your apartment building or front gate. Electricity bills can be paid online or at an E-Pago kiosk in a mall or supermarket. After two months without payment, the service will be cutoff, so don't fall too far behind. Electricity rates vary depending on where you are living, and even rates in Panama City can change neighborhood to neighborhood. In Panama City's El Cangrejo neighborhood, expect a monthly electricity bill of roughly US\$50, and double that if you plan on using air conditioning.

For water service, IDAAN (Instituto de Acueductos y Alcantarillados Nacionales), a government owned company, is who you need to visit. Bring your lease agreement or property title as well as your passport to their office, pay the deposit, and make an appointment for them to come to your place and get the water flowing. As with your gas, if you live in an apartment, your water connection may already be included in your HOA fees. A typical monthly water bill in a three-bedroom home is US\$60, but this varies with usage. Water bills can be paid at a Rapid Money or E-Pago kiosk in a mall or supermarket.

It's always good to call ahead before arriving to the utility companies' offices. It allows you to check when their hours are, confirm you have all the paper work that they request (these things can change), and see if your visit will be expedited by making an appointment.

Contacts:

- IDAAN:	- Union Fenosa	- Tropigas	- Panagas
523-8570	315-7222	206-0088	216-0155 (Panama City)
523-8567		800-0427	278-6100 (Central Office)

How To Set Up Your Cable And Internet

There are few things more important than having internet access in a new country—it's the way of the world in this digital era.

While you can certainly get by with relying on free Wi-Fi spots around Panama (depending on where you live), that's really a short-term game plan.

For your long-term fix, let's go over the ins and outs of setting up internet—and cable for that matter—in your home.

1. Researching Providers

First, pinpoint your needs and the best provider to fulfill them.

Keep in mind that your location in the country will play a big part in the quality of service you can expect. The city generally has better connectivity than the interior due to a lack of infrastructure in rural areas.

Make sure to include in your due diligence the service provided relative to your exact location in Panama. CableOnda may be a top-notch provider in the city... but how is the level of service in, say, Bocas del Toro, or other islands you may consider for living?

A general Google search might shed some light on the ideal provider for you, but you might also want to contact the providers for their assessment of service in your area.

The two primary cable providers in Panama are CableOnda and Cable & Wireless Panamá. Services are available for purchase individually or bundled for more affordable rates. A few of the cell phone providers also offer cable and internet services in addition to cellular services.

2. Proof Of Residence And Identification

When it comes to utilities you'll find that, as with most things in Panama, you'll need proof of permanent residence and identification on hand for setup.

Documents which qualify usually include a lease or deed and a passport or cédula. Exceptions may be made if you do not have these documents available but likely you will have to provide an alternative document as sanctioned by your provider.

3. Visit In-Person

Panama may be a modern Central American country, but you still have to go in person to request your connection...

While you may obtain quotes and begin the process online with certain providers, in most cases, you will be required to physically visit the office to start the real process. (You can also provide a power of

attorney to give someone the authority to do this for you.)

There are several standalone headquarters for your in-office visit, but you'll find that most providers have a presence at your local mall. If you have other business to attend to, heading to a mall might be your most convenient option. In Multiplaza Mall, for example, the third floor is referenced as the "Banking and Services" corridor. You'll find store fronts for various banking institutions, a Western Union, digital cell providers, cable providers, etc.

4. Service Options

When it comes to internet, upload and download speeds will be the biggest differentiator in cost. While establishing internet connection is one thing, you may want to exercise the option of a wireless router or even a hot spot. Both items will promote mobility and help you maximize the use of your connection.

Typically, you will have the option to provide your own wireless router or use one offered by the cable company. Sometimes their routers may not reach every square foot of your home, so purchasing a better quality router (or a signal repeater) is worthwhile.

Give your provider's router a shot, and if it proves faulty you can always upgrade.

5. Contract

A contract—written in Spanish—will be drawn up to initiate services and outline your agreement, for most companies the minimum contract is a year. The good news is that the ramifications for breaking a contract usually aren't severe, if there are any at all. Be sure to ask your customer representative about this aspect of the contract, and if there is an opportunity to set up a shorter-term contract if you'd prefer it.

There could be a discount in store, however, if you're willing to sign on for a longer contract. If you need an English-speaker to walk you through the process, there will likely be a representative at the store who can accommodate this, but it may involve a wait.

In order to avoid delays and ensure clarity take along a Spanish-speaking friend. The lines are not fun, though... be prepared to make it worth their while, maybe with a trip to the food court.

6. Payment

A small installation fee may be required, but, typically, if you set up monthly billing on a credit card, this fee can be waived.

If you choose to make the payments in cash you will have to do so in person. You can either return to the same place where you initially contracted services, you can visit a payment kiosk—there are various locations throughout the country, or you can even visit a local supermarket or store to submit payment.

Get started with your research by visiting provider websites and/or picking up the phone.

Rolodex Of Options...

Cable and internet service providers in Panama include:

Cable Onda <https://www.cableonda.com>
507-390-7555

Cable and Wireless <http://www.cwpanama.com/>
507-800-5555/507-323-7655

Claro www.claro.com.pa
507-6200-0000

Wipet (Internet Only) <https://www.wipet.com/>
507-305-7700

How To Furnish Your New Home

Panama offers expats an Americanized culture and Panama City has many stores and restaurants that you may recognize from back home...but when it comes to buying appliances, quality furniture, high-end bed linens, and a myriad of other home requests, sometimes things aren't so easy to find when you first arrive.

There are no Targets or Walmarts in Panama, but there are some close rivals... [Machetazo](#) is a souped-up grocery superstore much like Walmart. Discovery Center is something between a Home Depot and a Walmart.

Where do we recommend you go to find the essentials you'll need to make your new house a home? Read on...

Get a [Pricesmart](#) membership as soon as you get settled in the city. You may be surprised at what you'll find at this bulk shopping store with two locations in Panama City. There is a revolving selection of furniture, appliances, bed and bathroom linens, electronics, and other household goods.

Appliances:

White line appliances are called linea blanca. There are several stores that specialize in appliances. All have websites that allow you to browse products and sometimes order products online.

[Raenco](#) [Casa Gala](#) [Confort](#) [Rodelag](#)

Washing machines are not common in Panama, not every store or every location of the store will carry them.



Hardware And Gardening:

The closest thing to a one-stop shop for hardware, gardening, cleaning, and outdoor supplies is Do It Center. There is a small selection of furniture and appliances here, but usually not a large selection. Some locations are much larger and stocked with more variety, so check more than one store before finding your favorite.

Novey is also a general hardware store but is better than Do It Center for home goods. Most stores have a decent selection of kitchen and bathroom goods (including linens), and a small decor section.

Melo is a pet store chain with a large gardening section and Comasa and Cochez are larger-scale building supply stores.

[Do It Center](#)

[Novey](#)

[Melo](#)

[Comasa](#)

[Cochez](#)

Furniture:

Good quality, affordable furniture is not easy to find in Panama. Unfortunately, for decent quality goods, you generally have to pay quite a premium. An IKEA is sorely needed here...

[Econos Precios](#)

[Furniture City](#)

[Conway](#)

Antiques And High-End Furniture:

[El Atico](#)

[Deja Vu Consignment Furniture](#)

[Casablanca](#)

[Antigüedades Yates](#)

[Natalia's Antiques and Modern Furniture](#)

[Lifepius](#)

[BBK](#)

[Roche Bobois](#)

Linens, Kitchen And Bathroom Goods:

There are several department stores covering varying price points that offer selections of towels, linens, kitchen and bathroom supplies, and some furniture and decor. Here is a basic list in order from economy to luxury...

[El Costo](#)
[El Titan](#)
[Aliss](#)
[Conway](#)
[Steven's](#)
[Felix B. Maduro](#)

Lighting:

[Luz Decor](#)
[Ilimitec](#)
[Lumicentro](#)

Electronics:

[Multimax](#)
[Audiofoto](#)
[Panafoto](#)

Second Hand Buying:

[Encuentra24.com](#)
[Craigslist.com](#)
[Mundoanuncio.com](#)
[OLX.com](#)
[Facebook Group—Garage Sale PTY](#)

Nearly all of the above stores can be found in malls in and around Panama City malls including:

[Multicentro](#)
[Multiplaza](#)
[Albrook Mall](#)
[Metromall](#)
Westland Mall

If you aren't interested in figuring all this out on your own, look into our [Panama Circle membership](#). This VIP hand-holding service will take you from store to store, translate for you, and help you find anything you need in Panama.

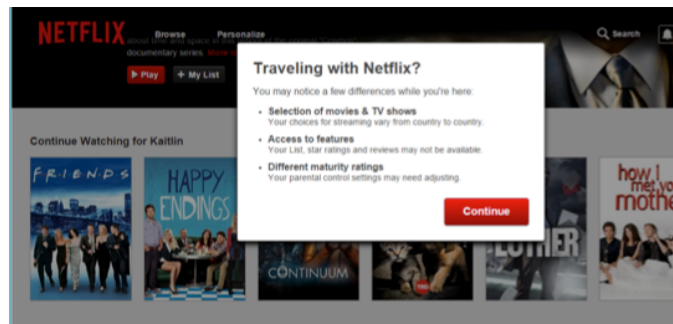


How To Watch American TV Shows In Panama

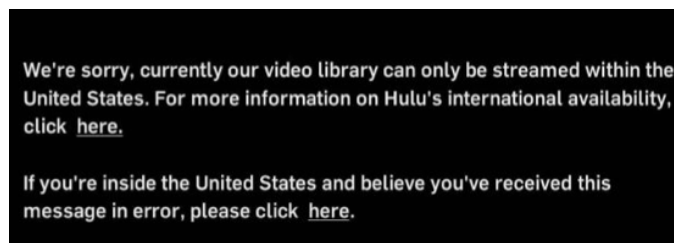
So you did it—you got yourself to Panama. You survived your first stressful week adapting to a new city and a new culture, and now all you want to do is catch up on your favorite TV from back home.

Lucky for us, the Internet Age has made creature comforts like TV available to us no matter our location... right? Unfortunately, no. There is no equal-opportunity viewing for those of us abroad.

Once you get online, no matter what service you try to use, you'll be stopped by a pop-up that looks something like this:



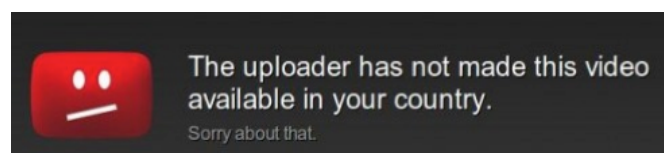
Or this...



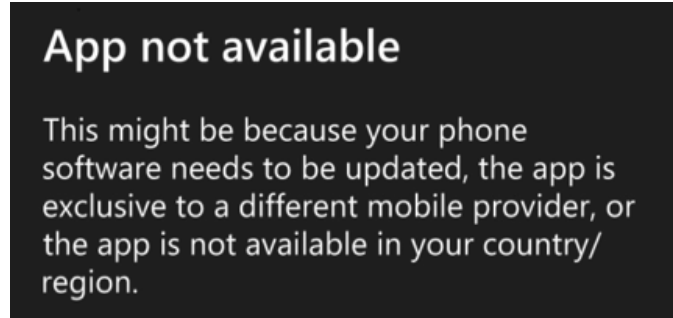
Or this...



Or this...



Or this...



No matter what service you use to watch TV online, it won't work outside of the United States.

Yup... it's a dark reality for anyone that wants to keep up with their U.S. media in a new country. The majority of TV network sites and paid subscription services either completely block their content from being viewed outside of the United States or the amount of content is limited.

In our years in Panama, we've become an experts at alternate viewing techniques. Here's what we've learned...

1. Know Where To Go To Get What You Want

On Demand Services

Sign up for Netflix and/or Amazon Prime. Both offer a great variety of TV and movies. And, in most cases, if something isn't available on one, you'll find it on the other. Hulu is another good option.

These services are great for movies or seasons of TV series that are already available on DVD. But the big drawback is that shows aren't uploaded live or immediately after airing... meaning you'd have to wait nearly a year to see the latest season of a given show.

Network Sites

Most major networks like Fox, ABC, NBC, etc. upload their TV shows to their websites and make them viewable for free.

The upside of using these sites is that you can watch the show almost immediately after it airs live (sometimes you may have to wait a bit, but usually the upload is immediate).

However, the big downside here is that shows are usually only available for a limited time, meaning you need to keep up or risk missing an episode and not finding it elsewhere. The other annoyance is that these can only be streamed, so your Internet speed can drastically influence your viewing experience. I find streaming to be nearly intolerable now. If you're more patient than I am, this is a good option.

US TV Now

US TV Now is a cool website that lets you watch most of the basic cable channels like Fox, ABC, CBS—live and for free.

Popcorn Time

Popcorn Time is an app for computers that allows you to stream nearly any TV show or movie for free. It even boasts an elegant Netflix-like interface... but don't be fooled into thinking this is a legal viewing system. Popcorn Time may look good, but it streams its media from torrents, which are illegal downloads floating around the web.

2. Get Access

Now to the nitty-gritty... gaining overseas access to these on demand services. The overseas user has three basic service options for viewing licensed content outside the States: a proxy server, a VPN, or a DNS proxy. For best results, find a service provider that offers all three types of service. It will cycle through them as they are more or less effective with different media services.

Proxy Servers

Anonymous proxy browsers were one of the first (and most common) ways to get around these annoying overseas licensing restrictions. A proxy changes your IP address to appear as though it's wherever you want it to be. You could tell the Internet that you're in the United States, or in the U.K., or in Japan, or anywhere in the world based on your proxy IP number.

The basic idea is that the proxy acts as an intermediary between you and the server you're trying to reach. This intermediary (as long as its server is located Stateside) fools the server you're trying to connect with (for example Netflix's U.S. server) into thinking your server is actually your proxy server (and therefore is also in the States).

It worked for a while; however, now proxies are all but useless. Most services have figured out how to recognize and block them. All of this is a moving target, though, the rules change daily. For months in Panama my proxy stopped working, so I switched to a VPN. Oddly, in recent weeks my proxy has started to work again with some services. I am mystified.

VPNs

VPNs (or virtual private networks) are the 2.0 version of proxies. Instead of just acting as an intermediary, a VPN creates an entirely new network for you—your own private virtual network that you can “locate” anywhere in the world.

Aside from fooling the Internet into thinking you're in the States (or wherever), they also provide a more secure and more private Internet connection. It's a win-win for those of us who resent being spied on by anyone with the know-how to get into your Wi-Fi network.

VPNs do have their flaws. They have been criticized for sucking up your bandwidth and slowing your entire household's Internet (and sometimes other computer functions) to a crawl.

And now, several years in, many media services have figured out how to recognize and block VPNs, as well as proxies. Hulu and Netflix, especially, have begun cracking down heavily and are blocking VPN users more and more.

Some still-good VPN service providers include:

Hide My Ass: This is a little-known but highly effective VPN service. It's a paid service (from US\$11.52 a month), but it's worth the cost for the security. Plus it comes in app form, meaning none of your devices will be left out of the plan; you can stream or download from your tablet, smartphone, or computer with equal convenience. Since 2010, it's been recommended by network security professionals.

Safer VPN: This is the paid VPN service that I personally use, and I have found it to be one of the best. It's not the cheapest service, but it is in the low end, with plans starting at US\$5.99 a month.

Often, cheaper services slow down the Internet connection too much to be worth it. With Safer VPN, my connection speed remains about the same, and I find the service to be reliable.

Hola: This is a free, easy-to-use service. You enter a website into their search bar and they'll make it look like you are accessing that site from any country you choose.

You get what you pay for... this service is unreliable at best. If you're really opposed to paying for a service, this will do the trick in a pinch, but expect long load times and infuriating streaming.

Get A Flash Router

If you're committed to a VPN, you may need to go the extra mile and purchase a special router that allows the VPN connection to run all of the time. I made the investment because I have an Apple TV, which doesn't allow you to input any VPN settings, so I could only access the Panama version of Netflix and Hulu... and most other apps were completely blocked from it. While the router is more expensive than your everyday version, I'm happy with it and the service. My Apple TV works 100%.

DNS Proxy

DNS (domain name system) proxies are the next-gen of proxy services and the best thing on the market right now. They are, as yet, nearly undetectable by any on demand media service. They work across all devices on any Internet-capable device (meaning this will allow your Apple TV to work all the time, without the purchase of a flash router). It works faster than a VPN and doesn't suck up bandwidth from the rest of the household.

Smart DNS Proxy is one of the best package services out there. It offers all three levels of service: proxy servers, VPN, and DNS, making sure you are covered on all fronts. It's super-fast, user-friendly, and affordable at US\$4.90 a month or less—you could get two years of coverage for only US\$50 if you pay up front.

Transportation

Figuring out how to get around once you land can be tricky, follow these lessons for easier commutes around the country...

How To Get Around Panama City

Panama City is one of the least walkable places in the world. In light of the traffic beating the feet might seem like a good option, but often it's more hassle than it's worth. Aside from the heat, and (for much of the year) rain, pedestrians must also contend with aggressive drivers, potholes, open manholes, lake-like puddles, and sidewalks that end without explanation.

Luckily there are plenty of other options for getting around town...

Taxis

Taking a taxi in hectic Panama City is a mixed bag. Sometimes you'll have a safety belt, or air conditioning—other times there's a window that won't close or driver who's too busy texting to keep his eyes on the road.

For days when a cab is unavoidable though, there are a few important things to keep in mind.

If you feel uncomfortable with the driver or the state of the cab, don't get in. There are plenty more taxis where that one came from.

It's common for cabs to pick up more than one passenger at a time. And just because you were the first one in, doesn't mean you'll be the first one out. If a cab pulls up and there is a passenger inside, wait for the next one. If your Spanish is good enough, let the driver know you don't want him to pick anyone else up on the way.

There are no meters in Panama taxis. Prices are regulated and based on a zone system. Taxi drivers should have a table (which may include a map) showing the costs for the fare, and theoretically they are required to show it to you if you ask. Fares are around US\$1.50 for travel within each, with prices increasing as you cross zones, and extra charges for each additional passenger.

In reality, it's very rare to see a price chart or to be charged accordingly. The one exception to this is shopping mall taxi stands. If you take a cab at Multiplaza or Metromall for example, you will agree on a fare and receive a receipt before you get into the car.

If you make the mistake of asking a street cab about the fare, be prepared to negotiate hard... and don't be surprised if you are left on the curb. The best way to avoid paying too much is simply to decide for yourself what is fair (US\$2 or US\$3 is about right within the city) and hand it to the driver through the window as you leave.

In order for this smooth exit strategy to work, you must carry exact change. Taxi drivers will absolutely

insist that they have no change, and if you hand over US\$10 or even US\$20 you are not likely to get much back.

Taxis are economical in Panama—but there are notable exceptions. Cabs from Tocumen International Airport to the city are much more costly than the distance suggests; you'll pay US\$30 for the 20 minute ride. Foreigners will also pay a premium for trip to the Miraflores Locks on the canal. It's difficult to get there by any other means and drivers know it, so fares are US\$8 to US\$10.

Uber

Recently, mega-app Uber has arrived in Panama. With Uber on your smartphone, you can text for a driver at any time. You select your pick-up and destination locations using GPS, avoiding any confusion.

Uber is a great alternative to using taxis in Panama City, and it's often cheaper than regular cabs (especially once the “gringo tax” has been tacked on to your cab fare).

The app is easy to use, all you need is a smartphone. Download the app (if you already had it downloaded from using Stateside, then you're all set) and create a profile. You'll also need to link the app to one of your credit cards by simply filling out a credit card form. Once you have the app set up, enter your current location and “Request a Driver.” You'll then be asked to fill in your destination, be given a fare estimate, and your driver will be called. When you have booked your ride, you'll be sent a photo of your driver, his name, his model of car (Uber cars are not the usual yellow cabs, cars are unmarked) and plate number, and an ETA—safe, secure, and refreshingly transparent.

The cars are always clean, in good condition, and well air conditioned. The drivers are always polite, respectful, and are patient and safe drivers—something that can't be understated in Panama. Often, then even speak English. And once you arrive at your destination, the payment is automatically taken from your credit card—no haggling, no arguing over what the fair or legal rate is, and no wasted time in negotiation.

It's not possible to make an advance booking with Uber and occasionally a car is not available right away, but you can keep an eye on cars in your area using the app.

In most cases, the fares often end up being less than what a yellow cab would charge. On a test trip from the banking district to Casco Viejo, one staffer took an Uber while a friend took a taxi. The friend had to wait (in the Panama heat) to flag down a taxi that would take them, which took about 10 minutes, was finally picked up in a broken-down car with no air conditioning, and was charged US\$5. Our staff member was picked up almost instantly in a new car with cold air blasting and was charged only US\$4.20.

At this point, we can confidently recommend expats take Ubers over taxis, it's a great service on all fronts.

Easy Taxi

Like Uber, Easy Taxi is an e-hailing system now available in Panama. With Easy Taxi you can book a cab and then track its progress to your pick up point via GPS. You'll also receive information about

the car and driver so you know exactly who to expect.

The advantages of Easy Taxi over Uber are the lower prices, and the ready availability of cabs at busy times. Be aware that these are ordinary taxis, though the drivers who get involved with Easy Taxi, are those with more business savvy, and generally the cars are well maintained.

Car Services

If you're reluctant to deal with taxis, or need transport for a longer period of time, car services can be a good option. It's best to get a personal recommendation, so ask friends or, if you are visiting, book through a travel agency or hotel. If you make the booking direct, be prepared to negotiate a day rate that you are comfortable with.

Metrobus

The Metrobuses in Panama City are clean, air-conditioned and easy to use. At only 25 cents a trip (or US\$1.25 for a Corredor Norte/Sur route) they are also economical.

In order to use the Metrobus you'll need to buy a US\$2 travel card. Cards are for sale in metro stations and at Albrook Terminal. You'll also find them at a kiosk opposite Multicentro. You can recharge the card at the same sites, or at any convenience store displaying the orange logo.

Tap the card reader when you hop on the bus and you'll see your balance displayed. You can't use cash on the bus, but if you find yourself out of credit unexpectedly other passengers will usually tap you in, in exchange for a quarter.

Buses are regular and routes are online at www.mibus.com.pa.

Metro

The Panama metro is the first rapid transit system Central America and opened in April 2014. The metro consists of 12 stations from Albrook to Los Andes, and there are plans to open three more stations in the near future. A second line is due to be opened in 2017 running from the city to Tocumen International Airport.

Metro carriages are clean, spacious, and air conditioned. Digital signs on the platforms alert passengers to train arrivals, and upcoming stations are announced inside the trains.

You can use your travel card for the metro too, tapping it as you pass through the stations turnstiles. A trip will cost you only 35 cents.

Cycling

Those who dare to bike in Panama City are truly taking their lives in their hands. Erratic driving, overwhelming traffic, and roads in various states of disrepair make bike transit treacherous.

On Wednesday evenings the group Movimiento Ciclistas en las Calles de Panama meets to tour the city en masse. Enjoy the safety of cycling in this police-escorted group once a week. On Sunday

mornings, fitness enthusiasts flock to the Cinta Costera, which is pedestrianized for the morning and called the Ciclovía, to bike, rollerblade, skateboard, and jog up and down the ocean-side stretch. The entire circuit will take you from the Amador Causeway all the way to Panama Viejo.

But as a day-to-day means of transport, biking here is a choice foolhardy.

How To Pay Less Than US\$2 To Get To The Airport

Normally, a trip to Panama's Tocumen International Airport means finding a really nice friend to drive or shelling out at least US\$30 for a cab ride. But if you want to save a ton of money there's an alternative... and it's dirt cheap.

Here's what you have to do:

Step 1: Board The Tocumen-Corredor Sur Metro Bus



You can either board this bus on Avenida Balboa on the side of the road closest to the ocean or take the Metro or Metrobus to the Albrook terminal and transfer to the Tocumen-Corredor Sur bus. The cost of the Tocumen-Corredor Sur bus is US\$1.25 instead of the normal 25 cents because it uses the tollway. Do not use the Tocumen buses that do not say Corredor Sur, these go the long way and can add hours to your travel time.

Step 2: Get Off At The Airport Stop



The bus ride from Multicentro to the airport is approximately 30 minutes, and, if the voice recordings that announce the stops are working, you need to get off at the stop that announces aeropuerto. It's the stop that has a covered walkway right in front of the airport.



Step 3: Continue On The Walkway

The walk from the start of the walkway to the airport is around seven minutes, and it's pretty straightforward.



You go through a parking lot and then after that through the entrance and follow it until the end.



The hallway ends at the entrance of the airport.

Step 4: Head Up To The Second Floor

The pedestrian entrance leads to the floor with arriving flights, so just head up to the second floor to check in for your departing flight.

A taxi takes about 20 minutes to get from the banking district of Panama City to Tocumen. Taking the bus will take over an hour, usually about an hour and 15 minutes. But if you're short on cash, it's



worth the savings.

Leave your house extra early if you are trying to catch a flight... or even do a trial run a few days before your flight to be sure of how long it takes.

Another downside, is that this won't be an easy trip to make with luggage. Drivers probably won't even let you on the bus with a large suitcase. It's best to do this for short trips when you just have a small carry-on bag or suitcase.

To take the Metrobus from the Tocumen International Airport back to Panama City:



Step 1: Exit The Airport And Head To The Right

Walk to the right, toward Restaurante Selles.



Step 2: Enter The Hallway Next To The Restaurant

The airport hasn't installed signs that say this leads to the pedestrian walkway going to the main road. At first it looks like you are entering somewhere that you are not supposed to; however, this is the correct way.

Continue through the back hallway to outside and then the walkway.



Step 3: Cross The Street

Once you reach the end of the walkway, you need to cross the street to get to the bus stop with buses heading back to Panama City.



Step 4: Get On The Tocumen-Corredor Sur Bus

They do not sell Metro Bus cards at the airport, so, if you are a tourist trying to use the bus, you need to kindly ask someone if you can pay them US\$1.25 to swipe you through with their card. Wait for the Tocumen-Corredor Sur bus to arrive and do not get on any of the ones that say Via España, because it will take forever to get back to the city. Once you are on the bus, you can get dropped off anywhere on Avenida Balboa or take the bus all the way to the Albrook terminal and transfer to another bus or hop on the Metro.



Remember, using the bus is only recommended if you have small carry-on luggage. Otherwise, if you're packing heavy, pay the extra money for a taxi.

Enjoy the savings!

How To Get Your Panamanian Driver's License

"Got the feeling, power steering, pistons popping, ain't no stopping now... Panama!" -Van Halen

Panama is a little but hugely diverse and beautiful country that begs you to hit the road. While buses and flights are also fine options for getting around this country, the freedom of a private vehicle is unmatched by crowded buses and airport delays.

Allow us to guide you through what may seem like a complex and overly bureaucratic process when applying for a Panamanian driver's license...

If simply in on a tourist visa, you can drive for up to three months with a valid foreign license. As a tourist, you have to leave within three to six months, depending on your nationality, and you may not even need to apply for a Panamanian license, so long as the license from your country of origin is still valid. Either way, as a tourist you simply aren't allowed to apply for a Panamanian license.

Anyone caught driving without a valid license will be fined and possibly have his or her vehicle towed.

A driver's license is available to anyone older than 18, and a provisional license to anyone older than 16. Anyone older than 70 may be asked to undergo an additional medical exam (having the exam results handy throughout the process is a good idea).

If you have a valid license from your country of origin, follow these steps to obtain a license in Panama:

1. Undergo a blood test. The blood test is apparently only needed if your original license does not list your blood type, which many don't. Nonetheless, it doesn't hurt to get it done either way. Rules come and go, and it is better to be over-prepared than under.
2. Go to your country's embassy or consulate (with an appointment) with two copies of your country-of-origin driver's license and passport along with the originals. You will receive a notarized form that states your license is real and valid (a fee may be involved, usually around US\$50).
3. Go to the Departamento de Autenticacion y Legalizacion of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with your passport, immigration card, country-of-origin driver's license, and the notarized form to have it authenticated.
4. Go to a SERTRACEN office with all your documents: copies and originals of your country-of-origin driver's license, your immigration card, your passport, health-test results, notarized embassy form, and US\$40. Here you will undergo a vision and hearing test. After filling out some forms and answering some questions, you should be issued your new Panamanian driver's license.

Your new Panamanian license is valid for four years, unless your residency permit expires before then.

The application for a motorcycle or scooter license is the same.

If you are without a valid license from your country of origin, before beginning the above process you will have to attend driving school (for 36 hours) and log practice time on the road (20 hours). After you've

completed your training, you'll have to pass a driving exam...in Spanish. We know many non-Spanish speakers who've passed the test. Brush up on driving-related Spanish vocabulary, and you should be ok.

Driving schools are a relatively new phenomenon in this country. In the past decade schools have popped up and tests been required of new drivers. These requirements weren't made uniformly though, so it's hard to say when tests truly became a requirement. Our staffers report that only within the past three years have any of them been tested when applying for their licenses.

Previously, all you needed was a vehicle...and you could hit the road. This explains why most Panamanian drivers drive as though they've had no training. They haven't. It helps to keep this in mind when you're driving. You can't count on the drivers around you to do the sensible thing. They've never been shown what the sensible thing is.

If you need to invest in driver's ed in Panama, here are good options:

- [Driving Center Panama](#)
- [ICC Training](#)

How To Get Panapass

The highways and byways in Panama City have been in a near constant state of construction for about a decade—the vast scale of improvement is staggering. Along with the luxurious new roads come more cars, trucks, and buses to fill them, and the growing pains have been severe for city residents.

It used to be common to see traffic at a standstill along main routes and mile-long lines at toll booths. But the newly implemented, express toll system, Panapass, was designed to alleviate the deadlock—and is working.



What Is Panapass?

As of June 2015, the previous methods paying at the toll roads has been phased out. The Panapass system is designed to speed traffic through the gates at 25 kilometers per hour, offer options for payment, and reduce traffic jams along the city's busiest routes. Panapass is now the only payment method available at the toll booths. Anyone that uses these routes is required to purchase one for each car they use. To date, over 365,000 accounts have been established.

Drivers in Panama create an account with [The National Highway Company \(Empresa Nacional de Autopista or ENA\)](#) and an electronic sticker is attached to the vehicle's windshield—this is what tracks you driving through the toll booth. You'll also receive a plastic tab (like a frequent buyer card that comes on a keychain) with a barcode and your account number. This is what you use to refill the account. Take the little card to any payment center to refill it (there's a US\$10 minimum).

As long as there is money in your account, you can pass through the toll booths without stopping—just be sure not to speed or you'll end up having to back up until you can pass through the sensors again (and if there's a line behind you, that's not easy).

How To Create A Panapass Account

The electronic stickers are installed free of charge at Panapass customer service centers. Currently there are two, one located at the toll road entrance near Atlapa, the other at Albrook Mall. Hours of operation are Monday through Saturday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Customers can set up the account with a credit card, debit card, or by using a pre-paid account.

How To Recharge

Payments can be made electronically through Cable & Wireless MovilCash, online banking, or at authorized payment centers such as ePago outlets. You can check your account balance at the [ENA website](#).

Payments can also be made in person at gas stations, grocery stores, Albrook Mall, Multiplaza, Metro Mall, Super Xtra and many other locations in the city and the outlying areas. [Go here for a complete list of locations](#).

To find out more about Panapass go to the [ENA website](#), or by calling 314-2800/833-PASS (7277).



Enjoying Life In Panama

Living in Panama can be tricky for foreigners at times. Culture shock can be, well, shocking... People here are different and so is the lifestyle, but that doesn't mean you can't adapt. The following is a collection of lessons that offer ways to maximize your quality of life in Panama...

How To Overcome One Aspect Of Culture Shock In Panama: Ignore The Guns

I had been in Panama City for about a week when I found myself with a gun pointed at me. In the span of mere seconds, I went from casually walking down the street, minding my own business, to a strange man pointing an assault rifle at me in broad daylight. For me, a Canadian, it was rather perturbing.

It happened entirely by accident. The man didn't know me, nor did I know him or his associates. All four of them were coalesced in a circle of an abandoned concrete shell of a building that was without walls. Each faced out with their guns' sights scanning the front and back sidewalks. Two suitcases were on the ground in the middle of them. None of them wore a uniform that might explain why they were so heavily armed.

It was all over in a few short seconds, from the instant I saw them until I figured I was safely out of their sights. Other people walked by the building, seemingly unaware of the armed men, as they were partially hidden by a makeshift fence and two running SUVs, presumably theirs.

Who those men were (private security? undercover police? drug cartels?), why they were there, what was in the suitcases, and why they had their guns pointed on everyone who happened to be walking down that sidewalk that day, I won't ever know.

After the incident, every time I walked past that house (it was unavoidably close to my apartment), I was focused on that abandoned building. A few months later, a taller fence was built around it, completely blocking off any view inside. Who knows what goes on inside that building now? It remains undeveloped, surrounded by the regular going-ons of the city. Maybe the armed men continue to use the building for their armed meetings. It's no matter to me, I continue to walk by on a daily basis. Out of sight, out of mind.

Those guns were the first and last I've ever seen in Panama, other than those of police or armored-vehicle and bank guards. Sometimes I think I hear gunshots through my open window at night, but then I see the sparkle of fireworks over the city or a broken-down taxi backfiring down the block.

The first time I saw the Panamanian National Police with their guns I was a little intimidated, though. They were cruising around in their all black uniforms and visor helmets, two per motorbike, with the back rider clutching an assault rifle. I didn't know they were police until the next day, when a friend filled me in. Again, for a Canadian, this level of armory for a simple street cop seems more than excessive—it's almost fear inducing. Why should they need to be so well-armed? Is crime that bad? Is the street I'm on unsafe?

Given that Panama is one of the few countries in the world without a military, it's understandable why these police—and, importantly, their weapons—are ominously displayed. It helps instill a sense of security in the general public. It probably also keeps overly ambitious revolutionary types in check.

Perhaps it's simply due to my Canadian-ness, that the sight of a gun in public captures my attention. Even in my hometown of Saskatoon, repeatedly ranked as Canada's most dangerous and murderous city (with rates close to U.S. national averages), firearms aren't generally seen or heard of. Since that first instance in Panama, I haven't seen or heard of guns much here in Panama either.

I'm a number guy, so I looked at some data to put it in perspective, and that helped put me at ease. While the murder rate in Panama is higher than in Canada (obviously, given Canada's is one of the lowest on the world), it is much lower than in many U.S. cities.

I never felt unsafe on my recent visit to New Orleans, where the murder rate is higher than Panama's national rate, so why should I feel unsafe in Panama? I shouldn't. Especially given that the areas I tend to hang around in are some of Panama's safest. And especially given that being a gringo tourist (i.e. someone with a lot of money) means the police have an extra eye toward my safety. The odds are ever in my favor.

Of course, shootings and robberies happen every day, all over the country, but that's true many places. Crime doesn't only happen in bad neighborhoods or to people crossed up with the wrong crowd. Walking down the street, sitting in a classroom, a church, a theater, or even opening your front door have all been instances of murders across Canada and the United States in recent years. Bad people exist, and bad things can happen to anyone, anywhere, anytime, even where you are—right now.

So never mind the guns, you probably won't get shot in Panama... at least, no more than you would anywhere else.

How To Connect With The Expat Community

Arriving in Panama and getting situated can be an overwhelming experience for some people. Getting your bearings straight, figuring out your housing arrangements, setting up your utilities, connecting phone and Internet, arranging any necessary documentation, finding a quality grocery store—all work, no play. And that can be kind of dull.

But everyone can get by with a little help... You just need some local friends!

And your new friends can be more than just friends. Don't underestimate the amount of knowledge expats already have about relocating to Panama. They've likely done it all and can give you some tips on setting up in your new country.

When you do finally get situated and your to-do list becomes a little shorter, getting out and meeting new people is probably your next undertaking. After decades of U.S. control of the Panama Canal and the military bases that came along with that, Panama is full of expats—many of them from the United States. However, Canadians, Germans, Colombians, Vietnamese, Argentines, and many other nationalities are found here, too.

Don't be shy. Approach a group at a bar, say hi, order a round of drinks, and you'll be fine. Most expats in Panama are open to meeting new people and will quickly welcome you into their social circle.

If you're less outgoing and the thought of approaching strangers seems daunting, you have other options. Many groups, communities, and forums exist online for the purpose of helping expats integrate and assimilate into their new surroundings. Most of these groups focus on Panama City, hosting social gatherings, charity fundraisers, and even outdoor excursions to beaches, jungle, or offshore islands. Most of the groups focus on socializing, though some focus on a certain activity. Many of these events sometimes have drink specials too, making it even easier to loosen up and meet new people.

Here is a list of resources for finding expats and events in Panama. Some of the resources are for the entire country, while others a little more localized.

Expats In Panama:

- This group is a good starting point. With more than 5,000 members, posts range from where to go for a good cellphone, finding a plumber, or chatter about what's going on around Panama.

Expats In Panama:

- The leading network and guide for expats in 390 cities worldwide. Connect with fellow expatriates at top events and receive tips and advice on expat life.

Spanish Conversation Group: 6913-9004;

- This group meets every Monday from 7 p.m. to 8 p.m. in Panama City. It is a great chance to brush up on your Spanish skills and meet new people doing likewise.

The American Society Of Panama:

- Founded in 1931, this group's presence in Panama is entrenched in the expat community. Membership is open to all persons anyone, regardless of citizenship or national origin. The society sponsors and performs charitable works, assists groups or individuals that engage in like-minded endeavors, provides a forum for discussing current events, and keeps members abreast of important issues that affect our community. Meet and mix events are held regularly and are a great starting point for new expats.

Panama Mamas:

- A group of local and expat mothers in Panama, helping each other out with all the challenges of childrearing. They organize play dates, excursions, as well as monthly ladies' nights—a great opportunity to leave the kids with the husband and unwind.

Young Expats In Panama (YEP!):

- This group organizes social gatherings and beach parties on a regular basis. The "young" and "expats" parts of the name aren't strictly defined—attendees range anywhere from ages 18 to 45, with a couple Panamanians usually in the mix as well.

Panama City Bridge Club:

- Every Tuesday, this club convenes at Rino's Restaurant at 6:30 p.m. If you have no idea how to play, don't worry—lessons are available.

St. Andrew's Society Scots Club: 6613-2977;

- Not just for Scots, this group meets at Rincon Aleman every second Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. If Scottish culture, food, and music interest you, you'll be sure to enjoy.

Tropical Cowboys & Cowgirls:

- Mostly made up of expats, perpetual travelers, retirees, and business owners in Panama, this group is for networking, asking questions, talking about your life, family, business or just what's on your mind. With people who can relate to you and help you, this is an extremely useful group.

Panama Hash House Harriers:

- Despite what the name may suggest, this is a running group that meets in Panama City every Monday at 6 p.m., come rain or shine. The group is open to all, and competing is the last of their interests.

Expats Give Back:

- This is a group of expats in Panama who want to make a difference and improve the quality of life for those who are less fortunate and living in poverty in Panama. They work with established nonprofit groups in fundraising and organization

Latte Macchiato:

- This German-speaking group is made up of expat women in Panama City. They meet regularly at local cafes to discuss and organize beach trips, charity activity, and daily life in Panama City.

Boquete's Sunday Flea Market: 6714-2487;

- A favorite among expats in Boquete is the Sunday flea market held on the first Sunday of every month from 10:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Chiriqui Storage.

Playa Community Coronado:

- This website provides English-language info in Panama's most popular expat destination, Coronado, just outside of Panama City. The website features informative articles, a business directory, restaurant guide, classifieds, and packed-full events calendar.

How To Teach English In Panama

Many expats to Panama want to fill their days with more than just touring and tanning. For those looking to do some work, teaching English is a great pastime and moneymaker. It's also a fantastic way to meet people and learn about the culture.

Nearly all Panamanians want to learn English and for many it's a job requirement. Teachers are in demand in Panama, so it isn't difficult to find a position in a school or become a private tutor.

1. Get Certified

The most sought-after candidates in Panama have a qualification such as Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults) or Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Certification can be quick and easy, and there are plenty of

options for how to go about it—you could attend a night class or study at university before leaving home, get it online, or begin classes once you arrive.

To get a TEFL certificate in Panama visit [ELS Language Centers](#) in Paitilla. Regular courses are taught on a four-week cycle. The 130-hour program includes 10 hours of assessed teaching practice, classes addressing cultural differences and learning styles, and advice on how to present your CV to Panamanian employers.

If you prefer to study from the comfort of home, try [TEFLonline](#) or [LoveTEFL](#), but beware that presenting in front of a class full of students is different to presenting in front of your cat.

2. Market Yourself Correctly

Once you're qualified you'll need to look at your CV and add or highlight some relevant experience. Most adult students in Panama are looking to improve their English for professional reasons—they want to expand their employment prospects or qualify for promotions that require English proficiency. Any experience that speaks to your professionalism or business vocabulary, for example if you've given presentations, spoken at conferences, written for a company website, or compiled reports, could set you apart from other candidates. Whether you're applying for a job within a school or advertising yourself as a tutor, highlight these important teaching assets.

Perhaps, though, your target audience isn't the adult or professional world, but children. Plenty of privileged Panamanian families hire private tutors—and natural English speakers, at that—so that their children will speak fluently and without an accent. If you don't have experience as a teacher in your home country, think outside the box. Have you been a nanny or babysitter? Have you coached a school sports team or been a camp counsellor? When it comes to working with children references are often the most powerful tool in your marketing arsenal. Arrange some written testimonials before you leave home and make sure your referees are happy to accept to emails or phone calls from potential employers.

The best times to search for teaching or tutoring jobs in Panama are typically February through March and then again in July and August. All schools, including those for adult learning are closed over Christmas, but things pick up again in February—it's also the time when schools discover that some of their teachers have decided not to return for the new year. In July and August head teachers will be looking for staff to see them through the third trimester and on until Christmas.

You can try to apply for jobs or advertise your services before arriving, but don't expect to get very far. Skype interviews and international appointments are still rare here, you are much more likely to get a job once



you're on the ground in Panama and can interview in person. Few employers in Panama will hire someone on the promise of an eventual move. Start your research and put a plan in place before taking off, but save your energy for after your arrival.

And don't be discouraged when you arrive, apply, and find that your emails and phone calls still go unanswered. This is typical. If you are serious about finding a position, you'll need to approach schools directly and be tenacious—follow up, follow up, and follow up again.

If you are interested in casual, one-on-one tutoring, word of mouth is the best way to find clients. You can put up posters in your apartment building or neighborhood, or even advertise in a local paper, but these advertisements are everywhere and you'll have trouble standing out. Connecting with other teachers is also useful, they may have a timetable clash, or be moving on, and recommend your services to their students.

Unless you find a job at an elementary school, you'll need to be prepared to teach outside of regular working hours—early mornings, evenings, and weekends make up the bulk of the in-demand English classes.

3. Be Prepared And Stay Connected

The typically irregular class hours should leave you plenty of time in the middle of the day for all the class planning you'll need to do...

There are several great sites on which English teachers from around the world share worksheets, lesson plans, and tips for addressing difficulties. Some of the best are [Busy Teacher](#), [Dave's ESL Café](#) and [ESL Printables](#).

These sites are also a great way to keep connected with the other teachers and the industry, learn new teaching methods, discover new teaching tools, and get acquainted with the world of global English tutoring.

Many language schools in Panama are not as well-equipped as you might expect. Precious equipment such as whiteboard markers, colored pencils, posters, books, and photocopying are often a luxury in schools here, so be prepared—you may need to bring your own supplies to class with you.

Private tutoring is a good option for picking up some extra cash and filling your spare hours without too much obligation. Keep in mind that while it might be easier to plan a curriculum for one student, it can be difficult to keep things interesting without the range of interactions that happen in the classroom. You'll also need to consider things like location—will you travel to the student's home, or meet in a café or library? If you are not following a standardized program think about how will you measure the student's success? Will you write an exam? Or report on progress informally?

4. Get Paid

Usually a tutor or teacher is only paid for lesson time, so when you receive an offer, or need to suggest a rate, factor in your planning and grading time, and, if your classes are in more than one location, your travel time.

Students expect to pay more for private tutoring, but you are at the mercy of their schedules and cancellations are commonplace, which can be frustrating and leave you out of pocket. Arranging to have the student pay by month rather than after each class is a good way to alleviate those issues.

Resources:

- [ELS](#)
- [TEFL online](#)
- [Love Tefl](#)
- [Busy Teacher](#)
- [Dave's ESL Café](#)
- [ESL Printables](#)

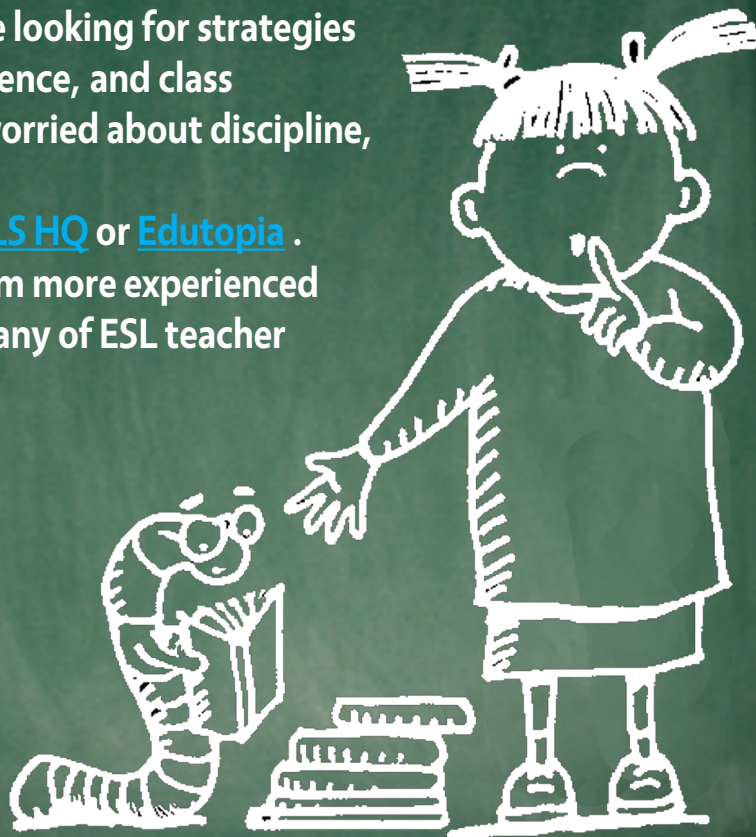
(Un)Common Challenges



The public school system in Panama encourages a quiet classroom. Students are not supported to speak up. You might expect adults who are paying for lessons out of their own pockets, or who have to pass exams in order to be promoted, to be proactive in lessons. You'd be wrong, it's not how kids are taught here. Students here need a great deal of encouragement to participate in discussions or ask questions.

Students also need at least as much encouragement to arrive to class on time and to put their phones away. This is where staying connected with other tutors and teachers around the world will really pay off. If you are looking for strategies to build student confidence, and class interaction, or you're worried about discipline, you'll find a wealth of resources online. Try [ELS HQ](#) or [Edutopia](#) . For personal advice from more experienced peers join one of the many of ESL teacher groups on Facebook.

Quiet
Please



How To Brunch In Panama

In Panama brunch often includes the usuals: mimosas... croissants... fruit... eggs... But, here, it can also include lots of exotic-seeming additions... from tacos and paella to sushi and carvery. Seafood is ubiquitous on all Sunday menus or buffets.

Although the concept of brunch has been around since the 19th century (first in England followed by an increase in popularity in the United States in the 1930s), the breakfast-lunch combo has recently evolved and re-popularized as a trendy Sunday activity for all age groups.

Panama is not always up to par on current trends, but brunch has arrived, caught on, and is something now offered in most restaurants and hotels in the city.

Because mimosas are (almost always!) calling our names... we did a little research on where you can go to brunch in Panama City. Here are our top 10 places to brunch in Panama City...

Happy brunching!

Gula



Gula Panama is located in Costa del Este, one of Panama City's most upscale districts. Brunch here is available all day on Sundays between 10:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. served à la carte with plates ranging between US\$10 and US\$20. Mimosas and Bloody Marys are served with brunch and a wide range of food is available, from steak and eggs to blueberry pancakes and from green eggs and ham to French toast.

Gula's green eggs and ham

Crepes & Waffles



Crepes & Waffles offers a traditional breakfast menu, but with a great selection. Eggs are offered in 13 different styles, alongside numerous breakfast combos and of course a variety of different crepes and waffles. This restaurant satisfies the Sunday bruncher with a sweet tooth (and even their friends who appreciate a savory start to the day). This is also one of the only places you can check out a menu online, check it out, [here](#).

Crepes and Waffles' primavera breakfast crepe

Ambrosia



If you are looking for casual Sunday vibe in Costa del Este, Ambrosia Café and Bakery is recommended as a top-notch choice. A plate averages around US\$10 for brunch—extremely reasonable considering the area—with a wide variety of options unique to the business. During brunch you can enjoy the caprese eggs benedict or, if you're looking for something sweet, try the cookie-ice cream sandwiches, or the baked Alaska in a jar (layers of chocolate and vanilla ice creams, brownie, caramel, and Oreo, topped with toasted marshmallows, all packed in to a mason jar). Check out the extensive and unique menu, [here](#).

Ambrosia's salmon eggs benedict with waffle base

American Trade Hotel—Dining Hall



Start your day off with a fantastic brunch at the very popular American Trade Hotel, one of Casco's most well-known luxury boutique hotels. Every Sunday in the lobby bar brunch is served with accompanying live classical music from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. We suggest you make a reservation here as brunch is a popular event every weekend. The Dining Hall's eggs benedict is their most famous brunch dish, but, if you feel like straying, check out their steak and eggs or Dutch pancake.

American Trade Hotel's famous salmon eggs benedict

Hotel Sortis—Manabí



This is one of the best priced brunch buffets in the city at only US\$29 per person (comparable with most US\$50 brunch buffets). Offered on Sundays between 11:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m., this international buffet features Mediterranean and Panamanian cuisine, pastas, dim sum, antipastos, meats, seafood (mussels, shrimp) desserts, crepes (lunch and dessert), and bottomless mimosas.

Sortis' fruit/yogurt/cold meats spread

Hotel Riu—Restaurante Arts



The Panama City Riu Plaza offers a “brunch” service every Sunday from 12 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. This is a buffet-style layout with a cost per person of US\$39. But this option is better chosen by those looking for more lunch options than breakfast; there are no egg-based or breakfasty selections during these hours, but there is an enormous variety of lunch dishes. The price includes one mimosa per person.

Riu Plaza’s ceviche martinis

Miramar Intercontinental—Bay View



This buffet brunch is known for its over-the-top variety and fantastic value. US\$40 per person (an average price for a high-end city hotel) provides you with a great selection of cuisine including a seafood bar with sushi, shrimp, ceviche, fresh fish, and an omelet bar, cold meats, a fruit bar, and more. The cost includes bottomless wine and champagne and live music for entertainment.

Miramar Incontinental’s breakfast bar (parfait/waffle stand)

Trump—Barcelona



Trump’s charcuterie/cheese bar

is often hard to come by in Panama City. The holiday brunches here are especially indulgent and memorable (Easter Sunday, for example).

This is known as one of the best brunch spots in the country. The price is US\$50 per person (you can check out the breakfast buffet for just US\$20), and runs between 12 p.m. and 3 p.m. on Sundays. Guests enjoy bottomless, serve-yourself mimosas (hold the orange juice if you so desire), and a fantastic array of options including ceviche, paella, cheeseburger sliders, tortillas, eggs, fruit, a chocolate fountain, a pasta stations, carvery station, and massive dessert table (we can’t overlook the chocolate croissants). There is always live music for entertainment and top-of-the-line service, which

Waldorf Astoria—Brio



Waldorf Astoria brunch-dessert bar

The Waldorf Astoria's five-star status is reflected in the Sunday brunch service. The cost per person is US\$40 and includes international cuisine, sushi prepared fresh in front of you, plus eggs, cold and hot meats, a salad bar, and desserts. There is also a juice bar as well as an open mimosa/bellini/Bloody Mary bar. This brunch also features live entertainment, typically the sounds of acoustic guitar.

Hotel Bristol—Salsipuedes



The five-star Bristol hotel features a Sunday brunch buffet at a cost per person of US\$50. This price includes everything... and we mean everything. Even a taco bar. If you're not up for tacos for your Sunday brunch, don't worry you can also choose from waffles, dim sum, paella, desserts, or check out the omelet station. And, of course, bottomless mimosas.

The Bristol's chocolate and vanilla waffles with chocolate and caramel drizzle

How To Enjoy Panamanian Street Food

There is some great street food to be had in Panama, use this “hitchhikers guide to street food” to learn about some of the most popular snacks and treats that can be found on just about any corner in Panama City, and throughout the country.

Raspados: US\$.50 to US\$1

These sweet shaved ice cups or cones can be found all over Panama City. They can be a little tougher to find in the interior, but city dwellers love their snow-cones. To make one of these refreshing treats, the Raspado man hand shaves a block of ice the size of a shopping cart. Once he has enough ice to fill your cone, the customer asked to choose from the unlabeled bottles of syrupy fruit flavors. A generous amount of your choice is provided...with a final flourish... Would you like condensed milk poured on top? Our recommendation? ALWAYS!

Empanadas: US\$.35 to US\$.75

Imagine bread filled with meat, deep fried and served in a napkin. This treat doesn't require much explanation, but it is by far the most common street food in Panama. Make sure to try one from several different vendors. Each stall will have its own recipe and you will find that they can vary quite a bit. Find your favorite and make friends with the vendor. Prices will magically adjust based on frequency of purchase and friendliness.

Ceviche: US\$1.75 to US\$2.50

Ceviche is almost always a mixture of several different types of seafood. Shrimps, calamaris, crabs, and sometimes lobsters, can all find their way into this delicious snack. The seafood is usually lightly boiled before being added to the pot. Though a purist may call this blasphemy, as the traditional ceviche recipe requires no cooking. The base cocktail of lemon juice, and onion effectively “cooks” the fish in its acidity. Ceviche is served in a small plastic cup that makes it easily portable for Carnaval-ing on the go.

Ojaldres: US\$.35 to US\$.75

Fried bread. There is nothing fancy about this fare. Ojaldres are a great midday snack, but don't get too carried away They have been known to pack unexpected calories for many an unsuspecting expat.

Chicha: US\$.25

Nectar of the Gods or just juice made on the street? We will leave that up to you. The options with chicha are endless. You can get any kind of fruit you can imagine hand squeezed and brought to market by many vendors throughout Panama. Some of them are on the side of the highway, while some have a bike parked on a street corner in Panama City. Maracuya, guanabana, piña, mango; every flavor deserves a taste test. Find your favorite and revel in it.

How To Keep Fit In Panama City

Panama City has some great workout options, both indoor and outdoor...

PowerCLUB



PowerCLUB is your best bet for a typical fully equipped workout center. With more than 10 centers located throughout the city, your morning workout can be easily reached on your morning commute. The services in each facility vary slightly, but all include high-end cardio and weight machines, as well, some locations include basketball, volleyball, and racquetball courts, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, a cafeteria, and a pro shop. Yoga, Pilates, spin, trampoline, TRX, and Tae-Bo are some of the types of classes offered.

The sign up costs US\$99, and monthly, three-month, six-month, and yearly packages are available. [Go here to find out more.](#)

Cinta Costera

While the first few trips to the gym are fun and exciting, after a dozen or so trips you might start to feel stuck in a monotonous routine—same equipment, same people, same scenery. Don't let this get you out of your groove though. Instead, change it up and head down to the oceanfront Cinta Costera.

The Cinta Costera is about 11 km long and is dotted with outdoor workout equipment, basketball courts, and soccer fields. For something a little more relaxed, it is common to find groups practicing yoga, tai-chi. Even if you aren't interested in a strenuous workout, the Cinta Costera is great for people-watching as well as seeing the wonderful vistas of downtown Panama City, Casco Viejo, and the ocean.

Panama Runners

Panama Runners is an organization that organizes running and walking events for anyone to partake in. The group seeks to promote public schools, charities, and hospitals. Their activities take place regularly at the Cinta Costera among other locations. [Go here to find out more.](#)

Movimiento Ciclistas En Las Calles De Panama (MCCP)

Panama has a growing number of serious cyclists and MCCP is a group that promotes this healthy alternative to driving. Every Wednesday at 7 p.m. a group of cyclists meets, usually next to the Hotel Miramar or Rali Paitilla store, for a 20 km ride throughout the city. The ride is designed to be safe and open to riders of all experience levels. The average turnout each week is 100 riders, making this as much a social event as an athletic one. [Go here to find out more.](#)

Twenty Smartphone Apps To Make Your Life Easier In Panama

Technology advancements and improvements move at a slower pace in Panama than they do in Western countries.

Here's a list of the most useful smartphone apps to have in Panama:

For Communication:

Whatsapp: This app is one you must have in Panama, or else no one is going to talk to you. More often than not, people ask for your Whatsapp contact instead of your phone number. Whatsapp allows you to text anyone who also has the app for free worldwide; you can also use it for calls.

Magic Jack: This app allows you to call and receive phone calls from any U.S. or Canadian phone number.

Viber: With this app, you can call and text anyone who also has the app for free worldwide.

Pinger: Get a U.S. phone number so that anyone can call and text you. It's great because anyone without a smartphone can still contact you through this app.

For Translation Or Language Learning:

Duolingo: Basically a free Rosetta Stone, Duolingo works on smartphones and tablets, so you practice Spanish (as well as many other languages) while on the go. With this app, long lines at the grocery stores become opportunities for learning a second language.

Google Translate: Sometimes I draw blanks when trying to think of a certain word in Spanish or when I need to know a word that I've never used. It's easy to be able to whip out my smartphone and get an instant translation with this app. But be cautious when using it for more than a word or two or a phrase; mistranslations tend to occur with longer translations or entire sentences.

Word Lens: With this app, point your smartphone at a menu, sign, or just about any text written in Spanish, and watch it translate to English right on your smartphone's screen.

For Transportation:

Tu Chofer: Arrive anywhere in Panama in style with your own personal chauffeur. The app uses your smartphone's GPS to have a driver pick you up. The fare is calculated by distance and time. I love this app for arriving home safely after a night out.

Yellow Car: This app allows you to hail the nearest taxi in Panama based on your GPS location.

Easy Taxi: This is the same type of app as Yellow Car, but it is good to have this one as a backup just in case all the taxis on Yellow Car are occupied.

Uber: The popular worldwide car service app is now in Panama. Uber definitely makes it easier to get around if you don't have a car. And Panama's taxi drivers have yet to take the lead of those in France who are intimidating the freelancing drivers out of business.

Google Maps: This is the best map app to use for walking directions in Panama. If you have an iPhone, Apple's map app sucks in Panama, so you should download Google Maps instead.

Waze: This is the best app for getting around Panama if you're driving. The maps are accurate, and it also updates you with traffic conditions and police stops. Because Panama does not have street signs or addresses, this app really comes in handy. Just type in the name of the building, restaurant, etc., and it knows the GPS coordinates of the location. After you type in the name of your destination, swipe over to the Degusta app to see how it rates.

MB Reader: Great for anyone who utilizes public transportation, this app gives you a live update of your Metrobus card balance.

Saldo Express: For those with a personal vehicle, this app will give you live updates of your Corredor Sur toll road card balance.

For Entertainment:



Degusta: This is Panama's version of Urbanspoon, a restaurant information and recommendation app. Degusta is great for finding new places to eat while on the go.



Páginas Amarillas: Panama's version of the Yellow Pages. Good to have given that phone books can be hard to come by and may be unreliable or out of date.



Super Deportes: I don't use this app, because I'm not a surfer, but it lists the current wave conditions at all of the beaches in Panama.

Panamanian Politics

How The Panamanian Electoral System Works: A Guide To Elections In Panama

The Panamanian electoral system is one of the most respected throughout Central America. After decades of living through dictatorships, the Panamanian people have developed a serious appreciation for free, fair, and transparent elections.

Managed by the independent Electoral Tribunal, Panamanian elections for president and the National Assembly are held every five years. Any free Panamanian citizens (that is, those not in jail) older than 18 years are eligible to register their vote. Much like in the United States and other Western democracies, specified polling stations are stationed throughout each constituency. After counting and recording the results, the actual paper ballots are burned, making recounts impossible.

Unlike the United States' two-party political system, Panama has a multi-party system, and in order for legislation to be approved in the National Assembly, coalitions are the norm. Also unlike the U.S. system, Panama has a unicameral, as opposed to a bicameral, legislature. Whereas the U.S. Congress has both the House of Representatives and the Senate, Panama only has their National Assembly.

Panama's National Assembly consists of 71 representatives. The election of the representatives consists of two different methods. The first is similar to the way that members of the House of Representatives are chosen in the United States: A single candidate wins a seat if he or she receives a plurality (more than anyone else) of the votes in the constituency. Of the 71 seats in the National Assembly, 26 are allocated this way. The second method Panama uses to choose their representatives involves multimember constituencies in which one constituency will elect more than one candidate. There are 45 seats allocated this way in 13 constituencies. Each multimember constituency will elect between 2-7 members, depending on the size of the constituency's population. If, for example, a multimember constituency has four seats, the top four candidates in the results will receive a seat. The multimember system allows for a more proportional representation of the results than does a single-winner-takes-all approach.

When voting for representatives to the National Assembly, Panamanian voters will not only vote for a party, but also for the individual they want from within that party. Parties provide lists of multiple candidates for voters to choose from, which provides an extra degree of choice and democratic control not familiar to North American voters.

Panama's provincial governors are not directly voted into office by the Panamanian people. Instead, they are appointed by the president.

The presidential election in Panama is decided based on a plurality vote, meaning that the candidate with the most votes wins (no meddlesome Electoral College like in the United States). There are no run-offs or requirements for a candidate to receive at least 50% of the vote. Along with the established party candidates, three independent candidates with the most support (measured in signatures on their application) are also allowed on the ballot. Unlike the on the carefully choreographed U.S. presidential

debates, the third party candidates are often included in the Panamanian presidential debates.

After serving their term, presidents must step down due to the single-term limit for the office. Only after sitting out two terms can an individual again run for president. Also disqualified from running is anyone related to the president, within a fourth degree of blood relation or of second degree “affinity” relation.

Who Is President Juan Carlos Varela?



Name: Juan Carlos Varela Rodríguez, Panamanian politician and President of Panama

Previous Occupation: Vice President of Panama from 2009 – 2014 on outgoing president Ricardo Martinelli’s ticket.

Born: Dec. 12, 1963, Panama City, Panama

Party: Panameñista Party

Family: Married to Lorena Castillo with three children (Stefan Varela, Adrian Varela, Gian Carlo Varela)

Education: Georgia Institute of Technology

Presidential term: July 1, 2014 – 2019

Childhood

Varela was born in Panama City, with family roots in the Herrera province. Varela is an entrepreneur, with family roots in the province of Herrera. After graduating from Colegio Javier, he attended the Georgia Institute of Technology in the United States where he received a Bachelor of Industrial Engineering in 1985.

Career

In the private sector, Varela has been on the board of Varela Hermanos, a family company, since 1985 and was executive vice president of the company until 2008.

Social service and public policy have been in the genetics of Juan Carlos Varela from his adolescence thanks to the training he received in the Jesuit Colegio Javier and the education from his family.

Varela has identified with the Panameñista party since the age of 14 when he attended a ceremony in Chiriquí to honor party founder Arnulfo Arias Madrid, who returned to the country after 10 years of exile in the United States and Mexico.

In 1985, at 22, he returned to the Panama with an engineering degree from Georgia Tech. Motivated by the civil wars in Central America, he became committed to social work.

Just 6 years later, he was named as one of the 27 major directors of the Arnulfista Party—the former name Panameñista party—that was his first position with the group.

Over time, his status in the party fluctuated as he had disagreements within the leadership, such as with former President Mireya Moscoso.

However, in 2006, with 15 years experience in the party, he ran for president of the collective and became its youngest ever leader at 42.

In the political arena, he worked in political campaigns beginning in the 1990s, was chief of the Panameñista Party campaign in 1994, and was the Panameñista Party's presidential candidate during the 2009 election. He joined forces with his rival in the presidential run, former president Ricardo Martinelli, as the candidate for Vice President, and on May 3, 2009, was sworn in as Vice President of Panama.

Martinelli And Varela, Bromance And Breakup



Political mistakes that came back to haunt them...

Relations between Martinelli and Varela, who formed a coalition government in 2009, quickly began to disintegrate soon after Martinelli took power after he reneged on a pre-election agreement that would have had Varela as the coalition presidential candidate in the current election. Relations continued downhill and, 26 months after the alliance was formed, Varela was sacked as Minister of Foreign Affairs and the alliance ended. To maintain control of the Assembly, many deputies were enticed to jump ship, with allegations circulating of bags of money changing hands, and the distribution of sinecure appointments, in one case re-instating the fired daughter of a defector to the post of head of the Cultural Institute (INAC).

Martinelli is not silent when it comes to insulting Varela, whom he calls “*bottella*” for accepting the salary as vice president but not working. Varela has countered that he donates his salary to charity, reports La Prensa.

Martinelli also accused his family business Varela Hermanos—producer of Seco Herreranó—for not paying the minimum wage and sued him for damages for calling him corrupt.

Varela originally ran for president in 2009 after receiving the support of 99% of his party in an internal primary. But everything changed five months before the election when Varela agreed to run as vice president in an alliance headed by the CD candidate, Martinelli.

Present

Varela won the 2014 presidential election, winning against the ruling-party candidate José Domingo Arias, who was supported by Cambio Democrático, a party led by outgoing president Ricardo Martinelli. Varela won about 39% of the vote against 32% for Arias.

The 2014 elections were conducted in an atmosphere of complete tranquility and great transparency throughout the electoral process and the emission results.

Varela Campaign And Proposal

One of Varela’s biggest campaign promises, and something on the minds of many Panamanians, is to reduce inflation, specifically regarding basic daily foods. He set price freezes on 28 basic food items, a move that he claims will reduce the monthly “bread basket” expense for a family by US\$58. He also wants to raise the amount of money given to seniors, as well as taking a tough stance on crime, which has risen throughout the country in the past few years.

Another big campaign promise from the Varela camp was transparency. After numerous corruption scandals tarnished the Martinelli administration, the president’s approval rating dropped substantially. In political terms, there was a huge amount of disillusionment between the Panamanian people and their government. Varela claims that this will end with his administration, and he plans to open up more information about government programs and businesses to the public. This may be tougher than he credits it, however, as his opposition is still in control of the legislative body, and many expect a fight.

The Government Plan covers different areas such as economic development, basic food, security and justice, environment, transport, and infrastructure, among others.

The proposals presented by Juan Carlos Varela span several sectors. One is the basic food basket, where price controls established emergency commodities, increase food production through incentives to farmers, create new local and regional markets and also increase irrigation systems.

For Education, Varela poses improving existing “Universal Scholarship” and also raises bilingual education in all public schools and increasing class days. Similarly, expand and renovate these schools and build about 50 new schools. A National Secretariat of Culture and National Secretariat for Sport will also be created; and will make a tax deduction of income tax families that invest in private education for their children.

On the Transport and Infrastructure sector, will be created Metropolitan Transportation Authority Panama, which will integrate the Panama Metro Bus and Metro. Also, will start construction of Line 2 and 3 of the Metro and will be built a new terminal for Transportation in Northern Panama. A fourth bridge over the canal and a new access to Arraijan-La Chorrera Highway will also be built. In the area of Security and Justice, several proposals are presented by the new president: Zero tolerance to corruption and more transparency and accountability; Parallel to convene a Constituent Assembly to strengthen the separation of powers and promote decentralization of government; will be reviewed law liability of minors and there will be a comprehensive plan for security and opportunities in neighborhoods.

In addition to the above sectors, there are also proposals for the Economic Development of the country, which are listed below: Incentives and tax credits for companies in which 5% or more of the staff are college students; social programs incubators for young entrepreneurs, creating unique area of minimum wage across the country, simplifying the tax system and not raise rates or create new taxes on the working class and professional.

In a country, Social Development has a huge importance. The proposals in this sector are: The creation of Youth Development Centers in neighborhoods with high levels of risk; increasing the number of beneficiaries of the “100 to 70” age reducing the base; increase housing allowances and creating a single system of Public Health, with universal health coverage. It will also built 15 new health centers and Cancer Hospital in Chiriquí.

In terms of Environment, Juan Carlos Varela proposals include the construction of recycling plants and waste treatment and waste and the creation of the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development and the Environmental Administrative Tribunal.

Campaign Help From A U.S. Adviser

With limited knowledge of Panama’s political culture, Christian Ferry spent months in the country designing speeches, organizing grassroots supporters, and buying TV ads as chief strategist to Varela’s presidential campaign. After trailing in the major polls, Varela jumped past his two rivals to win the vote convincingly.

The victory was more remarkable because Varela’s choice of Ferry flies in the face of a recent trend

among Latin America campaigns to shun carpetbagger consultants from the U.S. and rely on regional talent more attuned to local nuances. Varela's better-funded opponents hired the region's most sought-after strategists: Joao Santana and J.J. Rendon.

Santana, a former journalist, is the best known of a generation of Brazilian strategists who have campaigned around Latin America. He's credited with helping Silva bounce back from scandal to retain the presidency in 2006 and for stage managing the election four years later of his then-unknown successor, Dilma Rousseff. Other clients include the current presidents of Peru and El Salvador. While those leaders lean left, Santana was hired in Panama by conservative candidate Jose Domingo Arias, the hand-picked heir of outgoing President Ricardo Martinelli.

Rendon, a native of Venezuela who is a professed Buddhist, advised former Panama City Mayor Juan Carlos Navarro. Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro declared Rendon "public enemy number one" in 2013 for supporting the opposition. Now based in Miami, the publicist is known as Latin America's version of shrewd U.S. Republican strategist Rove.

Rendon's biggest victory to date was Juan Manuel Santos' landslide win in Colombia in 2010. But he was recently forced to resign as chief strategist of Santos' re-election campaign over allegations, which he denies, that he received \$12 million from the country's top drug lords to negotiate their surrender. Neither Rendon nor Santana have discussed their involvement in Panama's election. Rendon didn't respond to requests for comment and efforts to locate Santana were unsuccessful.

But members of both the Navarro and Arias campaigns say the consultants provided critical, paid advice.

They attribute to Santana the slick television ads featuring Brazil-built projects – Central America's first subway, a coastal beltway and a soccer stadium – that bombarded the airwaves to remind Panamanians of Martinelli's legacy, and Arias' claim to it.

Except for a 2013 visit to Panama, Rendon's consulting work was done remotely. Aides to Navarro said last year that they contracted Rendon to prepare for what they expected would be a dirty campaign.

The 39-year-old Ferry, who was a deputy campaign manager to John McCain's ill-fated 2008 White House run, said that the hardball tactics by the two rival campaigns turned off voters. Attack ads, false rumors on social media, claims of ties to drug and money laundering by candidates all featured prominently in what was the country's costliest and hardest-fought race since democracy was restored following the 1989 U.S. invasion. Arias' reliance on the billionaire Martinelli to promote his candidacy despite laws prohibiting the president from campaigning may have also backfired.

"It was an act of desperation that showed people Arias wasn't as strong as he was purported to be," said Ferry.

In turn, he said Varela stayed on message about the need to lower the cost of living for poor Panamanians even in the face of an onslaught of attacks by his arch-rival Martinelli.

Ferry, whose Alexandria, Virginia-based consulting firm The Trailblazer Group began working with Varela in 2011, said he'll remember the campaign as the most malicious he's ever seen, mostly because of the machinations of his two rival strategists. "I've worked in a half-dozen countries and I've never seen anything as negative as this."

Holidays In Panama

How To Navigate November In Panama

Wondering why Panama seems like a ghost town in November? Government offices are closed, the banks are closed—which means law firms are closed—and so are most local businesses...

November is Panama's Independence Month (yes, month... not day). Holidays are as follows:

Nov. 2	Day of the Dead
Nov. 3	Independence Day
Nov. 4	Flag Day
Nov. 5	Colon Day
Nov. 10	Shout in Villa de los Santos
Nov. 28	Independence from Spain

*But, remember, when the holiday falls on Saturday or Sunday, the President may make Friday or Monday a holiday too.

Now add in the gringo holidays:

Nov. 11	Veteran's Day
Nov. 28	Thanksgiving
Nov. 29	Black Friday and part of the long holiday weekend

If you are coming to Panama to obtain visa, residency, purchase property, or just want to conduct business in general... don't come expecting to accomplish anything during the month of November.

Aside from all the official holidays (and the "bridge holidays" on Monday or Friday), a lot of people take vacation days during this month to capitalize on the time away—they get to spend five days at the beach, instead of two. Some folks here manage it so that they work only a few days during the month, at all.

Given that, the city will be moving slower than usual and no one will get much done.

On the bright side, there will be no traffic in the city that weekend... but be warned about the holiday traffic. The Pan-American Highway will be packed on any day that would have masses coming or going from the beaches. Every week this month either a Thursday evening, Friday, Sunday evening, or Monday will see the highways in gridlock.

November and December are popular months for holidays all around the world. It's important to keep that in mind as you plan your business transactions around the world

This is not the time of year to try to get anything done in a hurry...

How To Have Christmas In The Tropics

Palm trees and sunscreen aren't usually what most of us think of when we think about the holidays... but Christmas is one of Panama's biggest celebrations and is a festive affair, despite the heat.

Although the typical light displays and wintry greens aren't common, the city decks herself out in a rainbow of hues, bows, glitter, and ribbons. The technicolor displays may be shocking to new-comers. Purples, pinks, and oranges are just as popular for Christmas here as the traditional colors we're used to.

Many buildings with lawns decorate with synthetic trees or life-size candy canes, creating a tropical Christmas wonderland. Not a bit is missed, the city is showered in holiday decorations of all types and colors.

Head to the Canal Zone for decorations that you might find more familiar, including lots of lights.

Stores begin selling Christmas goods in October and (with no Thanksgiving in the middle) decoration begins almost immediately after stores start selling. You'll have no trouble finding fun baubles to decorate for the season, but some other aspects of preparation may take a bit more leg work...

One place that might help is the [Casita de Navidad in Costa del Este](#). This Christmas wonderland is your one-stop shop for all things festive. Here, you'll find all manner of seasonal décor, from ornaments of all types to large lawn installations, and wreath-making supplies to miniature village models. (It turns into a Halloween store, too.)

Trees...

If trimming a palm tree doesn't sound like your style, and you're partial to living over synthetic, you have several options for buying Christmas trees in Panama...

[Tzanetatos](#)

These are the best trees you can buy in Panama. These trees have been harvested in Canada, shipped down, and put immediately into a massive refrigerator that serves as a meat locker during the rest of the year. Tzanetatos is actually a large food storage warehouse and bulk shopping outlet. This time of year they sell Christmas baskets, plenty of Christmas-related foods including wine, olives, and hams... and trees. The guys who sell the trees will wrap them and pack them for you, put them on your roof, and send you on your way. Bring cash, no cards accepted here.

The problem is that you have to wait until the shipment comes in, which is never the same date. Our strategy is calling every day until they finally tell us they have our trees—just be sure to specify that the trees are in fact at the location you are going to. [In the past we've called and asked if the trees were in, told yes, gone to shop, and were told that the trees were only in the country...not actually at the store.](#) Once you confirm they are in-store, drop everything, run over, and pick out your tree before they are all gone.

Supermercado El Rey

These trees are available earlier in December than those from Tzanetatos, but they are left out in the sun and the heat until they are sold. Their condition upon purchase is likely to be much better than

their condition once you get it in the door of your home, so take great care in transporting these wilting fellows from the store. The good news here is, with many locations all over the country, you likely won't have to travel far to get your tree home. The problem is you can't say how many needles you'll have left by the 25th...

Supermercado Super 99

These trees are much the same as those sold at El Rey—kept outside and already wilting, but, again, are available earlier in the year and more conveniently located for most.

*Depending on where and how big you buy, prices range from US\$25 to US\$150.

**HINT: If you don't have pets, try putting an aspirin and a little vinegar into the tree's water. It will help preserve the needles. If you have pets, 7-Up helps preserve the tree as well—and it presents no danger to the family furies. Add a cup of soda every couple of days. Don't overdo it though, no more than one part 7-Up to three parts water.

Events...

Festivities start in December, but hit their full stride in the second week of the month. Christmas events are many and varied during the season...

The Cinta Costera offers floats, nativities, and other festive displays that get bigger every year. These begin around Dec.1 and finish by the second week of the month. Once they're up, they are left up for spectators to enjoy at no cost. This is a great, fun, family-friendly activity.

Carols by Candlelight has become a Panama City institution in recent years. Organized by the Canada Plus Club, this event now attracts a staggering number of participants every year. In the past the year has been held in Casco Viejo, the Cinta Costera, and in the Ciudad del Saber. It seems that the event outgrows its venue every year and has to upgrade to a larger space each following year. Proceeds earned benefit Santo Tomas hospital. It is a truly wonderful event, full of singing and good cheer.

Spectacular fireworks displays are a hallmark of holidays in Latin America, and Christmas in Panama is no different. Keep your eyes on the skies over the holiday...though you likely won't miss them as the booming noises echo around the city. While you'll likely get more than one display, the main event is midnight on Christmas Eve. Fireworks are how Panamanians ring in Christmas Day—with huge color, light, energy, and excitement.

Parades are also a major part of any holiday in Latin America, with children playing a major role. Vibrant floats pass the Cinta Costera, followed by women in colorful *pollera* and children playing music and dancing.

Las Posadas is a traditional Spanish celebration that takes place during the nine days leading up to Christmas and is practiced in some small towns and neighborhoods in Panama. This is the reenactment of Mary and Joseph going door to door looking for lodging. People dress up and parade

through their neighborhood, finally ending in the last house with carols, (or villancicos), food and drink, and a piñata for the kids.

Food...

All the usual Christmas fixin's can be found in Panama, but you may have to visit a couple different stores to get everything on the list...

Supermercado Riba Smith—Locations in Bella Vista, Multiplaza Mall, Costa del Este, Transistmica, Coronado, and Chitre

Known as the expat grocery store, Riba imports a lot of goods that North Americans crave, especially at this time of year. From cranberries, to turkeys and hams, to stuffing mixes and pumpkin pie filling, this is your best bet to find everything you want for Christmas dinner. But be warned...this stuff sells out fast. I recommend you buy what you want as soon as you see it, because you don't know if another shipment will come in.

If you can't find what you need in one location, you'll have to hit a few others...

Foodie and Organica—Located in Paitilla

These stores also offer a wide range of imported goods from all over. They also offer great organic produce.

Celebrating Panama-Style

A traditional Panamanian Christmas is not at all like a traditional North American Christmas. If you want to try to adopt local custom for your own holiday this year, here's how...

The season kicks off on Dec. 8—the day of the Immaculate Conception. This also happens to be Mother's Day every year and it's an official holiday. No one goes to work today and most stores are closed, so take the opportunity to decorate, or start preparing for the holiday.

On Dec. 8 a parade of the Statue of the Blessed Virgin winds through the city, closely followed by children, some dressed as angels. This is the day of First Communion for many of these children.

During the following days and weeks nativities appear all over the city. These *nacimientos* are sometimes quite elaborate and most are life-sized. If you live in a house with a yard, make sure to put out your nativity around this time. Likewise, if you own a business, your office decoration is not truly completed to Panama-standard without a nativity (contrary to the secular practices of office decorating in the United States).

Christmas Eve is spent preparing food, much like back home. A Panamanian Christmas dinner likely includes turkey or ham, stuffing or *arroz con pollo*, *arroz dulce*, and tamales. The all-too-familiar fruit cake is a popular dessert here, as are various types of liqueur cakes. *Ron ponche* is eggnog, and very popular here.

As evening sets in you'll need to stay up feasting, drinking, and partying with your family all night—music is a major part of the celebration. After eating, many might take to the streets of their neighborhood to dance and celebrate with neighbors. At midnight, after watching the fireworks, you get to open your presents, and finally hit the sack.

Christmas Day is spent at church, at least in the morning. The rest of the day is spent with family, or going to travel to farther-away relatives. The same foods are eaten today, as well.

The final celebration comes on Jan. 6 when Panamanians begin to burn their trees. Tree bonfires are a fun way to say goodbye to the season and are usually held with friends rather than family. You'll see scorch marks and tree skeletons appearing throughout the city as people burn their trees.

How To Ring In The New Year Panamanian Style

Feliz Año Nuevo from Live and Invest Overseas!

Maybe you celebrate the New Year in Panama the same way you've been used to. Maybe you have some friends and family over... maybe you enjoyed a night out... you probably ate a lot (and maybe had a drink or two)... music... dancing... celebrating the way North Americans do.

In Panama they do all that, too... the friends and family... the food and drink... the music... the dancing... But, there are a few—we'll call them unique—things that Panamanians do within the first few minutes of the New Year to start the next one afresh.

Here are some of the more common (and bizarre!) superstitions and traditions Panamanians uphold every 31st...

1. Pack your suitcase!...

Or at least wheel it around the perimeters of the house a few times...

This superstition is common in nearly all Latin American countries. If you're hoping for a year full of travel and adventure, then pull out your suitcase when the clock strikes twelve and take it for a stroll (packing is optional). In Mexico and Colombia the tradition requires you to take your case around the block... Panamanians simplify things, around the house will suffice here. Although, seeing everyone in the neighborhood taking their suitcases for a walk around the block would be amusing!

2. Burn what (or who) you want to leave behind...

Not literally! Create a life-size doll called a muñeco that represents whatever that thing may be...

If you happen to be driving around Panama, particularly the interior of the country, in the month of December, you will notice many (mostly not-so-favorite) celebrities hanging around along the sides of the road... standing... sitting... still. These are *muñecos*. Heads made of papier-mâché with faces drawn on, some familiar, some not so familiar. Bodies made of pillows, or straw, or whatever the maker feels like stuffing it with, and dressed in clothing.

Muñecos are made to represent something or someone who should be left in the past. At midnight on New Years Eve, the *muñecos* are torched or, more recently, turned in to a fireworks display.

This tradition began in Panama's western provinces and has gained popularity over the decades, so much so that local governments are now funding the tradition and putting together official contests for the best *muñecos* in the region.

They may look creepy as they stare you down while you drive by, but you can be comforted knowing their fiery, firework fate.

3. Wear yellow underwear for luck...

But you can keep this one to yourself...

It's simple. Just wear your favorite pair of yellow underpants and you're ready for the New Year. Only good luck and happiness is ahead of you, officially. Nothing to worry about now.

It is uncertain where this tradition originated from, but it is common in most Latin American countries. Some consider it even luckier if you receive them as a gift, and even luckier than that if you wear them inside out only to reverse them at midnight... But we'll leave that to you.

4. Wear red...

And you might just begin a year of romance...

This trick will be sure to start your New Year right, according to Panamanians... Maybe even sparking an unexpected New Year's kiss. This tradition began like the last, as red underwear. But, how could you possibly wear yellow and red underwear at once? So, wearing red anywhere in your sparkly, new outfit should avail for a year of romance ahead.

5. Hold money at the stroke of midnight...

And get ready to bring on the riches...

Don't worry if you spent all your money on your New Year's Eve celebrations! If you're grasping some cash, even your last coins will do, at the stroke of midnight, then you'll be assured that 2016 will be a wealthy one. You will be looking to buy mansions and nice cars in no time. This tradition varies amongst Latin American countries; in some places, the money needs to be in your shoe.

6. Eat 12 grapes...

Don't forget to make a wish for each bite!

This is the most well-known, yet still unique, New Year's Eve tradition. Originating in Spain, but common throughout all Latin counties, this tradition will have you eating twelve grapes at midnight (just one at a time) and making a wish while eating each grape. Occasionally, if the party gets a little out of hand, you will soon find yourself being showered in a storm of grapes. They may also come handy if the party runs dry... if one of your wishes was for all those grapes to ferment and to turn to wine!

How To Do *Carnaval* In Panama



Carnaval is one of the most highly anticipated events of the year in Panama. During the days of *carnaval*, thousands of people from every corner of the country dance to earsplitting music, while beautiful parade floats and elaborately dressed *carnaval* queens saunter down every major avenue of the country.

One unique aspect to *carnaval* in Panama is its all-inclusive attitude. Toddlers, children, teenagers, parents, and grandparents all come together to celebrate and let loose. In Panama, you're never too old to party!

To make sure your *carnaval* is all it can be, follow these insider tips and tricks:

Get Out Of The City

It can seem shocking to newcomers to find out that the worst *carnaval* in the entire country is held in Panama City. The city becomes a ghost town as everyone heads out to the interior of Panama for the real *carnaval* celebrations. Panama City *carnaval* attendees are usually rookie tourists who didn't know any better and several thousand people who come into the city from the surrounding low-income neighborhoods.

Under former president Martinelli, the government tried to improve on the Panama City carnival by spending more than US\$3 million and brining in big-name acts like Don Omar. Their hope was to make the city the definitive carnival destination in the country, but the attempts weren't fooling anyone. Everyone in Panama knows where the real carnavales are held. Consequently, the subsequent budgets for carnival celebrations in Panama City have been reduced. The idea is to focus promotion and expenditure on the massively attended celebrations in the interior of the country.

Book In Advance

As soon as this year's carnival celebrations end, Panamanians start planning next year's bash. Rooms fill up quickly, to say the least.

Hotels charge a premium for rooms during carnival season, so book as far in advance as possible. These small towns that host the most popular carnival celebrations don't actually have enough commercial accommodation to support the huge influx of revelers every year, so a common practice is renting out private homes or rooms within homes. Often, the homeowners head to the city or some other town for carnival and rent their house out at an inflated daily or weekly rate. This is a great option for most people... and the only option once the small hotels fill up.

If you happen to go to carnival in Penonome, we recommend staying at Dos Continentes. It's often the only hotel with space available the week before, and they weren't charging ridiculous prices.

Be Prepared To Get Wet

One of Panama's own carnival traditions are *culecos*. Many countries celebrate carnival, but these water trucks are a tradition unique to Panama. The trucks patrol the main streets of every town that celebrates and spray the often overheated crowds. The first spray might be a shock, but you'll soon be waving your arms and begging the *culecos* to hose you down as the heat intensifies throughout the day.

Be sure to wear swim trunks or a bathing suit and shoes that will still be comfortable to wear after getting wet (definitely don't wear socks and tennis shoes). We recommend putting your money, ID, and phone in a waterproof pouch (there will be plenty of people selling these no matter where you go to celebrate).



How Far Out Of Your Comfort Zone Do You Want To Go?

Carnavales in Panama can be far outside the comfort zone for many a Westerner. Part of the celebration is accessible and much like a North American holiday: parades, costumes, and Queens. But the other part is crowded, dirty, loud, and full of messy drunks. This part can be hard to handle for those unprepared.

A few years ago, a friend came to visit during *carnavales* and we headed to Penonomé so she could see some “real Panama.” We arrived to the festivities pretty early in the day so it wasn’t too crowded and she was having a good time. Fast forward two hours when the place is jam packed with people, the music is blaring reggaeton, and guys from the *culecos* are spraying water everywhere and she had had enough; the entire debacle was too overwhelming for her.

You are either going to love it or hate it, so try to go to a carnival celebration that will be within your comfort zone. Here are three locations to choose from, starting with the most intense to the least intense:

Las Tablas: If you want the most extreme carnival experience, then Las Tablas is it. This town is home to the most beautiful and intricate parade floats with an elaborately dressed carnival queen on top waving down to the crowd. The town will be crammed with thousands of people, so get friendly!

Penonomé: The carnival in Penonomé is popular because it’s big, but not as intense as Las Tablas. It also features a floating parade down the river.

Pedasí: If you want a more tranquil carnival experience, then head over to the small town of Pedasí. You’ll see plenty of parades without the over-packed crowds of Penonomé and Las Tablas. You’ll also be close to several beautiful beaches that offer a break from the carnival festivities.

Renting At Las Tablas During Carnaval

The Tableño locals leave town during carnival to maintain their sanity. It is actually less expensive to rent in one of the smaller outlying towns... and life is more enjoyable. If renting full-time is your goal, look at Guararé, Santo Domingo, Sesteadero, or El Carate. For a quaint beachfront town look at Pocrí.

Stay Safe

Don’t let your guard down. If you plan on attending a carnival celebration, remember:

- 1) Keep your pockets empty.** Do not take valuables with you. We suggest bringing US\$20 or less in cash, your ID, and a phone with you—and keep them in a waterproof pouch under your shirt. This festival is a pickpocket’s heaven... Past attendees will recount incidents in which cell phones, cameras, wallets, purses, and anything else of value have been stolen.
- 2) Prepare for the drunks.** Expect to be in the middle of a lot of sloppy, messy drunk people. They might spill on you, fall on you, scream at you, or pour water on you... Think Mardi Gras

in New Orleans. If you're not prepared for this level of inebriation, you should keep out of Las Tablas and head for a more low-key Carnaval celebration. Within just a few hours (yes, even in the morning) it becomes difficult trying to walk around avoiding the empty beer cans and other litter on the streets. On this same note, expect to see people urinating in the streets. Day time, night time, any time... Public bathrooms are hard to find, so any corner, fence, tree, or parked car becomes a urinal.

- 3) **Wear ear plugs.** If you want to be able to hear anything, or anyone, after attending a night of partying... wear ear plugs. The noise is unbelievably loud. Even at a distance of several blocks, you'll be able to hear music from the sound stages as if they were right next to you.
- 4) **Wear sunscreen and stay hydrated.** Many a gringo has come back from Carnaval sporting lobster shades of red. Don't make this rookie mistake—stay well lotioned and remember to reapply often. Likewise, people often forget to drink water when they're drinking beer in the sun all day—that's a sure way to get heatstroke. Carry a bottle of water with you and make sure you keep refilling it.

What To Eat

Your diet during *carnavales* is mostly going to consist of street meat and other street food. It's quick, cheap, abundant, and won't delay your partying too much. If you need to eat something more substantial, there will be a few restaurants around depending where you go, and you can enjoy some sancocho from a local fonda in the morning to help with the lingering hangover.

Beat The Traffic

Leave Panama City on Friday afternoon if you want to beat the traffic. Most Panamanians have to work a half-day on Saturday and then they head to the interior of the country for *carnavales*. By leaving on Friday afternoon you miss the morning and evening rush hours as well as Saturday traffic, which is the worst day. If you can't leave on Friday then go as early as possible Saturday morning while the majority of people are still working.



Most people head back to Panama City from *carnavales* on Tuesday—*do not do this* unless you want to sit stranded in traffic for an infinite number of hours. My biggest tip for beating the traffic is to leave on Monday or stay a few extra days and head back to the city on Wednesday or Thursday.

Enjoy *carnavales* in Panama!

What To Bring

1 Sunscreen



2 Cheap sunglasses (hundreds of vendors will be selling these no matter where you go, so just get them there if you don't have any)



3 During the day, wear a swimsuit, tank top, shorts, and flip flops or crocs to fit in with everyone



4 At night, it's the same minus the swimwear, and some people wear jeans



6 Waterproof pouch (also frequently sold everywhere)



5 Passport copy or Panama cedula if you have one



7 Seco. You can't experience carnavales without drinking Seco. A lot of Panamanians say they will only drink it during carnavales because it makes them crazy.



Understanding *Carnaval*: Panama's Carnival Traditions, Queens, And The Ancient History Of *Carnaval*

Carnaval In Panama

The most noteworthy of annual celebrations in Panama takes place every year in Las Tablas when this normally sleepy Panamanian town of around 25,000 people erupts in a four-day riot of DJs and water cannons firing purified water over the dancing and partying crowds that allegedly swell the little town to more than 100,000 on occasions!



It's time to let the hair down before the fasting of Lent. The clothes come off along with the inhibitions and the rival factions begin their annual clash of the parties. Traditionally, there are two *carnaval* queens: one from uptown (Calle Arriba), the other from downtown (Calle Abajo). Typically, the uptown girl's family will invest thousands in her campaign to become the queen. Each side battles for supremacy and the competition gets pretty fierce. However, 2016 marked the first year with a third queen from "midtown" (Calle Central). It's all about noise and color: who has the gaudiest floats, the loudest *murga* band (mainly trumpets, trombones and tubas), the most outlandish costumes, and the largest and loudest fireworks display? The public votes and the queen of that year is crowned. That's at midnight on the Friday when the party hasn't even begun in earnest yet.

The processions from both sides pass through the streets at a stately pace. The queens wave and flash their plastic smiles for hour after hour from their bejeweled floats, sometimes dwarfed by countless glittering baubles and supported by giant papier-mâché figures of Roman centurions or other virile and symbolic characters. Each queen also has her own all-male entourage, called *tunas*. The noise that accompanies the queens is simply phenomenal. Dissonant notes clash between deep bass reggaeton and local *typico* music from the open-air clubs and the repetitive brass *murga* traveling just behind the new would-be queen.

The fervor rises and it's not hard to see *carnaval's* roots in the Caribbean. There is something mesmerizing about the sights and sounds which engulf the senses... something primal.

Carnaval officially begins around 8 a.m. on Saturday morning with the procession of the new queen and the midmorning arrival of the *culecos* for what is called the *mojadera*: up to ten 18-wheel water trucks arrive and spray the dancing, sweating crowds with fresh water.

This situation prevails until about 5 p.m. each day whereupon time is made for a couple hours of break for a nap, and then it's back at it for dinner or all night dancing in one of the open-air clubs featuring local music stars and DJs.

The structure of *carnaval* follows a time honored pattern: opening on Friday night, Saturday is International Day, *pollera* day on Sunday, Monday is costume day, Queen's Day on Tuesday, and before 5 a.m. on Wednesday they bury the sardine, signifying the end of the festivities.

The Ancient Origins Of *Carnaval*

How did Panama's traditions emerge? There is an interesting story behind the Panamanian *carnavales*, and each part of the story has a symbolism and meaning largely lost in the mists of time and beer.

For example, the *culecos* are not only a respite from the heat and an antidote to the rum, but a symbolic gesture throughout the carnival period of washing away last year's sins and excesses and purification in readiness for Lent and the year ahead.



The etymology of the word *carnaval* could provide a clue to its origins, too. In Greco-Roman history and ancient Egyptian culture the *carrus navalis* (sea chariot) was the name given to the funny ship driven through the streets of Ancient Greece by a costumed group of satirists during the festival of Dionysius. Roman tradition at this time of year was that slaves would swap places with their masters to welcome the new year's harvest to come during a festival dedicated to Saturn, god of grain, vegetation, and wine.



The early church of Emperor Constantine had to assimilate, not alienate, the proponents of many pre-Christian, pagan festivals. For ancient peoples the period leading up to Lent was born in rebirth and ancient fertility rites. It was a time for looking forward to a good harvest having cleansed the ills of the previous year and for happiness and joy prior to new growth. At the time, the festival began as early as Dec. 26, but they all ended before sunrise on Ash Wednesday.

Like the sea chariot of the Ancient Greeks, carts and coaches have always formed an intrinsic part of the ceremony, and in pre-Christian times carts were sent around the countryside as symbols of fertility, prosperity, happy lives, and an assurance of good harvests in the name of Mother Earth, goddess of fertility. In Bronze Age Mesopotamia (approximately 2,500 B.C.), Ishtar was worshipped as goddess of fertility and sexuality, in many cases depicted in a carriage or chariot.

This is now echoed by the carnival queens traveling sedately in their heavily decorated floats.

Throughout the ages, ancestors were revered and masquerades were commonplace throughout the ancient world, popular to impersonate lost forebears and iconized through dance, ritual, and music.

The date for Ash Wednesday was decided in the 11th century, and it is thought that the Middle Ages gave rise to a festival called Carne Levale (literally, “to say farewell to meat”). It was in Florence that Bonfire of the Vanities was born when a group of Friars burned books, works of art, and other supposed adornments in public on Mardi Gras. As Catholicism began to spread to the Americas, brought by French, Spanish, and Portuguese settlers, so too came their traditions and religious festivals.

It is understandable that such an ancient rituals would have evolved and morphed over the ages into a myriad of variations. The legend of King Momo is also steeped in pre-Christian belief. Descended from Momus, Greek god of mockery and satire, usually depicted looking out irreverently from under his mask, King Momo has his origins in the Magi and their earthly representation in the King’s Cake. Momo has become the personification of the pagan need for a sacrifice, which is why King Momo is nothing but a spirit in some iterations of carnival, including that of Las Tablas. In ancient times, the king of a tribe would be chosen annually by way of baking a coin into a cake and appointing the one who ate it. After his year of royal treatment, he would be sacrificed. Momo has come to signify the spiritual emcee of carnival and his yearly fate is intertwined with the sacrificial burial of the sardine.

A 1559 oil painting by Pieter Bruegel entitled “The Battle between carnival and Lent” and other evidence that mock battles were indeed part of the 16th and 17th century carnival festivals.

Whatever their origin, Panamanians—and particularly those from Pedasi and Las Tablas—uphold many folkloric traditions that may otherwise be lost to us. As one online source has it, “The custom of abundant consumption can still be considered an intrinsic part of *carnaval*.” Let’s enjoy its modern version and embrace its ancient origins.

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