



TEACHER PLANNING GUIDE - PANAMA

PRACTICALITIES

Currency

Panama does not print bank notes. Thus, since 1904, the US dollar has been the legal tender. US coins are interchangeable with Panamanian coins of the same denominations, similar sizes and metals are used. The dollar bill is called the Balboa, cents are centavos. US coins are also used, while Panamanian coins look exactly like US coins - except for the imprint. Prices are often written with \$ sign or 'B' before the amount.

Large denomination dollar bills can be difficult to change, particularly outside Panama City. Even for \$50 bills, you may be asked to sign a book and give your passport number. \$20 bills are the most convenient, but in rural areas, where prices are lower, you are advised to carry even smaller bills.

You will want to be sure that any bills are not torn, dirty, or have any markings on them. Expect coin change to be given in Bilbao, or a combination of Bilbao and US coins.

Cash, ATM & Credit Card Use

The easiest way to obtain cash after arrival to Panama is from a debit or credit card at an ATM machine. Be sure to advise your bank that you are traveling ahead of time. Exchange rate and convenience fees vary by bank or merchant. A small amount of cash may be useful for travel days in airports in particular.

WiFi and Phone Use

The easiest and quickest way to prepare for phone use while in Panama is by contacting your provider to review the packages they offer for international travel. Many companies have plans that begin at \$10 USD per travel day. WiFi will be available in some establishments, hotels, and families, but cannot be guaranteed, and the signal can vary greatly. Purchasing an international SIM card is also an option, but will likely be difficult to purchase after arrival.

Voltage & Converters

All your appliances will work in Panama. The voltage is the same as the United States and Canada: 110V. Some outlets may only have two prongs, for which you may need a converter.

Time Zone

Panama is on U.S. Eastern Standard Time all year. Daylight Saving Time is not observed.

Climate

Panama is tropical, but temperatures vary according to location and altitude. The annual average temperature on both coasts is 29° C (84° F), and it ranges from 10° to 19° C (50 to 66° F) at various mountain elevations. There is little seasonal change in temperature, with warm days and cool nights throughout the year. Humidity averages 80%. The period of lightest rainfall is from January to March and the heaviest occurs in October and November.

Clothing

In general, for the tropical climate, light-colored, loose-fitting cotton clothes are the most comfortable. Panama City is a dress-up city, but as a tourist, you'll be excused from the dress code if you are dressed respectfully. Think along the same lines as what is acceptable at your school. The highlands can be cold in the night so a warm sweater or light jacket is necessary. If you plan to hike, bring long pants, boots, a hat and insect repellent.

Business Hours

Many retail stores are open 9am-6pm Monday-Saturday, with most being closed on Sunday. Supermarkets and major malls such as Albrook are the exception.

It is customary for all offices and stores to close for the lunch period for at least one and a half hours. Office hours for government offices vary and it is advisable to check prior to visiting any government office.

If a holiday falls on Sunday, it is observed on the following day. The executive branch is authorized to designate days of national mourning on which all offices and commercial businesses are closed.

Taxi Service

In Panama City, yellow taxis are everywhere and are considered safe.

Regardless, always travel in groups of three or four. As such, finding one is not a problem (unless it's raining or during rush hour). Be aware that a taxi meter is not used. Do not hop in a taxi, get to your destination, and then try to figure out the price. You must negotiate a price prior to leaving. Most locations in Panama City by taxi should not cost more than \$4-5. Most trips will be \$2 or \$3. Don't be alarmed if your driver stops to pick up a local. If someone's going in the same general direction the driver will pick them up to make more revenue. Taxi use must be approved by your organizing teacher.

Street Addresses

There are few street addresses in Panama, and many streets don't even have names. Everything in Panama is done by region. To an outsider it is impossible to tell one region from another, but in Panama each region is very important. To describe an address, you give the name of the region, the street name if available, and the nearest landmark or building.

Holidays

Panama celebrates thirteen public holidays. As a predominantly Roman Catholic country, Panamanians keep several religious holidays like Holy Friday and Christmas. In addition, Panama acknowledges certain dates in its own history and commemorates these with special holidays: Martyr's Day (January 9), Separation Day (November 3) and Independence Day (November 28).

January 1 – New Year's Day

January 9 – Martyr's Day

Monday Before Ash Wednesday – Carnival

Monday Tuesday Before Ash Wednesday –

Carnival Tuesday Friday of Holy Week – Holy

Friday (Death of Christ) May 1 – Labor Day

November 3 – Separation

Day November 4 – Flag

Day November 5 – Colon

Day

November 10 – The Uprising in the Villa de

Los Santos November 28 – Independence

Day

December 8 – Mother's Day

December 25 – Christmas

BRIEF HISTORY

Pre-Columbian and Colonial

Panama's history didn't begin in 1501 with the arrival of the first European. The country has a rich pre-Columbian heritage going back over 11,000 years. Some of the first pottery-making villages in the Americas took root in Central Panama.

Before the Europeans arrived, Panama was widely settled by Chibchan, Chocoan and Cueva tribes. Some experts estimate the total indigenous population prior to the conquest as being as high as 2,000,000 people. However, the vast majority of these were decimated by disease and warfare once the Spaniards arrived.

Rodrigo de Bastidas inadvertently discovered Panama in 1501 while sailing from Venezuela in search of gold. He was the first European to explore the Isthmus of Panama. A year later Christopher Columbus himself visited Bocas del Toro. In 1509, Alonso de Ojeda and Diego de Nicuesa were given the go-ahead to colonize territories between the west-side of the Gulf of Uraba to Cabo Gracias a Dios in modern-day Honduras. The first settlement in Panama was La Guardia. Founded in 1510, the city was later renamed Santa Maria la Antigua del Darien and became part of a province governed by Vasco Nuñez de Balboa. Balboa, who waged war against the natives, was executed in 1519.

In 1521 the city of Panama received royal acknowledgement and became the first European trading post on the Pacific. For more than 300 years, Panama was part of the Spanish Empire. The country's fortunes fluctuated with its geopolitical importance to the Spanish Crown.

Columbian Panama: 1821 – 1903

After years of neglect by the declining world power, Spain, Panamanians declared their intention to seek independence from the European nation on November 10, 1821. 18 days later on the 28th of the month, Panama declared its independence from Spain. At this point, the Panamanians were unsure as to whether they should remain a part of the Republic of Colombia, as they had been under Spanish control, or join forces with Peru. Under the 1821 Constitution of Cúcuta, Panama became an official part of the Republic of Colombia, along with Venezuela and New Granada (modern-day Colombia) under the leadership of Simon Bolivar. In 1822, Ecuador would also become a part of this Republic, which came to be known as Gran Colombia.

In July, 1830, General Alzuru became supreme military commander of the Isthmus of Panama and declared its independence from New Granada (Colombia). However, Alzuru's administration lasted only one month. The general was assassinated and the country, this time under the leadership of Colonel Tomas Herrera, reestablished its ties with Bolivar's liberated nations.

Next, Herrera separated from Colombia in 1840 after a civil war. The country, reunified with New Granada on December 31, 1841. A few years later - in 1846 - Colombia and the United States signed the Bidlack Mallarino Treaty which granted the US rights to build railroads through Panama. This also granted the USA the right to intervene militarily if Panama tried to secede again.

Columbian Panama: 1821 – 1903 continued:

By 1855, the United States had completed the world's first transcontinental railroad, the Panama Railway. During the years of 1850 to 1903, when the Bidlack Mallarino Treaty expired, the US government quelled a plethora of social disturbances in Panama including the Watermelon War of 1856. During the 1880s, the first attempts to build a sea-level canal were undertaken by the French. However, due to illness and engineering challenges, these were abandoned. In 1902, Theodore Roosevelt, then President of the United States, convinced Congress to take the project on. At this time Colombia was in the midst of the Thousand Days War.

During that conflict, Panamanians struggled to attain independence from Colombia, which had become Gran Colombia by this time. The US, which had originally supported Colombia's claim to keep Panama part of Gran Colombia, switched sides and backed the Panamanians in their quest for independence. In November of 1903, the United States helped Panama take its first step to sovereignty. A few weeks later, the two countries signed the Hay-Bunau Varilla Treaty allowing for construction of a canal and U.S. sovereignty over a strip of land on either side of the Panama Canal Zone. The United States would build the canal, administer, fortify and defend it "in perpetuity."

Republic, Dictatorship, and Democracy: 1903 – Present

From 1903 to 1968 Panama was a republic. The power in the newly formed nation rested in the hands of a precious and wealthy few. During the 1950s, the Panamanian military began to challenge the hegemony of this commercially oriented oligarchy. On January 9, 1964, Martyrs' Day riots, which protested the United States' involvement with the Panama Canal, saw twenty rioters killed and 500 other Panamanians were wounded. In October 1968, Dr. Arnulfo Arias Madrid was elected president for the third time. He was ousted twice prior by the Panamanian military. The third time, the military established a junta under the commander of National Guard, Brigadier General Omar Torrijos. A charismatic leader despite running a corrupt and harsh regime, Torrijos enjoyed great support among rural and urban constituencies that had been long ignored by the oligarchy.

In 1977, Torrijos and US President Jimmy Carter signed a treaty which would transfer the Panama Canal and the US army bases in the country to Panamanian control in 1999. The US would retain a perpetual right to intervene militarily, however.

Torrijos died in a plane crash in August of 1981. By 1983 General Manuel Noriega took control of the nation although he never held the title of president. Initially an ally of the United States – he was put on the CIA payroll in the late 60s – Noriega became implicated in various illegal activities including drug trafficking and selling U.S. secrets to Fidel Castro.

In 1989, Noriega was captured after the United States, under the leadership of President George W. Bush, invaded the country. Since 1989, Panama's presidents have been democratically elected.

PEOPLE & CULTURE

There is a saying that Panama was "born global." Since Panama is historically a crossroads, people and cultures from all over the world meet and intermingle here, resulting in an atmosphere of tolerance where people know how to get along with each other.

Panama is a microcosm of the Americas with a mixture of Latin, European, black and Indian populations. 65% of Panamanians are mestizo (European-Indian mixed) and the other 35% are a combination of traditional natives, Caribbean blacks, European and Chinese. Small but dynamic, Jewish, Arab and Hindu communities play important roles in Panama's business community.

You'll discover that the Panamanians are gentle, friendly, fun-loving and helpful. One of the most important national holidays are the Carnival celebrations in which it seems the whole country shuts down for serious partying or serious relaxation.

The presence of a large American community in the Canal Zone for almost a hundred years has deeply impacted the culture. Panamanian-American marriages abound. The quintessential American "can-do" spirit and the modernity of Panamanian character are due in part to America's long presence in Panama.

Panama has a stable democracy, a dynamic business sector and an unusual variety of terrains. John Le Carré, writing in *The Tailor of Panama*, summed it up well: "We have everything God needed to make paradise. Great farming, beaches, mountains, wildlife you wouldn't believe... people so beautiful you could cry."

People & Culture continued:

The indigenous population of Panama comprises approximately 8 percent of the population and is composed of 7 distinct groups which are the Kuna, Embera, Waounan, Ngobe, Bugle, Nassau, and Terribe.

Each of the 9 Panama Provinces has a rich and varied folklore and cultural traditions which are expressed through its music, dances, the cultural dress, and cuisine. As in other Latin-American countries, dances and music are an important part of Panama's culture. Due to the proximity to Colombia and to the Caribbean immigrants there is, in addition to the classical Latin-American dances, a big variety of others. The well-known Salsa, Bachata, Merengue, and Cumbia can be heard as often as the Colombian Tipico and Vallenato, the Haitiano, and Jamaican Reggae. The Reggaeton evolved here.

The influence of the US in Panama can easily be seen in the popular sports. Basketball and Baseball are two of the sports that please the entire Panamanian population. Various Panamanian Baseball players made it into a professional US baseball team – the most famous among them have been Rod Carew, Ben Oglivie, Mariano Rivera, and Carlos Lee.

PANAMANIAN FLAVORS

Panama has a rich tradition in the culinary arts. Due to its geographical location, the country is home to a vast array of fresh and tasty fruits, herbs and vegetables as well as delicious seafood. Combine this with influences from the Native Indians, Europeans and other Latin American countries and you have some great food in Panama. Generally, Panamanian food is safe and hygienic without any notable problems.

Different from other countries, the **Tortillas** are thicker and deep fried. Typical items are then placed on top of the tortilla to make a meal. It is very common to use eggs, cheese and beans.

Sancocho is a typical chicken soup that can be found everywhere in Panama. However, the flavor varies due to the different ingredients and family recipes.

Tamales are considered one of the main national dishes. Again, same name, but not the Mexican kind at all. Panamanian tamales are like a square burrito and are made from a dough of ground corn with a filling of chicken or pork with spices. They are wrapped in a banana leaf and boiled.

The **Carimañola** is a roll made of a type of tropical yucca. Typically, the rolls are stuffed with eggs and meat.

Ceviche is a common fish appetizer. Typically, corvina is chopped up and added to lemon juice and some spices. The acidic content of the lemon actually "cooks" the corvina to create a nice, tangy taste.

Panamanian Flavors continued:

Probably the most common side dish is **Arroz con Guandu**. Essentially rice is cooked with some sort of peas, beans and other spices to create a great tasting rice dish. You may see this side dish served with many meals.

Platano Maduro is something you will see as a side dish everywhere in Panama. The plantain – it looks like a huge banana - is cut in small slices and then fried. The flavor is sweet and is a nice addition to any meal.

Patacones are fried green plantain which are cut in rounds, pressed, deep fried and salted. You can order it as an appetizer for lunch or dinner, as your starchy vegetable or snack.

Being a tropical country, Panama has a wide array of fresh and flavorful **fruits**. With some of them you will be familiar but most of the fruits are common only to the Central American region and cannot be found in the United States. Non-alcoholic beverages are mostly made with fresh fruits. The fruits are either prepared with water (chicha) or with milk (batido) and taste delicious.

SOUVENIRS

Panama has the greatest variety of indigenous-made souvenirs of any country outside Mexico. Panamanians have an innate sense of beauty that shows in their handicrafts.

Typical Panamanian crafts originate in the traditions and cultures of the different indigenous tribes and include the colorful Mola, nut carvings, woven baskets, balsa and cocobolo wood carvings and pottery. FUN FACT: souvenirs do not usually include the Panama hat – most are made in Ecuador.

The Kuna women of Panama are known for their colorful and intricately sewn Mola blouses and cloths. The Mola panels of the blouses are hand sewn using several layers of colored fabric. The women of the Wounaan and Embera tribes make elegant baskets from the fibers of the Nahuala plant and Chunga palm which grow in the Darién rain forest of Panama. The Ngobe-Bugle are famous for their woven bags made from the fiber of the wild pineapple plant.

PANAMA CITY & SURROUNDINGS

Long overshadowed by the Panama Canal, Panama City is not only reinventing itself as the thriving commercial and financial hub of the Americas, it is asserting itself as a burgeoning tourist destination. Panama City (commonly referred to simply as "Panama") is one of those rare Latin American capitals that has it all: a high standard of living, a seemingly endless supply of investment from abroad, a surplus of natural beauty, and a rich cultural brew of ethnicities and religions. There is a sizeable ex-pat presence in the city, as well as a growing Asian community, which continues to change the face of Panama City. It has been called the new Hong Kong and Miami -- a sleek and modern city proud of its role as host to the world.

Many visitors are surprised by Panama City's skyline of towering skyscrapers. A bustling center of finance and trade, the city is home to about 120 banks and features innumerable shops filled with the world's finest merchandise. Thanks to low import duties and large volume, prices in Panama City's shops are low. Two famous shopping districts are the Via España and the Avenida Central, with 20 blocks of non-stop shopping.

The city's architectural diversity is rivaled only by its cultural diversity. Urbanites here hail from all over Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia and, increasingly, North America and Europe. Given the ethnic diversity, it's no surprise that the capital boasts a wide array of restaurants, with everything from Panamanian-style ceviche and bluefin tuna sushi to tikka masala and chicken kebabs. Not far from the city, you'll also find some impressive adventure opportunities, from hiking through tropical rainforests to skirting along the jungle on a train ride to Colón.

CASCO VIEJO

Casco Viejo Panama (also known as Casco Antiguo & San Felipe) was constructed as a walled city to protect its settlers. What makes 'Casco' (as the residents call it) so unique is the number of original building structures which still stand today, in various stages of renovation and disrepair. The 16th & 17th century Spanish & French Colonial architecture is breathtaking.

There is rapid change in Casco Viejo as both Citizens of Panama and Foreign Expats revitalize the neighborhood and renovate these historic colonial buildings. From the rubble are emerging boutique hotels, luxury residences, gourmet restaurants and night clubs.

UNESCO designated Casco Viejo as a World Heritage Site in 2003. What was 10 years ago a 'forgotten neighborhood' and rapidly deteriorating slum of Panama City is now arguably the most vibrant and exciting place to visit in all of Panama.

EL VALLE de ANTON

Just a two hour's drive from Panama City, El Valle de Anton is a magical place for a day away from Panama's lowland heat --a fertile volcanic valley filled with bright flowers, square trees and golden frogs,

After 40 minutes or so you will catch your first glimpse of the valley spread out far below you, ringed by steep hills. Most of the houses on the valley floor are surrounded by trees, so the overall impression is still green and unspoiled. It can be warm during the day, but it feels less oppressive than on the coast and is considerably cooler at night.

There is no real center to the town, but if you know where to look you'll find more places to visit per square kilometer than anywhere else in Panama. A draw to El Valle is the market held every weekend. Apart from vegetables, fruit, plants and flowers, you can buy handicrafts such as wooden bowls, paintings on wood, hammocks, molas, baskets and ceramics. Prices are usually negotiable. The popularity of the market has encouraged a string of handicrafts shops to open nearby.

El Valle de Anton continued:

There are several waterfalls around the valley that are beautiful at any time of year and impressive during the rainy season. The most frequent optional visit is to El Macho, a five-minute drive from the center. The waterfall is a few minutes' walk off the road on a path through cool, thick forest. The entrance fee includes the loan of a bamboo walking stick to help you cross the sometimes slippery stones. Also at El Macho, if you're not scared of heights, you can try the Canopy Adventure, an unusual way to get a bird's eye view of the rainforest. You start by walking uphill for about half an hour with a knowledgeable guide who will point out any birds and animals he spots and tell you about the trees you pass. Then comes the adventurous part-- put on thick gloves and a harness, attach the harness to a rope and whiz down a series of ropes suspended high up in the trees, passing over the waterfall.

El Valle also has some petroglyphs -- rocks decorated with what are believed to be pre- Colombian art. The rocks with their strange designs are worth a visit, if only for the walk there that gives you lovely views of the valley. If none of the attractions appeal, just spend your time enjoying perhaps the best thing about El Valle -- the fresher climate and its natural beauty.

PLAYA SANTA CLARA

Playa Santa Clara is one of the most convenient beach destinations close to Panama City and closer to Valle de Anton. Santa Clara beach has remained relatively undeveloped with a scattering of cabins and just a few open-air beachfront restaurants.

The accessibility of the beach has made it a favorite among locals for a long time, who make do with the lack of infrastructure by packing picnics for day trips to the beach. The atmosphere here is very tranquil and perfect for a relaxing getaway.

From the beautiful white sand beach you can watch fishermen netting and sorting the catch of the day while pelicans and seagulls circle overhead, go horseback riding or ask a fisherman to take you to the offshore Farallon island where you can hike to a giant cross that is rumored to have been constructed according to orders from Noriega.

PANAMA CANAL LOCKS

The Panama Canal has three sets of locks, two situated near the Pacific coast (Miraflores & Pedro Miguel), and the third along the Atlantic (Gatun). Miraflores Locks, the most southern of the Locks, has two chambers, while Pedro Miguel, just to the north, has just one. Gatun Locks, on the other hand, has all three sets of chambers stacked together.

MIRAFLORES LOCKS

The Miraflores Locks, due to their close proximity to Panama City and easy public access, is probably the most visited tourist site in Panama.

The visitor's center faces the Locks and has four floors; from any of the top three floors, photos can be taken from their respective balconies. On the third floor there is a restaurant, which is open to the public. Inside the visitor's center, you'll find a small gift shop, exhibition salon, snack bar, and more.

Miraflores Locks are slightly over one mile long, from beginning to end. Depending on the size of each vessel, one can see anywhere from 1 to 3 vessels make the transit. From the minute the vessels enter the locks, it takes approximately 10 minutes for the process to be completed. It is important to note that the water enters and leaves the locks by means of gravity, as there are no pumps or other man-made devices that assist in this process. For large commercial vessels, assistance is provided with multiple, land-based electric cars that run alongside both sides of the Canal, attached to the vessel by long cables. These cars help guide the vessel through the locks; however, the vessel moves under its own power.

PANAMA CANAL RAINFOREST

Nature was never this close! The Panama Canal rainforests are the most accessible nature-rich rainforests in the world. Just 30 minutes from Panama City is Soberania National Park, home to outstanding ecotourism attractions. A veritable treasure of nature, these 50,000 acres of pristine rainforest host an incredible 105 species of mammals, 525 species of birds and 124 species of reptiles and amphibians.

How is it that such nature preserves exist so close to a major metropolitan city? The reason is unique. The Panama Canal needs a vast watershed of rainforest to feed water to its lock system which requires millions of gallons a day. Therefore, the Panama Canal Zone has vast protected rain forests - pristine rainforests right next to the modern Panama City. Practically speaking what this means is that you can experience pristine rainforest nature in a mere day trip from Panama City.