

lonely planet

Panama

From *seco* and *ceviche* to surfing

Floss It

For the cost of a crummy cigar, you can buy a vacation-saving item. It's called dental floss, and its uses are innumerable. Got a fishhook but no line? Four words: green waxed dental floss. Need to secure a mosquito net? Reach for dental floss. Forgot to pack a clothesline? You're in luck if you've packed dental floss. Tear in your jeans, rip in your pack? A little dental floss and a sewing needle and life goes on.

Dental floss comes in 50m and 100m lengths and is sold in nifty little cases complete with built-in cutters. It's cheap, it's light, it's strong and it's outrageously useful. Some say dental floss can even remove decay-causing material from between teeth and under gums. Now in cinnamon, mint and grape flavors. No kidding.



are an option for Parque Nacional Darién, which is spectacular to explore by foot and/or boat, but going alone isn't recommended.

A Room with a View

There's no shortage of memorable places to stay in Panama, but some have views that burn enduring images into the ol' grey matter. The Canopy Tower in Panamá Province is a former radar installation, ringed by dense rain forest, that's been converted into a fancy birding platform with half a dozen charming guestrooms.

The Cabañas Los Quetzales, located inside Parque Internacional La Amistad, consist of three romantic chalets with idyllic near-canopy-level sitting areas. Speaking of romance, the rustic-yet-lovely beachside cabañas of Al Natural Resort on Isla Bastimentos in the Archipiélago de Bocas del Toro aren't for everyone, but they are tonic for incurable romantics. From the El Turega and Chichibaldi rooms at the Posada del Cerro La Vieja near Chiguirí Arriba in Coclé Province, a guest could see forever if it weren't for the many mist-shrouded peaks that inspire beautiful thoughts.

Several of the Kuna-run hotels in the Comarca de San Blas offer magazine-coverish coconut-trees-on-dreamy-isles images neatly captured by your window frame. Among them is the Sapibenega 'The Kuna Lodge' on the isle of Isla Iskardup. There, at least half of the water's edge cabins offer views that inspire gotta-pinch-myself reality tests.

Few visitors to Panama's capital consider it a beautiful city, but then relatively few of Panama City's visitors have stayed in one of the rooms at the Hotel Caesar Park that look back upon the financial district, Casco Viejo and Bahía de Panamá. But watching the skyscrapers of downtown painted in rays of pastel pinks, oranges and reds at sunset, as you nibble on a chocolate and sip a cocktail in a guestroom of this true five-star hotel, is an undeniably glorious urban experience.

**PLANNING
When to Go**

Panama's high tourist season corresponds with its Pacific-side dry season – from mid-December to mid-April. During these months, there is relatively little rain in Panama City and elsewhere south of the Continental Divide. North of the mountains, on the Caribbean side of Panama, it rains all year around. However, it tends to rain less in February, March, September and October than it does the rest of the year. (See Climate in the Facts for the Visitor chapter for details.)

The best time to visit Panama really depends on what you intend to do and on personal preference. If you intend to spend most of your time on the Pacific side, you might want to visit in December or January, when there's generally little rain and the weather is pleasant. Bear in mind, however, that hotel prices and airfares are generally higher from mid-December to mid-April.

If you'll be doing any serious hiking, the dry season is the most comfortable time to do it – and the least arduous, because you'll have better traction, no sucking mud to contend with and fewer creeks to cross. For planning purposes, beware that Panama's

mountains can get very cold at night; if you're considering camping at altitude (in Boquete, El Valle or Cerro Punta, for example), be sure to bring warm clothing.

If you like to party, try to be in Panama City or on the Península de Azuero for Carnaval (Mardi Gras), held each year during the four days leading up to Ash Wednesday. Panama City's Carnaval celebration is one of the world's largest. On the Península de Azuero it's great fun, too, but the crowds are not as huge. Hotel reservations during Carnaval are a must and should be made well in advance. Panama has a number of other festivals worth catching, especially on the Azuero; see the Herrera Province and Los Santos Province chapters for details.

Maps

International Travel Maps (☎ 604-687-3320, fax 604-687-5925, itmb@itmb.com; 530 W Broadway, Vancouver, BC V5Z 1E9, Canada) publishes an excellent 1:800,000 color map showing the geographical features, cities, towns, national parks, airports and roads of Panama (US\$8.95).

Website: www.itmb.com

The Instituto Geográfico Nacional (☎ 236-2444), just off Avenida Simón Bolívar in Panama City, sells topographical, nautical, provincial, city and regional maps of Panama. Taxi drivers know the institute simply as 'Tommy Guardia' in honor of the man who founded it.

What to Bring

You can buy anything you are likely to need in Panama and probably more cheaply than you can back home, but if you're short on time, try to bring everything you think you'll need with you. And although the risk of contracting malaria is remote, if you intend to be on antimalaria medication during your trip, you'll want to start taking it before you leave, as it takes a couple of weeks to kick in (see Health, later in this chapter).

If you'll be camping, bring a sweater or jacket for chilly nights. If you're planning on scuba diving or snorkeling while you're in Panama, check the Activities section in this chapter for tips on items to bring.

City & Beach Clothing Panamanians place a lot of importance on appearance. If you want to be treated with respect, don't dress like a bum. Only the poorest Panamanian would wear cut-offs, and no locals strut around in bikini tops except at the beach. Due to the heat, the most appropriate clothing for Panamanian cities is made of 100% cotton fiber or (even better, but pricier) material designed to wick moisture away from the skin; such high-tech wear usually can be found in stores specializing in outdoor apparel.

If the club scene is your scene, keep in mind that casual-to-dressy officewear is the norm here, and collared shirts are preferred to T-shirts. Most clubs deny entry to people in shorts. Entry to government buildings, too, is often denied to people in shorts. Shoewise, Panamanians seem to stop wearing sneakers at about age 16 in favor of leather shoes.

The beach scene ranges from the Brazilian (brief briefs and tiny bikinis) to the American (baggy shorts and enveloping one-pieces). Nudity will attract unwanted attention or detention, except at the country's only official nude beach, on Isla Contadora. Remember, every day of the year a sunburn spoils someone's vacation. Regardless of your other beach apparel, wear sunscreen if you are susceptible to burning. You'll be glad you did.

Jungle Gear If you'll be spending a significant amount of time in the jungle, consider bringing along the following items:

- lightweight hiking boots for short jaunts
- military boots with drainage holes for treks
- medium (30-50% Deet) insect repellent
- heavy-duty rain poncho
- light blanket for lowland, thick for mountain
- air-inflated sleeping pad (Thermarest is best)
- washable tennis, running or walking shoes
- sandals (the strap-on sports-style works well)
- two pairs of cotton-polypropylene/nylon socks
- one pair of wool-blend socks
- two pairs of nylon, quick-dry field pants
- one pair of nylon, quick-dry shorts