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# TRAVEL

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SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2009

## TRAVEL NOTES

### Check in for charity

**PHILANTHROPY** • Silver-Birch Hotels and Resorts (1-888-4CANADA/422-6232), www.GreatCanadianHotels.com) are hoping to raise \$100,000 for such charities as the Canadian Red Cross and the SPCA this holiday season.

With the Friends in Need program, \$10 will be donated for each night booked at selected hotels managed by SilverBirch from Dec. 20 to 27. Properties include Ramada, Radisson, Best Western, Hilton and Crowne Plaza hotels. Room rates range from \$59 to \$155 per night depending on the location.

The Friends in Need program was started in 2000 and has raised over \$820,000 thus far. See the website for the nightly rates and which charity will benefit from your stay.

### Early booking discount

**DEALS** • There's still time to save with Air Canada Vacations' (www.aircanadavacations.com) early booking discount on airfare and hotel packages to Europe. You can save \$200 per couple when you book by Nov. 30 for travel by April 30.

Contact a travel consultant.

Meanwhile, Signature Vacations (www.signaturevacations.com) promises extra savings with its Take-Off Tuesdays promotion.

The tour operator will offer a new vacation deal on the website each week that will expire at midnight on Wednesdays.

### Win a trip to France

**CONTEST** • You can enter to win a trip to the French Riviera at www.franceguide.com. The lucky winner will receive round-trip Air France flights for two from Montreal or Toronto (you have to pay the domestic airfare to one of those cities) to Nice in economy class, two weeks' accommodation in a Pierre & Vacances rental residence and a leased car for 17 days. Deadline is Jan. 15. Travel must be completed by Dec. 31, 2010.

— Rick Cropp  
and Barbara Braidwood,  
for Canwest News Service

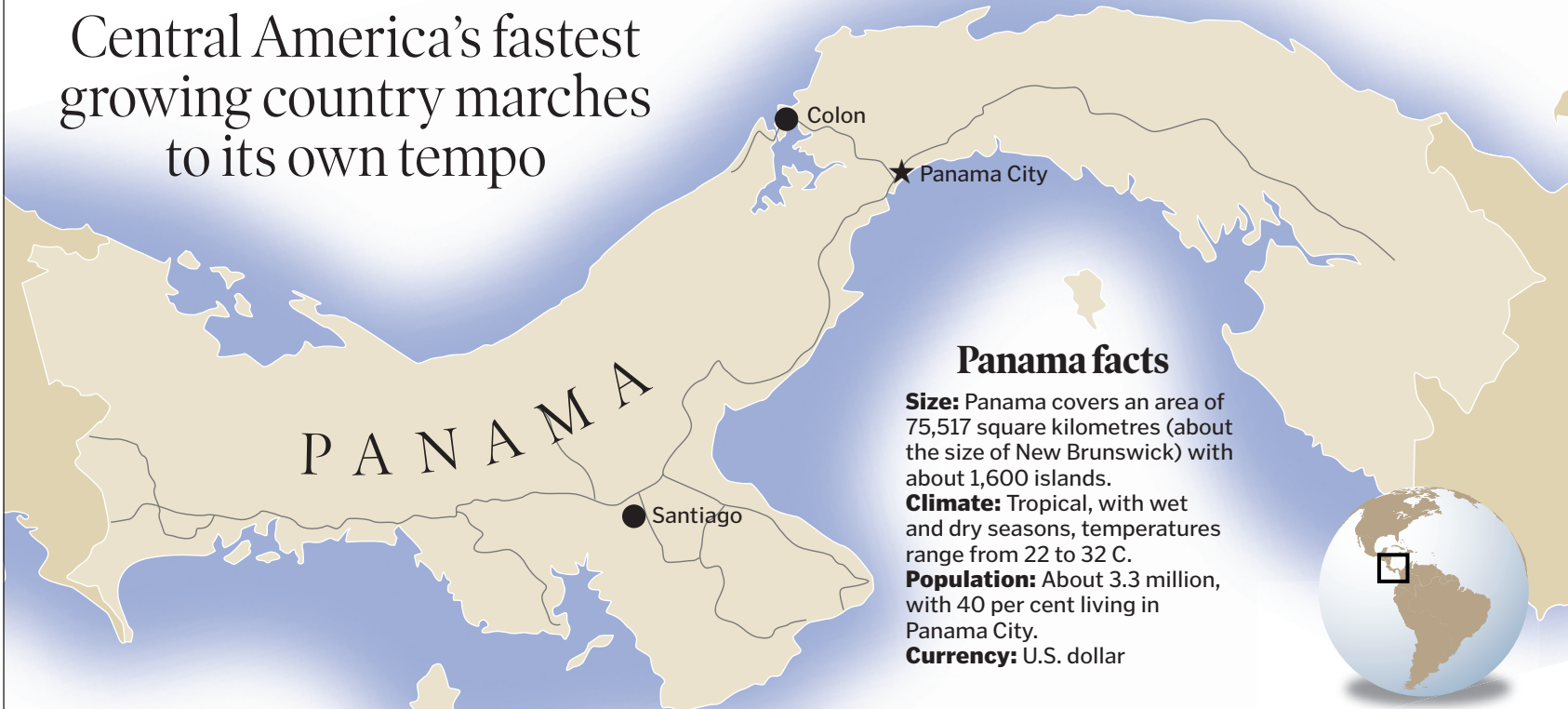


Stephane Danna,  
AFP/Getty Images

**Negresco is Nice's most famous hotel. The French tourist office is offering the chance to win a free trip to the French Riviera.**

# Beyond the canal

Central America's fastest  
growing country marches  
to its own tempo



### Panama facts

**Size:** Panama covers an area of 75,517 square kilometres (about the size of New Brunswick) with about 1,600 islands.  
**Climate:** Tropical, with wet and dry seasons, temperatures range from 22 to 32 C.  
**Population:** About 3.3 million, with 40 per cent living in Panama City.  
**Currency:** U.S. dollar



Elmer Martinez, AFP/Getty Images

Panama City skyline dazzles by night. The country is poised to become a tourist hot spot for its eco-tours in the rainforest and its many beaches.

LISA MONFORTON  
CALGARY HERALD

Think of Panama and what comes to mind is the canal, those jaunty straw hats — even if they didn't originate there — and the infamous Manuel Noriega, who provoked the United States into an invasion in 1989.

This small and narrow Central American country — an isthmus that connects the Americas — is at once green, sublimely lush and hilly with a sleek and shiny cosmopolitan city smack in the middle. Panama and its most famous landmark is also the only place in the world where, via a canal, two oceans meet, earning the country the title Crossroads of the World.

With the northern areas of the country a tangle of undeveloped jungle, much of Panama's action is in the central and southern regions. Along its Caribbean/Atlantic and Pacific coastal waters are hundreds of islands, some yet to be discovered by travellers and others that lure beach bums, snorkellers and scuba divers. That includes Bocas del Toro and the San Blas Islands on the Caribbean Sea in the northeast which, for some blazing their own holiday trail, has been a popular off-the-beaten-path, ecotourist hot spot. That's where the country's tourism trade got its start, then trickling down to the rest of the country.

But tourism is not the major reason Panama has the fastest growing



Steve MacNaul for the Calgary Herald  
**Tourists cool off in the refreshing waters at Panama's Las Yayas waterfalls, one of many holiday side trips.**

economy in Central America. Drive or walk around the capital, Panama City, to see the highrises — hotels, casinos and condos — all less than a decade old, because of a healthy economy that includes banking (the currency is U.S. dollars), real estate and shipping. What holds it together is a strong middle class made up of a melting-pot population of three million people.

SEE PANAMA, PAGE F2

## Striking gold in Panama

With the historic Canal expansion  
underway, tourism boom  
could be close behind

SHANNON MELNYK  
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

It's a new day in Central America. The impending \$5.5 billion US expansion of the hydraulic eighth wonder of the world, the Panama Canal, is expected to have a major impact on global trade in what has steadily become a bustling business hub of the Americas. Widening and deepening the passage will make room for a new generation of monster ships carrying anything from human cargo to one million barrels of oil, shaving weeks off current transport times and reshaping trade patterns throughout the world.

With the entrepreneurial enthusiasm of the former

Wal-Mart employee and new Panamanian President Ricardo Martinelli, his government plans to live up to its namesake in profiting from world business with the birth of the bigger, better Canal. It's also injecting undisclosed millions into welcoming the world for holiday fun.

With sights set on giving neighbouring Costa Rica a run for its tourism dollars, Panama is gearing up to becoming a cosmopolitan and resort destination, luring tourists with not only old world history, but offerings of hurricane-free tropical beaches, luxury shopping and jungle adventures.

SEE CANAL, PAGE F2

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Lisa Monforton, Calgary Herald

A woman sweeps her doorstep in Casco Viejo, colonial Panama. The area, filled with brightly coloured buildings and restaurants, is undergoing gentrification, restoring the area to its former glory.

# PANAMA: Wildlife and city life

## FROM FI

That sizable population in such a small country has much to do with Panama's generous immigration laws, which include the proviso that foreigners need only show they have \$500 in a bank account to live here.

Plenty of Canadians, Americans and Europeans know that, and have adopted Panama as their retirement nest because of its low cost of living. On a shopping trip at a local grocery store, we found a two-kilogram bag of locally grown coffee beans for around \$3, cheap liquor and staples, and a stop at a fruit market bought two shopping bags jammed with fruit — everything from pineapple to melon and papaya — for under \$10. There are also the tax-friendly perks, such as no taxes on foreign earned- or interest-income, or capital gains.

For many Canadians, Panama hasn't been convenient to reach, but that will change by mid-December for western Canadians with the introduction of regular

service into Panama City and vacation packages. (see sidebar).

Traditionally, the major tourist draw here has been big cruises ships that squeeze through the Panama Canal with mere inches to spare, and a quick bit of retail therapy at the duty-free canal zone shopping area in Colon on the Caribbean side.

For the past five years or so, Panama's northern neighbour Costa Rica has shone as the ecotourism darling. But, like its neighbour, Panama has an embarrassment of riches: wildlife and wild scenery, expansive beaches, an acclaimed surfing scene, Spanish colonial charm, indigenous tribes and a cosmopolitan capital city.

The added bonus in Panama is that feeling of being untouched by tourists. Absent are the trappings — Wal-Marts and McDonalds — often seen in other popular winter getaways.

There are no Starbucks, but caffeine addicts can get their daily fix from smooth Panama-

grown coffee. A veritable feast of locally owned bars and restaurants line the narrow streets and alleyway in Casco Viejo (colonial Panama), dishing up everything from sushi to paella and chicken masala. There are no tourist throngs to contend with, either. English isn't as widely spoken as in such tourist standards as Mexico — yet.

Travellers who like to mix up their holidays with one part city life and one part beach-bumming — and a few outdoor adventure thrills in between — will find Panama fits that yin and yang.

You might want to start your holiday with a couple days in the capital and then head to the sea for some surfing and sunning. Then, savour some fresh seafood and juicy pineapple. It's all part of the down-to-earth charm in this burgeoning tourist destination.

NEXT WEEK: VISITING THE EMBERA TRIBE IN PANAMA'S RAINFOREST.

LMONFORTON@THEHERALD.CANWEST.COM

# When in Panama, be sure not to miss ...

## If You Go

**Casco Viejo:** Beyond the glass and steel skyscrapers of downtown lies Casco Viejo (the old quarter), a UNESCO world heritage site. Described as New Orleans, minus Basin Street, this once-dilapidated area along the harbour is gentrifying, restoring its colonial look. One fellow traveller likened the district to Havana, although its revival is moving at a faster pace. There's a beehive of construction throughout the narrow cobblestone streets.

Alleyways are lined with wrought-iron balconied homes, painted in greens, pinks, blues and greens. The bustling thoroughfares have an old world Spanish charm: laundry fluttering in the breeze and colourfully dressed Kuna Indians selling art and trinkets. The neighbourhood is punctuated with striking old churches, the Teatro Nacional (National Theatre), the Presidential Palace and pleasant leafy plazas. Casco Viejo is where to head for an extended lunch or to come to dance to the salsa beat when the sun goes down.

Check out Manolo Caracol (Calle 3 at Av. Central Sur in front of the National Theatre) for a sublime fixed menu of a delightfully fresh take on Mexican/Asian cuisine, with an open kitchen and funky contemporary art.

■ **Getting there:** Nolitours begins flights and vacation packages from Calgary, Edmonton, Dec. 21 and continuing until mid-April. Check [nolitours.com](http://nolitours.com) or [airtransat.ca](http://airtransat.ca) for details on flights and vacation packages at a variety of hotels and price ranges, and add-on excursions or daytrips. Several airlines also offer flights from Calgary through cities in the United States.

■ **When to go:** December to April is the dry season and the high travel season, with temperatures in the high-20s to mid-30s.

■ **Where to stay:** Accommodations range from rainforest eco-lodges, all-inclusive resorts and ultra-modern hotels and boutique inns. We stayed at the massive Royal Decameron Golf and Beach Resort and Villas, a 3-star all-inclusive with nine pools, a beautiful beach and nicely-landscaped grounds, and eight restaurants.

■ **Flight time from Calgary:** 7.5 hours.

■ **Language:** Spanish. Little English is spoken so think of it as a way to pick up a few new words.

■ Several tour operators offer these trips and more. Decameron Explorer ([decameronexplorer.com](http://decameronexplorer.com)) offers trips from its resorts.

■ Other resources: [extremepanama.com](http://extremepanama.com); [panamatourismtravel.com](http://panamatourismtravel.com)

treks, waterfall hikes and wildlife encounters are available. For a country smaller than South Carolina, Panama's biodiversity is remarkable with more wildlife species than any other country in Central America.

One popular trip is to Isla de Los Micos (Monkey Island) to see the white face and howler monkey and includes a cruise up the Panama Canal. A couple of recommendations for day trips include a trek to Las Yayas for a fun and refreshing swim beneath a waterfall.

If you can, try to do a day trip (or longer, by special arrangement) to visit the Embera or Kuna Indians, one of seven indigenous tribes, who live in the rainforest and live a simple off-the-land life.

The trips can also include a waterfall hike. You'll be treated to freshly caught fish, tribal dances and a chance to interact with people who were first discovered by Christopher Columbus.

# CANAL: On the cusp of a boom

## FROM FI

Development has been equally heavy in other parts of Panama City in addition to resorts and all-inclusives dotting the coast and nestled in the tropical splendour of the vast rainforest. Tour companies are beefing up adventure-'til-you-drop fare, including fishing, diving, hiking, wet rappelling, zip trekking and jungle excursions.

Beach life meets the tropical surround of exotic fruit, monkeys and misty cascading falls: Panama is home to some of the sweetest pineapple in the world

and many species of rare flora and wildlife.

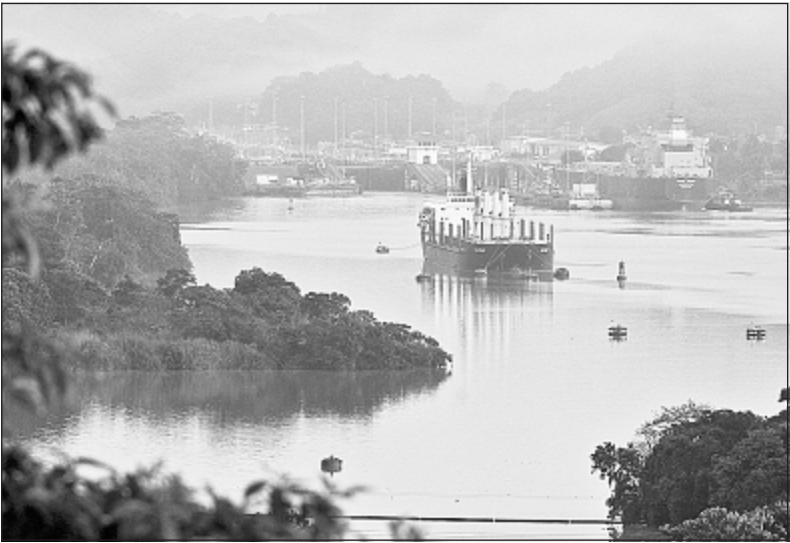
In what constitutes rural rainforest neighbourhoods, tourists will also spot curious quirks of Latin life, like the industrious drive-in motels for lovers adorned with unassuming white signs and candy red hearts.

Tu y Yos (You and Me) are what look like North American garages and are rumoured to be owned by the panty-removing crooner king of Latin America, Julio Iglesias.

Ecotourism is also growing in the little country that could. Volunteer work holidays and

visits with indigenous rainforest cultures are growing industries. Tourists can board tiny piraguas paddled by semi-clothed natives in crocodile-infested waters to see an old way of life relatively untouched by modern society. Tribes that include the Kuna and Embera Indians have been working with the government and tour companies to increase tourism opportunities by showcasing their authentic jewelry, crafts, cuisine and dance traditions.

The new Panama Canal may not open until 2014, but Panama is intent to encourage a rebirth of its nation in the meantime.



Elmer Martinez, AFP/Getty Images

Cargo ships wait to enter the Pedro Miguel lock in the Panama Canal. A \$5.5-billion US expansion is underway at the canal.

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