

*Panamanian woman
in traditional folk dress*



Panama Hat Trick

Chris Robinson

I thought I was coming to Panama for a simple beach holiday. But Panama has seduced me into a three-centre vacation, serving up a hat trick of completely different travel experiences. Unlike the Panama Hat - which actually comes from Ecuador but was imported into Panama for the canal workers - these three other worlds within Panama are authentically and uniquely Panamanian and are just a part of the multi-layered allure of this tropical yet accessible destination.

PACIFIC BEACHES

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There is no shortage of beaches to choose from in Panama. Although it's not a large country - it's roughly the size of New Brunswick - there are over 1,500 beaches strung along its coastlines. And yes, that's "coastlines" plural because Panama is situated at the narrow waist of the Americas where North and South America merge. It not only has Pacific Ocean beaches, but hundreds of Caribbean beaches too. In fact, it is the only country in the world where, on the same day,

you can catch sunrise over the Caribbean and then comfortably enjoy a spectacular sunset over the Pacific Ocean.

Many of the Panamanian beaches are truly world-class. If natural simplicity à la Robinson Crusoe is your beach style - head for Comarca Kuna Yala. Here are hundreds of tiny islands off the Caribbean coast, where thatched huts and hammocks are the rule. Families will love another island group, this time in the Pacific - Las Perlas. They are a

short plane hop from Panama City, with dazzling beaches, calm waters and great snorkeling. The Azuero Peninsula, also easily accessible from Panama City, has beaches of all sorts - from sheltered coves that are ideal for toddlers, to great surfing beaches... all backed by a hot, dry landscape, peopled by Panamanian cowboys.

Most of the Panamanian resorts you will find in the holiday brochures are on the Pacific coast within a two-hour drive of Panama City. I am staying at the Royal Decameron Golf, Beach Resort & Villas on Playa Farallon, 140 kms west of Panama City. A long beach of silvery sand fronts this large all-inclusive complex. It boasts all the facilities you might expect of a sophisticated international resort...and yet, in typical Panamanian fashion, a short walk down the beach takes me to an authentic local fishing village of palm thatched huts with fishing nets strung over ancient wooden boats.

The Kuna Yala communities in Panama





*Teleferico aerial tram,
Gamboa Rainforest, Panama*

CANAL CROSSROADS

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To go to Panama and not experience the Panama Canal would be like going to Egypt and not seeing the Pyramids. Using my beach resort as my base, a couple of hours drive along the coast and I arrive at Panama City. This is a booming, fast growing city of skyscrapers and the Pacific entrance to the Panama Canal. The canal is a monumental triumph of human engineer-

ing, but it came at a terrible cost: over 25,000 deaths, a revolution and a generation of poisoned US/Latin American relations.

To appreciate the full scale of this monumental endeavor, the canal has to be experienced by boat. Our little tourist craft is dwarfed in the gigantic locks of Miraflores and Pedro Miguel. It seems tiny under the magnificent span of the Bridge of the Amer-

icas, and we feel insignificant as we putter through the Continental Divide along the Gaillard Cut— which is the biggest excavation ever undertaken by Man. Huge container ships and cruise liners alternate along the course of the Canal and the rainforest grows ever denser as we entered Gatun Lake at 85 feet above sea level. And here the Panamanian seduction continues, as the call of the jungle proves irresistible and I experience a third face of Panama.



USEFUL info

WHEN to go:

The best time to visit Panama is during their dry season, which happily coincides with our winter: December to April.

HOW to get there:

Ask us about **noliDUO** - Two unique experiences, one trip! Combine your dream tropical beach vacation with a stay in the cosmopolitan city of Panama City or the country's beautiful lush rainforest.



*Miraflores Locks,
Panama Canal*

RAINFOREST RICHES

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Gamboa Rainforest Resort is a treasure, buried in the wet and steamy jungle at the point where the Chagres River meets the Panama Canal in Gatun Lake. It has all the amenities of civilization, yet is completely surrounded by rainforest. I ride the Teleferico aerial tram through the canopy to the top of a nearby hill. From here, a guided hike in the dripping forest takes me to an observation tower above the canopy. There is a breathtaking view over the rainforest to the Chagres River below. Glimpses of colourful birds include parrots and hornbills and the chatter of the jungle creatures is incessant. Flowers are little explosions of colour in the green of the trees. Orchids and epiphytes grow in profusion, watered by the never-ending showers dripping through the jungle canopy. Birds and reptiles, mammals and rodents scuttle every-

where - cleverly camouflaged for the most part. But in clearings, and by the brown rainforest rivers, I see crocodiles, caimans, turtles, agouti, iridescent butterflies, parrots, eagles and the world's largest rodent: the absurdly rotund capybara.

BEACHES - BUT SO MUCH MORE

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The Panamanian people I meet are universally warm and joyful. The children are irresistibly adorable, whether clad in their Sunday finest or playing on the ground. Travelling in Panama mixes beaches and rainforest, skyscrapers and thatch huts, flora and fauna...and of course the Canal. It's a potent cocktail of hugely diverse worlds and I am happy that my simple beach vacation has turned into a Panamanian hat trick.

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*Panama City, Casco Viejo (old city),
Independence square*