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PANAMA CITY GUIDE

CANAL DREAMS: THE BEST HOTELS, RESTAURANTS, BARS, SHOPS AND THINGS TO DO



PLACES TO STAY

The Bristol

Ave. Aquilino de la Guardia
Tel: 265 7844

Discreet and luxurious, Reception is a small front desk in the entrance lounge and an escort to your room by a butler on call 24-7. Scores points with travel-weary executives who can leave clothes to be washed and ironed ahead of their next visit. But there's no swimming pool.

The Marriott

Calle 52 y Ricardo Arias
Tel: 270 9100

The Marriott's favourite, and a highlight among the international chains in Panamá. Insist on a high-floor, corner room and you'll catch at least a silver of the bay on view. Dress up for the gym.

El Panama Hotel

Avenida Central
Tel: 260 5000

The oldest grand hotel in the city and, frankly, it shows. Built before the age of a/c and modernised with variable success, the hotel does have a number of decent two-storey cabanas, complete with fabulous pool-side terraces.

Al Natural

Isle Basimientos, Bocas del Toro
Tel: 623 2217

Happy chic in a tropical island retreat 45 minutes by Cessna out of town. A Belgian-owned hybrid of vernacular architecture and technology, it does at least use its solar power to fire up twin turntables in the pier-end dining room and bar. The four cabins have a half-moon wooden wall facing the jungle, leaving the front open to sea and sky.



PLACES TO EAT

Limoncillo

Calle 47 y Uruguaty, Bella Vista
Tel: 263 5350

Limoncillo serves up fresh, upmarket fusion staples and good seafood from elegant premises in an unpromising locale. It took a while to win over the locals - not surprising, given that much of the neighbourhood competition was all about franchise food at places such as Crepes & Waffles opposite. Co-owner Jennifer Spector, a New Yorker, also offers wall space (and a link) to some of the city's artists.

Café du Liban

Ave. Day Allario, Calle de la Presidencia
Tel: 212 1582

The best Lebanese restaurant in town abundantly well stocked with them. There are tables for two on a narrow balcony overlooking the Casco Viejo bay opposite the modern metropolis. Exiled Ecuadorian president, Abdalá Bucaram, whose family hailed from Lebanon, personally recommends the hummus.

Los 3 Caracoles

Calle Primera Casco Viejo
Tel: 211 0535

The Spanish owner delivers tapas and plates of fresh maritime treats from an ad-hoc prix fixe menu. Elegant eating in a big family dining room.

Pomodoro

Calle E.A. Morales
Tel: 269 5006

The food is standard Italian fare but the restaurant is a popular evening hangout and low-key meeting spot near the banking district. Don't be put off by its apparent emptiness - most tables are set up outside on an arched patio bordered by residential towers at the back.

Café Coca Cola

Avenida 7 Central
Tel: 220 7687

This handy-located, perennially popular Panama City institution puts in an especially good-looking breakfast crowd.

La Cascada

Avenida Balboa y Calle 24
Tel: 262 1297

Most of the food comes lightly fried but the garish painted animal display and the kitsch al fresco excesses of the setting more than compensate for the food.



PLACES TO DRINK

The Blu Room

Edificio Pisco las Bovedas, Casco Viejo
Tel: 220 9059

A night-time treat in an accurately named Martin bar lounge. The velvet-worn ambience, cushions and cocktails will conspire to get you horizontal. Even the too seat is padded. Picked until dawn on salsa Tuesdays and Wednesdays when DJ Vaprio spins from a varied bag of familiar if funky tunes.

Café du Asia

Plaza Bolívar, Casco Viejo
Tel: 262 8304

Casco Viejo's al fresco innovator. This was the first bar built to be tables outside around the square honouring regional liberator Simón Bolívar and, despite the invaders, it's still by some distance the best.

El Livin' Lounge

Calle 42 Casa 443 Bella Vista
Tel: 225 2048

Naiscent hangout set up by three members of a would-be Panamanian band: a drummer, singer and a guitar player, and their surfer friend. In the unlikely event they ever do get round to playing, at least their bar is already equipped with a small stage specially built for music acts.



PLACES TO SHOP

Librería Argosy

Via Argentina y Via España Esquina
Tel: 223 5344

A great selection of literature and books on art and cinema in English and Spanish. The small store gives you the often correct impression that you're going to find a hidden gem somewhere among the disorganised shelves and stacks of libros.

Sol de la India

Avenida Central
Plaza 5 de Mayo
Tel: 212 1803 / 262 6056

The 'Indian Sun' shops continue a long tradition of bringing silks and spices to Panamá from the Orient but there are lots of other kitsch delights to load up your basket. Haggling doesn't go on much but there's full satisfaction for the hunter-gatherer instinct amid shelves scented with sandalwood.

Bernheim Gallery

Edificio Madroño 50, Calle 50
Tel: 222 0012

Gallery-cum-store with canal memorabilia, canvases and fine jewellery in silver and tangua. Ask owner Carlos Weil if you can take a peek at the shelves of art history and design books in his office.



PLACES TO VISIT

Casco Viejo

By day Panamá's colonial heart offers fascinating voyeurism. The neighbourhood's families have their living rooms on show, around the corner from mansions and facades in restored splendour. By night the side streets are less safe to walk - even by day Calle 13, counting away from the bay, is about the limit for edgy but safe adventures.

Barro Colorado Island

Tel: 231 1137

Barro Colorado was just a hill in the interior before the River Chagres was dammed and the area flooded to build the canal, creating Gatun Lake. The hill became an island and is now a biological reserve in the hands of the Smithsonian. A visit by boat from Gamboa needs to be arranged in advance.

Bahai temple

Via Panamericana
Tel: 231 1137

This is the Bahai faith's house of worship for all of Latin America until plans for one in Chile get off the ground. The temple, a little like a large white egg atop the hill, was completed by English architect Peter Tallon in 1972. A fresh breeze blows through the open nine-pointed star structure.

Bocas del Toro

Majuel Aero
Tel: 315 0292

Aeropuerto

Tel: 315 7500

The Caribbean beaches of Bocas del Toro are a favoured weekend spot for moneyed locals. Much of the archipelago boasts shallow reefs that are perfect for snorkelling.



PLACES TO SEE

Ancón Hill

This showcase of North American tropical colonial architecture was left to the Panamanians after the US pulled out at the end of December 1999. Drive past the hospital, the canal administration building and the bunker where the US generals worked, which now serves as the foreign ministry.

Salsipuedes, off Avenida Central

A narrow alley located off the main shopping drag, the name means 'get out if you can', and the shopping is certainly a little snug. It's worth persevering with the cramped market stalls in search of the odd, sometimes very odd, delight. The endless medicinal herb stalls are a particular triumph.

Miraflores Locks

These freshwater locks are the best spot to check out the canal in action. Enormous ships and small sailboats use the toll link between the Pacific Ocean to the Caribbean and the Atlantic all day and night, all year round. Payment is strictly cash only and must be made 48 hours up front but at least it's based on a sliding scale. Plooting your 50ft Wally yacht through the canal would cost \$500 - the big cruise ship pay upwards of \$200,000 for the same privilege.