

[High/Low]

Panama

Being a country with a famous canal can have its challenges. While countless visitors come to Panama to see its well-known landmark, far fewer are aware of the experiences beyond the locks. Home to an unspoiled rain forest, stunning beaches, and vibrant bird-watching opportunities, the country deserves a name as an adventure and ecotourism hot spot. visitpanama.com. —*Mia Taylor*

GO

Worth It: Experience a simpler way of life at an **Embera Village**. The outing begins with a canoe ride along rain forest-lined tributaries and continues with a hike led by a village shaman who points out medicinal plants used to treat everything from snakebites to diabetes. Before the visit ends, you can enjoy a lunch of fresh-caught fish. Price of tour depends on number of people; for five or more, cost is \$120 per person. (314) 397-7750; emberavillagetours.com.

On the Cheap: The **Casco Viejo** neighborhood is simultaneously crumbling and being reborn. Established in 1673 by Spanish colonialists, this historic Panama City district is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Painstakingly restored houses and government buildings as well as boutique hotels and some of Panama's newest and best restaurants line the area's cobblestone streets. Take a walking tour led by one of the former gang members who helped turn the community around. About \$20 (note that tour guides aren't always prompt). esperanzasvc.org/fortaleza-tours.

EAT

Indulge: The tasting menu at **Donde José's** in Panama City tells a story about the country's history, one course at a time. The cuisine is new Panamanian with such dishes as smoked *sancocho* with crispy *ñame* (yam) dumplings, all made with farm-fresh ingredients; chef José Carles is a rising star. About \$73 per person for the chef's table. (011) 507-262-1682; dondejose.com.

Budget Bites: Eat like a local at **Mercado de Mariscos**, Panama City's fish market in Casco Viejo. Daily catches include tuna, snapper, and octopus. Other notable menu items include seafood stew and ceviche. cascoviejo.com/mercado-de-mariscos.

STAY

Big Spender: Between its beachside location and view of cargo ships on the horizon queuing to enter the canal, the **Westin Playa Bonita** in Panama City offers a grand welcome to the country. The property also contains four pools, a spa, and six restaurants. Rates start at \$329. (011) 507-304-6600; westinplayabonita.com.

Smart Saver: Located in Casco Viejo, **Las Clementinas** is a charming 1930s building with a rooftop terrace and outdoor dining amid a palm garden. Heirloom furniture from Panama's aristocratic families decorates its nine chambers. Rates start at \$200. (877) 889-0351; lasclementinas.com.



Currency exchange at press time:
\$1 USD = 1 Panamanian balboa (PAB)

An Embera Village



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