



Panama: A Cosmopolitan Tropical Escape By Lavanya Sunkara

Rich in cultural, natural and historical significance, Panama is one of the most visited countries in Central America. The modern skyscrapers and highways of Panama City are on par with those of big cities in the United States, while the cobblestoned streets and 300-year-old Spanish colonial buildings of Casco Viejo transport you to another era. Diversity of population, resulting from those who came from afar during the canal construction, reminded me of New York. The isthmus of Panama offers plenty of outdoor activities, including fishing in the jungle waters of Gatun Lake, exotic bird and wildlife viewing, and hiking in rainforests.

A big bright blue colored billboard, “Paradise on the rise,” greeted me on the ride alongside the Pacific coastline 20 minutes from Panama City. Lights from ships lined to cross the canal flickered in the distance. True to the sign, up ahead, I caught sight of a white high-rise poised like a birthday candle on a green velvet cake. The newest of the hotels – the Westin Playa Bonita Panama – is the first Westin to open in the Republic of Panama. The palm fringed one-mile stretch of golden sand makes Playa Bonita one of the country’s most exclusive beaches. Hotel guests are welcome to bask in its seclusion.

With expansive views of the Pacific, and nearby Punta Bruja Natural Reserve, the Westin Playa Bonita offers a mix of modern luxury, tranquil atmosphere and adventure. The hotel boasts 611 guest rooms, including 64 spacious suites and three deluxe Presidential Suites, an open-air executive lounge with ocean or rainforest views and adorned with chic hues, rich textures and patterns. The 22 multi-purpose spaces that come in an array of ambiances ranging from intimate decadence to modern minimalism are ideal for conferences and weddings.

The six unique restaurants of the Westin Playa Bonita set it apart from other hotels. Oceánica offers international buffet, the sleek Starfish Grill specializes in a la carte fresh sea fare, Café Pacifica provides the best in Pacific Rim cuisine where East meets West, and the fine Latin steakhouse Tierra y Fuego offers traditional favorites with fiery Latin influences. Located beach level, Asiana provides Asian fusion cuisine, and the euro-style Soléo Mediterranean café is ideal for tapas and fine wines. Other amenities include the full service Pearl Club & Spa (opening March 2012), three infinity edge swimming pools and the children’s swimming pool. Those traveling with children can take advantage of the Westin Kids Club, where the kids are provided with quality entertainment, leaving parents free to relax and explore Panama. The hotel helps guests tailor group or private excursions to nearby attractions through Gamboa Tours.

Panama Canal

Watching a massive ship glide through the gates of the Miraflores locks is a sight to behold. The 48-mile Panama Canal is one of the significant waterways ever built and it provides passage to 15,000 ships per year. The museum on site showcases artifacts and pictures from the construction of the canal, and includes a section for the new gates that are being built as part of the canal’s expansion project. Once open, the gates will allow more vessels, including bigger ones, to pass through. Unlike the older gates, the new ones will be recycling a large percentage of the water used to fill the gates, reducing the amount of fresh water dumped into the sea.

Amador Causeway

After touring the canal museum, we headed towards the Amador Causeway, which connects four islands in the channel leading into Miraflores. Built from excavated material from the Canal construction, the causeway is a former military base that’s been transformed into a tourist attraction with hotels, restaurants, marinas and shops. Bikers and joggers are seen along the tree lined scenic waterfront, taking in the panoramic views of the impressive city skyline on one hand and the Canal and the Westin Playa Bonita on the other. The causeway is also home to the Marine Exhibition Center of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, where visitors can see Panama’s exotic

marine life. The colorful and intricate Bridge of Life Museum of Biodiversity building designed by Frank Gehry is under construction on the Causeway.

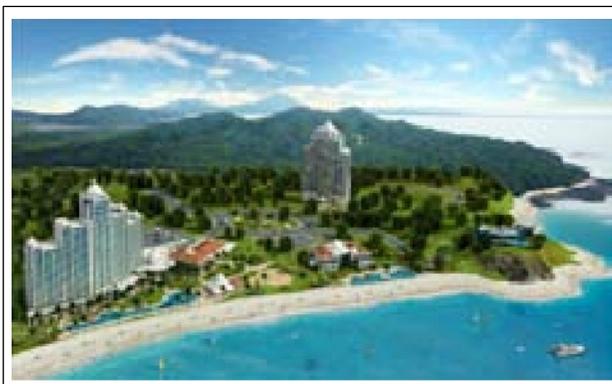
I was ready for some shopping after a delicious lunch at the seafood restaurant Pencas, located on the Causeway. Heading back into town, I stopped at a local crafts mall where rows of shops, all under one roof, displayed jewelry, baskets, hammocks, and garments. The traditional mola inspired colorful designs of flora and fauna were sewn onto everything from pillow covers to kitchen mittens. I had to buy an extra bag (with mola print of course) to carry back the items I acquired.

Monkey Island and Gamboa

I was delighted to view huge ships making their way on Gatun Lake on a Gamboa tour boat trip to Monkey Island. Gatun Lake, which was created by damming the Chagres River, forms a major part of the canal. Four different species of monkeys including- the white-faced capuchin and howler monkeys- can be seen cavorting in the trees of the island surrounded by turquoise waters. Crocodiles, toucans, iguanas, sloths and many exotic birds can also be seen if one is lucky. The container ships, maneuvering their way between the islands calmly through the winding canal, along with the boaters and kayakers, blend in with the landscape of islands and the forest hemmed banks and dense mountains, a vista one can only see in Panama.

Later, I headed to Gamboa Rainforest Resort in the town of Gamboa set on the banks of the Chagres River. The resort, set on 340 acres of Panamanian jungle, is an oasis overlooking the canal. A short drive through the resort grounds past the pink and blue former housing for canal construction engineers and current Smithsonian scientists, took me to the Aerial Tram. The tram slowly ascended 280 feet, providing bird's eye view of the giant trees and exotic birds that are part of the mile long rainforest that lies within the resort's boundaries. Monkey calls and bird songs filled the air as the tram chugged along above tree branches. The ride ended atop a hill, where I walked up to the observation tower 100 feet above and marveled at the views of the Canal, the Chagres River and Soberania National Park.

A few miles away deep in the jungle, the Embera village can be found. The Embera are one of the seven of Panama's indigenous tribes and live much the same way that they have for thousands of years. The Embera villagers wear minimal clothes, cover their body in paintings with rainforest dyes and live off the land. Their houses are made of wood and palm and sit on stilts typical of jungle Indians. For an authentic experience, watch their traditional tribal dances, and learn about their way of life and traditions over a typical meal.



After a full day of jungle exploration, I headed back to Gamboa Rainforest Resort where I was greeted with a cool pineapple drink. Lunch at the resort's Las Lagartos restaurant, complete with sweeping views of the Chagres River and the huge ships floating by silently in the canal, was certainly a highlight. My favorite was the sweet mango and palm hearts salad, but only after the delectable flan crocante. The best part was feeding pieces of bread from the deck to the terrapin turtles swimming underneath.

Casco Viejo

Panama City is a land of contrasts. While glass and concrete buildings reach the skies on one hand, the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Casco Viejo district, a short ride away, consists of 16th and 17th century Spanish Colonial architecture. Along with the Presidential Palace with its elaborate gardens, Casco Viejo also houses museums, quaint shops, and plazas, which are perfect for perusing after an afternoon meal. A walk along the historic wall built to protect the old city from pirate attacks provides vistas of the Pacific and the city skyline.

Casco Viejo has the best mixture of food and restaurants, from Italian, Peruvian to Sushi and French cuisines. If you spend one evening in this historic district, the

place to be is at Manolo Caracol, a ten year old Spanish tapas restaurant featuring fine wines and a prix fixe 12 course meal. Relax and be surprised by the creative meals that keep coming. The head chef and owner Manuel Maduenas, believes in cooking with love, and using the freshest local ingredients. Seated at one of the restaurant's wooden tables in the antique colonial building, I felt the warmth of the cozy setting and invigorated from the aromas drifting from the open chef's area. Chatter filled the air instead of music. Wine bottles lined a part of the wall, and religious artifacts and local art hung from the stucco walls. I forgot all about the surroundings when the food started arriving, one better than the next, from savory tomato soup with onion croquette to gingery prawns to green mango ceviche. By the time the dessert arrived, I was full, but how could I resist a meringue with mandarin ice cream and crème fraiche?

After an exceptional meal, I headed to Habana Panama, a Casco Viejo bar/restaurant that turns into a dance venue after hours. Entering the space is like being transported back to the 50s. Professional dancers in sparkling outfits dazzled the dance floor with their salsa moves that brought cheer while the live band entertained throughout the night. The low lighting, the dark red leather couches were comforting after a long day of sightseeing, but I couldn't help but join the crowd on the dance floor under the wagon wheel chandelier.

With the juxtaposition of the modern and traditional, cosmopolitan and natural settings, Panama is ideal for those who want to experience the best of both worlds. Those seeking comfort can look no further than the new Westin Playa Bonita Panama. Whether your idea of vacation is sitting on a secluded beach watching ships pass across the Pacific, or boating in the canal waters, getting up close with an Indian tribe, exploring a historic neighborhood or enjoying fine cuisine followed by a night on the town, Panama is the place to be.

The Westin Playa Bonita Panama

Special grand opening rate of \$220/night, based on double occupancy.
www.westin.com/playabonita

