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## How green is my city!

• TEXT GÜ N T E R K A S T

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Skyscrapers and colonial splendor, highland coffee and sloths: Panama City is laid back and sophisticated – but the jungle’s right next door

Our sweat-soaked shirts cling to our skin as we stumble, muddy-shoed, over slippery roots. I reach for a palm tree to steady myself and its thorns prick my hand. And then there are the mosquitoes ... “Señor, you call this a stroll in the city?” Igua Jiménez, our diminutive guide, a member of Panama’s indigenous Guna people, flashes the photographer and me an indulgent smile that says: Don’t make such a fuss! You are treading historical paths. And he’s quite right. The Camino de Cruces in Soberanía National Park between the Pacific and the Atlantic was a terrestrial Panama Canal on which the Spanish conquistadors carried off the Aztecs’ gold. A large section of the path was flooded when the navigable canal was built in 1914, but some ten kilometers are still passable. Between moss and drooping leaves, you can still make out the slabs of sandstone hauled here by slaves in the 16th century, in which the mules loaded with New World treasures trod large hollows.

## ZUM ZIEL

Lufthansa fliegt fünfmal pro Woche von Frankfurt (FRA) direkt nach Panama-Stadt (PTY). Wie viele Meilen Ihnen gutgeschrieben werden, können Sie unter [meilenrechner.de](https://www.meilenrechner.de) ermitteln



Kajakfahrer in den tropischen Buchten des Gatúnsees, durch den auch die Fahrinne des Panamakanals führt

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“Perezoso,” Igua suddenly shouts and stops. A sloth? Oh yes, we see the lifeless-looking ball of fur. “No, no, it’s not dead,” our guide insists. Forceful shaking of the tree produces a slow-motion stirring: Two eyes open and stare down at us. In a comic-book version, a speech bubble would pop up saying: “Ease off, guys!” Without Igua, whose progress through the undergrowth is as fast as it is silent, we would have completely overlooked the peculiar creature. Igua belongs to a people that won partial autonomy from Panama in a revolt in 1925, and although he wears Western trekking clothes and speaks fluent English, as a young boy he honed his instincts on hunting trips and in tests of courage in the rainforest, and they are still intact. In addition to the larger jungle animals, the parrots, toucans and coatis, he also points out tiny members of the jungle population, some army and leafcutter ants busily crossing the Camino de Cruces on their own roads – just half an hour’s drive from the



heavy traffic of Panama City.



Wilford Lamastus serves home-grown highland coffee at the Bajareque

© Meiko Herrmann







The city is surrounded by national parks and nature reserves. Even visitors with little time to spare have the chance to catch a glimpse of iguanas, anteaters and sea turtles at the Natural Metropolitan Park, right on the western edge of town, on the way to Soberanía National Park. The wild expanses of Chagres National Park 30 kilometers to the northeast are ideal for a tour of more than one day. As though in defiance of nature, civilization asserts itself with an imposing skyline. Dozens of glass skyscrapers either under construction or already completed make Panama City, home to 1.5 million, the Dubai of Central America. Some towers house smart apartments, others, offices and shell corporations – the “Panama Papers” have to be kept somewhere, after all! Eight of the ten tallest towers in Latin America are here, and many are over 200 meters high. From their upper stories, you can see as far as the Puente de la Américas, the steel bridge spanning the canal that forms part of the Panamericana highway connecting North and South America.



Von Cannes ins Casco Viejo: Samy Ferrenbach führt das Bistro Paula Nani

© Meiko Herrmann

# Panama City is the Dubai of Central America

Samy Ferrenbach, bistro owner

On Sundays, the Cinta Costera coastal beltway is closed to traffic and attracts throngs of cyclists and joggers. The new, seven-kilometer causeway built on rocks and earth excavated during the construction of the canal is the runway for a new, fun-loving, body-conscious middle class. Latino pop blares from giant speakers and a dance leader gets the crowd going. Further south, the ring road crosses the ocean and describes a huge loop around the old town, Casco Viejo, where the facades of derelict and renovated villas create a walk-through painting in pastel shades reminiscent of Miami 100 years ago. Where drug barons once waged their wars, the police have now reinstated order, and hoods who once collected protection money are now bar owners. So tourists and the local mix of ethnicities can all stroll carefree through the streets once more.



- 1 Lake Gatún / Gatúnsee
- 2 Panama Canal / Panamakanal
- 3 Soberanía National Park
- 4 Metropolitan Natural Park
- 5 Restaurant Donde José
- 6 American Trade Hotel
- 7 Bajareque Coffee House
- 8 Hat Store / Hutladen El Guayacano
- 9 Cinta Costera

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The colonial quarter, which became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997, is best explored with a guide – Yelena Gonzalez, for instance. A famous presenter of parliamentary television, she knows every new bar and every new restaurant here. She left her home city for Barcelona



once, but was so utterly homesick, she came straight back. What did she miss most? “*La gente*, the people, their smiles, their helpfulness, their parties.”

Walking around the city is nearly as strenuous as tramping through the rainforest, so Yelena takes us to her favorite coffee house, Bajareque. Wilford Lamastus, the junior boss, roasts beans for us, grinds them, and brews us a coffee with only a hand filter and hot water – and absolutely no barista showmanship. The coffee tastes multilayered, like a good wine, with complex notes of forest berries and fruit salad, and a detectable, but not too obtrusive acidity. “Tastes better than Columbian coffee, doesn’t it?” Lamastus asks. He doesn’t expect an answer. Outside the door, Yelena tells us what we have just sampled: Elida Geisha Green Tip, which costs just under 120 dollars a pound. To many connoisseurs, it’s the best coffee in the world. The beans come from the Boquete area close to the Costa Rican border. The yield on slopes of between 1700 and 2500 meters’ altitude is very low, the area of volcanic soil suitable for cultivation limited and the harvest very labor-intensive – hence the price.



Toucans bill and coo in the urban jungle, too



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Young women often celebrate their Quinceañera, 15th birthday, in turquoise and tulle

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Outside the American Trade hotel: a monument to General Tomás Herrera, who led Panama to independence in 1840

© Meiko Herrmann



## AMERICAN TRADE HOTEL

Restored colonial building with stylish rooms and a jazz club.  
[acehotel.com/panama](http://acehotel.com/panama)



## DONDE JOSÉ

José O. Carles's restaurant is perhaps the best in the entire country.  
[dondejose.com](http://dondejose.com)



## EL GUAYACANO

Originals and fakes: This store stocks every variety of Panama hat.  
[elguayacanopanamahats.amawebs.com](http://elguayacanopanamahats.amawebs.com)



## VIVE PANAMA

Personalized city tours and excursions into the nearby jungle.  
[vivepanama.es](http://vivepanama.es)

Yelena thinks we should be better equipped for future jungle tours – and get ourselves a real Panama hat. Is there such a thing as an unreal one? “Claro que sí!” says our guide, “the ones from Ecuador. I’ll show you the difference.” At El Guayacano, there’s a low-priced model for 60 to 80 dollars, but that is naturally not a genuine “sombrero fino.” The next model fits perfectly, but costs a cool 1000 dollars. For a couple of straws on your head? We discover that “a hat like this one, a jipijapa, is hand-woven from the fine straw of the toquilla palm tree. Humidity, warmth and pressure then give it its characteristic shape.” Because fewer and fewer people master the art of straw weaving or grow their own toquillas, both the knowledge and raw material are gradually being lost.

Samy Ferrenbach, who runs the Paula Nani bistro in Casco Viejo, takes a more optimistic view of the future. “In Panama City, there’s a real sense of new beginnings,” he says, explaining why he moved from Cannes five years before. “France is stagnating, but it’s still worth investing here.” He got himself a house right by the ocean and turned it into a trendy eatery.



Yelena knows lots of adventurous souls like him. “Our city is still young, it’s only just awakening.” Still young? “Many people only start counting from December 31, 1991, when the Americans gave us back the canal and the surrounding areas,” she explains. We should not forget, she insists, that just ten years before that, U.S. President George Bush tried to forcefully topple the dictator Manuel Noriega. It’s not just the graffiti on the walls of the less chic neighborhoods that recall the night of bombing, December 20, 1989: “Ni olvido, ni perdón!” – No forgetting, no forgiveness! Come to Panama today and you will barely pick up on its dark past – and definitely not in the rainforest west of the city.

The following morning, we head out into the rainforest again, this time in a kayak to take a look at the amazing species diversity that has come into being in artificial Lake Gatún, through which the Panama Canal shipping channel runs between Colón and Panama City. Because the USA held sovereignty over the waterway and the adjacent land corridor until the end of 1999, the animals were safe from all too many hunters. Today, there’s a national park to protect them, and the animals have long since grown accustomed to the big ships passing by. We glide silently through the lagoons at the lake’s edge, where marmosets let themselves down from the trees by their tail to drink from the water’s surface, all the while keeping a eye out for crocodiles. Then suddenly, amid the myriad shades of green all around, the colossal, brightly colored container ships of the Neopanamax class come into view. They are so large, they will only fit through the canal’s locks at Santa Clara on the Atlantic coast, which, completed in 2016, raise the level of Lake Gatún by 26 meters and then lower it again on the other side. Igua, like all of his people, is proud of the installation that cost almost six billion dollars, even though as an Indian, he is always keen to emphasize his people’s autonomy. In other words, the canal not only connects wilderness and civilization, but occasionally all other worlds, as well.