

A treasure waiting for you

By **GUSTAVO HIM CASANOVA**

GENERAL ADMINISTRATOR, TOURISM AUTHORITY OF PANAMA



GUSTAVO HIM CASANOVA has over 25 years experience working in corporate marketing and communications. He is the founder of the Mix Holding Group – considered one of the most important radio networks in Panama. He has created numerous high-profile promotional campaigns for companies including Coca Cola, Varela Hermanos, National Brewery, Barú Panamá Brewery and Digicel. He is advisor on presidential strategies and state communications, and in July 2015, was appointed as General Administrator of the Tourism Authority of Panama.

A tour of Panama City takes in four important landmarks: Old Panama, the first colonial city on the Pacific; the Historic Quarter, built later; the cosmopolitan city, dominated by skyscrapers; and the Miraflores Locks on the Panama Canal.

COLONIAL CITIES

Old Panama (Panama Viejo), founded on August 15, 1519 and designated a Historic Monumental Complex in 1976, comprises the ruins of the first European settlement on the Pacific, as well as archaeological remains of the pre-Hispanic and colonial periods.

The city was destroyed in 1671 by British pirate Henry Morgan and was abandoned for more than two centuries, thus preserving many important buildings. On July 5, 2003, UNESCO included it in the World Heritage list.

Today, visitors can walk the cobblestone streets of the ruins, in particular the famous Cathedral Tower, and visit the Old Panama Museum.

The Historic Quarter (Casco Viejo) of Panama is where Panama City was founded in 1673, after the destruction of Old Panama. A colonial gem, many of its churches, convents, squares and buildings have been restored and converted into hotels, restaurants, shops and residences. In 1997, the Historic Quarter was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

Among the attractions of this picturesque site are the Golden Altar in the Church of San José, the Metropolitan Cathedral, Independence Square, the National Theater, Herrera Square, Bolívar Square, the Interoceanic Canal Museum and the Presidential Palace.

THE PANAMA CANAL

A must see for all visitors is the Panama Canal, running some 80 kilometers from Panama City on the Pacific coast to Colon on the Caribbean coast.

The Canal extension, the most important infrastructure project in Panama for a century, was inaugurated on Sunday June 26, 2016 with the passage of the “Cosco Shipping Panama” vessel. The canal extension involved building two new sets of locks, deepening and widening the existing navigation channels and creating a new access channel that connects the new Pacific locks with the Culebra Cut.

The new locks, Cocolí (on the Pacific side) and Agua

Clara (on the Atlantic side) allow the transit of vessels up to 366 meters long, 49 meters wide and with a maximum draft of 15 meters.

During the first three months of operation, the expanded Canal contributed more than 5 per cent of the 330.7 million tons shipped worldwide and US\$1.9 billion in revenue from tolls along the ocean-to-ocean waterway.

MIRAFLORES VISITORS' CENTRE

Located only 15 minutes from the capital, the three stories of the Panama Canal Miraflores Visitors Center offer the best view to observe the operation of the Canal and the passage of in-transit ships through the Miraflores Locks. It is an ideal place to take photographs and capture a memory of this modern-day engineering wonder.

BIOMUSEUM

Located on the Amador Causeway at the entrance to the Panama Canal on the Pacific Ocean, the Biomuseum is the only work of the world-renowned architect Frank Gehry in Latin America.

This 4,000-square meter museum tells the story of how the Isthmus of Panama emerged from the sea, uniting two continents, separating a large ocean in two and its gigantic impact on the planet's biodiversity.

The Biomuseum has eight permanent galleries and



Right: Taking a break on the migration flight

eight state-of-the-art motion theatres, a public atrium, a space for temporary exhibits, a store, a cafeteria and multiple outdoor exhibits arranged in a botanical park.

The museum offers visitors, among other attractions, an audiovisual presentation of the natural wonders that make up the ecosystems of Panama, the formation of the isthmus displayed in three 14-meter-high tectonic models, along with sculptures of the huge numbers of species in North and South America.

RESTAURANT SERVICES

Thanks to its rich cultural diversity, including Spaniards, Afro-Panamanians of Caribbean descent, Chinese, French and US citizens, Panamanian food is characterized by a fusion of flavours. All these cultures created our cuisine, adapting their recipes using ingredients found in the isthmus.

The Conquest, the Colony and the construction of the Interoceanic Railway and the Canal marked our culinary history and today we enjoy the gastronomic influence created by the cultures that came together in our country.

In the capital city visitors can enjoy many different culinary experiences, choosing from a wide range of restaurants, offering Panamanian gourmet and international food of the highest quality, in sectors such as Calle Uruguay, Amador Causeway and the Historic Quarter.

Among the Panamanian traditional dishes to be found are the Panamanian sancocho (chicken soup), rice with chicken, rice and beans, tortilla, corn buns and corn tamales.

Panamanian coffee is considered one of the best in the world, and has won numerous international awards in recent years.

In the highlands of Chiriqui province excellent coffee, highly valued worldwide, is grown. Buyers and international tasters visit us more frequently to taste the high quality of Panamanian coffee, as evidenced by “The Best of Panama,” the auction and dedicated annual coffee competition.

THE HIGHLANDS

Some 45 minutes from the city of David is the town of Boquete, located in a region dominated by mountains and valleys, famous for its rich variety of flowers to be found growing wild around its most famous landmark: Barú Volcano, the highest peak in the Republic of Panama, with an altitude of 3,475 meters.

Boquete is famous for its International Flower and Coffee Fair, held every year in January. With a very pleasant climate thanks to its altitude, Boquete features extensive coffee plantations and exuberant nature.

The highlands are a favourable destination for resting, bird watching and climbing the top of the Barú



Volcano. On clear days visitors have the opportunity to observe both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea.

ECOTOURISM

Panama is unique in the world for having a tropical forest within its capital city. Just 15 minutes away, visitors can enjoy guided ecotourism tours around the Metropolitan Natural Park, along with cable car tours through the jungle, bringing them into close contact with our unique flora.

For more adventurous visitors Panama offers magnificent mountain ranges where canopy tours are available, along with hiking along trails. The variety of natural and well-preserved environments in forest and mountain areas of the country are perfect scenarios for the practice of these activities. Panama has eleven forest reserves and even within the urban area, there are places with favourable characteristics for ecotourism, as is the case of the Metropolitan Natural Park, the only protected tropical forest area in Central America within a capital city.

BIRD WATCHING

Panama is an air bridge for the migration of birds making the journey from the Northern Hemisphere to the South and vice versa, which has made it a privileged and well-known destination in the world for watching the many different species of birds that stop over in Panama.

World Shorebirds Day, held in May, allowed Panama to demonstrate its full appeal to bird watchers, positioning itself as the number one country in Central America and among the 10 best countries in the world with more species of birds observed in a single day.

Some 40 per cent of the country's total area is protected, making Panama a unique place with incredible appeal for bird watchers and nature lovers.

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Above: Still standing – a Dominican monastery dating from 1678