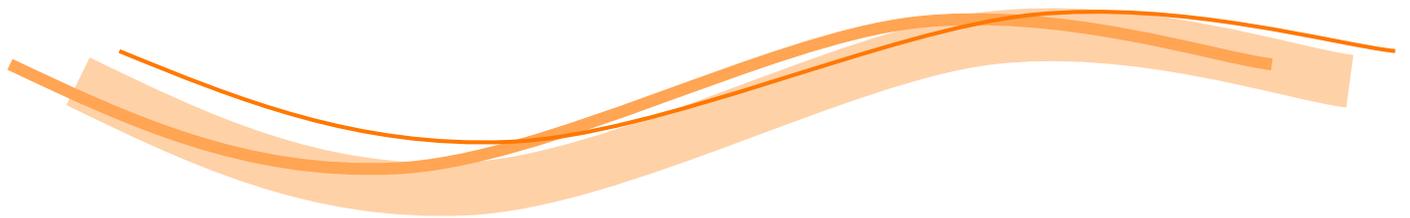




NOLITOURS & DECAMERON RESORTS





NOLITOURS & TRANSAT	<p>Transat Holidays and Nolitours have launched their winter 2013/2014 programs. See at a glance if a hotel is rated as, for instance, luxury or family friendly thanks to the brochure designations. Transat Holidays has grouped resorts into different “Collections”. Resorts in the Transat Holidays “Distinction Collection”, for example, offer you exclusive privileges and added services. And the Luxury Collection means the ultimate in elegance and pampering.</p> <p>Plus discover innovative new ways to discover your destination. For example Nolitours offer the noliZONE – designed for vacationers who want to explore, meet new people and really get to know their destination. And with both the Transat and Nolitours programs make it easy to choose a combination of two very different destinations during one trip.</p> <p>Book early and be sure to get the exact dates and the perfect destination for you. And there is no reason to wait this year. Both Transat Holidays and Nolitours have some great reasons for you to book now. Enjoy the warm feeling that comes with everything being booked just as you want it, and the anticipation of your dream trip to come.</p> <p>There are 25 Sun destinations and 350 Resorts to choose from. There is a wide variety of fantastic resorts on offer, carefully selected and categorized by the experts from Nolitours and Transat Holidays so you can choose the vacation that is just right for you.</p> <p>Ask your travel agent for the Transat Holidays Sun Collection 2013-2014 and Nolitours Sun 2013-2014 brochure and go to www.transatholidays.com and www.Nolitours.com</p>
TRANSAT and NOLITOURS with DECAMERON RESORTS	<p>Nolitours specializes in exciting and different destinations in South and Central America such as Panama, El Salvador and Cartagena and San Andres Island in Colombia. Plus less familiar resorts in Mexico such as Riviera Nayarit and Los Cabos.</p> <p>Nolitours offer Decameron Resorts in all these destinations – great value, all inclusive properties and your ideal base to explore these colourful locations.</p> <p>Several of these hotels are rated by the experts at Nolitours as “Fab Finds” - because they believe these hotels bring together all the ingredients for a great vacation. The Royal Decameron Baru Beach Resort & Spa in Cartagena, Colombia; the Royal Decameron Salinitas in El Salvador; the Royal Decameron Golf Beach Resort and Villas in</p>

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	<p>Panama and the Royal Decameron Complex in Riviera Nayarit - all these hotels bear this distinction.</p> <p>Decameron Resorts, exclusively from Nolitours, deliver an authentic and exotic experience. They offer guests an introduction to the local culture in a warm and intimate setting. Decameron Hotels are found on fabulous beaches and surrounded by untouched, lush tropical landscapes. You can rely on Decameron Resorts to provide a quality vacation with comfortable accommodation, excellent cuisine, warm and attentive service – as part of a unique travel experience.</p>
<p>Nolitours Background</p>	<p>Nolitours is part of Transat A.T. Inc., an integrated tour operator that specializes in holiday travel and offers more than 60 destination countries. Transat, which was created in Canada and has offices in many other countries, is an international company that owns an airline, provides destination services, is active in the accommodation industry and operates an extensive travel agent network.</p> <p>Transat is now the largest tour operator in Canada, and is at the core of the vertical integration process developing and marketing vacation products as well as flights to destinations in the South and Europe. The company acts as a master craftsman in assembling different components of leisure travel: air transportation, passenger transfers from airport to hotel, accommodation, recreational and cultural activities, meals, cruises, and much more.</p> <p>Website: http://www.transat.com</p>
<p>Early Booking Incentives</p>	<p>Book before Oct 31 with Nolitours and receive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Save \$100 per couple - Have the opportunity to change your travel date up to 7 days before departure. <p>Book before Oct 31 with Transat Holidays and receive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Price Guarantee on participating hotels from the Distinction and Luxury Collections. If a lower Transat price becomes available up to 30 days before departure, you are entitled to a cash refund. - Free upgrade to Option Plus or CanJet Select on your flight with Distinction and Luxury Collections. Get free seat selection and upgraded inflight services. - Travel dates can be changed up to 7 days before departure
<p>Option Flex</p>	<p>For even more peace of mind – consider Option Flex from Transat Holidays and Nolitours. For only \$49 at the time of booking, should anything unexpected happen, Option Flex has you covered. You can change your departure date, destination or hotel up to 3 hours before departure. You can transfer your vacation package to a friend or family member up to 7 days before departure. Or you can cancel your trip and get a full refund.</p>

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<p>Transat Background</p>	<p>For over 25 years, Transat Holidays has been offering a large selection of vacation options in Europe, Florida and the south, as well as cruises. In addition to more than 200 south hotels available in the form of all-inclusive packages, Transat also offers a wide range of flights, packages, tours and à la carte products in some 30 European destinations. Their packages are flexible and tailored to stays of varying lengths. Their employees aim to exceed vacationers' expectations in order to maintain their position as a market leader here in Canada. They see their role as turning holiday dreams into reality: making the vacation experience of their guests one of the most memorable ever. Transat offer flights from East to West and all in between, such as Hamilton, Thunder Bay, Ottawa and from the West Coast.</p>
<p>Transat Collections</p>	<p>Because we all have our own definition of ideal vacation, Transat Holidays has designed exclusive Collections to meet the needs of different travellers. Last winter (2012/2013), the Distinction and Luxury collections represented 19% of Transat Holidays' business. Out of 452 hotels offered by Transat Holidays and Nolitours, 61 are exclusive to them, and they accounted for 38% of the 2.7 million room nights sold. Together, Collections product represented 59% of Transat Holidays and Nolitours room nights.</p> <p>Experience Collection Beyond its beautiful beaches and fabulous weather, the south offers a wealth of fascinating travel opportunities. So, Transat has put together a collection of out-of-the-ordinary experiences to complement your dream vacation under the sun.</p> <p>Duo Collection Vacations don't have to come in neat little boxes. Transat Holidays and Nolitours have introduced a line of packages that allows travellers to enjoy a more complete vacation experience by combining two very different destinations. You could spend part of your vacation soaking up the sun on a beautiful beach, and the other half exploring the cultural and historic attractions of an intriguing city or town. Or you could opt for a few days of snorkelling in a gorgeous coral reef, before relaxing to the sounds of the surf in a completely different destination. Panama NoliDuo: On a 1 week holiday, stay 5 nights at the Royal Decameron Beach resort and 2 nights at the Hard Rock Hotel Panama Magapolis. On a 2 week holiday, stay 11 nights and 3 nights respectively.</p> <p>Distinction Collection Transat Holidays' Distinction Collection was especially designed for travellers looking for an enhanced travel experience. Located on</p>

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	<p>stunning beaches, these resorts offer exclusive privileges, added services and superior comfort. You'll notice the difference the minute you arrive. Beautiful surroundings, attentive service, superb facilities and spacious accommodations serve as the backdrop for that special vacation you've always wanted.</p> <p>Before takeoff</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Avoid the wait at the airport with Online check-in service at www.airtransat.ca - Upgrade to Option Plus and enjoy even more privileges <p>On the plane</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Italian leather ergonomic seats - Welcome champagne glass - Choice of hot meal and complimentary glass of wine <p>During your stay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Non-stop transfer from the airport to your resort - Exclusive room location - Concierge service - Minimum of three guaranteed reservations for à la carte restaurants - 24-hour room service
Awards	Agent's Choice Awards: For the fifth consecutive year, Transat Holidays was named Wholesaler of the Year by travel agents in 2012.
New Brochures	<p>Transat Holidays Sun 2013-2014 and Nolitours Sun 2013-2014 brochures are available at your local travel agent and cover vacations through to October 2014.</p> <p>Also newly released are:</p> <p>Transat Holidays Florida Transat Holidays Cruise Transat Discoveries</p>
Air Transat's New Comfort Zone	<p>With so many new comfort features, you're on vacation the minute you take your seat. Air Transat is giving their fleet a full makeover. Starting in 2012, one by one, the planes and passengers are soaring to new heights in design and comfort. They are rolling out the new cabins over the next two years. For a glimpse of what it all looks like:</p> <p>http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBse6WOCd70</p>
Air Transat Kids Club	<p>To ensure that your family vacations are fun and unforgettable from beginning to end, Air Transat has created Kids Club so that young passengers can really enjoy themselves whilst onboard an Air Transat flight. It is designed to make air travel a fun experience for young travellers (and for their parents!). Even before the doors of the plane are closed following boarding, every child receives a small bag containing all sorts of surprises and games. The more fun they have, the easier the flight. Furthermore, children who are members of Air Transat Kids Club enjoy certain exclusive privileges.</p> <p>Members of the Air Transat Kids Club will enjoy several benefits that the</p>

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	<p>whole family can share. You can check in at a special "Air Transat Kids Club Members" counter. Thanks to these special counters located in major Canadian airports where Air Transat flies, checking-in is quicker than before. At check-in, special tags will be placed on your baggage; as a result, your baggage gets priority treatment.</p>
<p>Air Transat Upgrades</p>	<p>Air Transat has added more legroom on all their aircraft, making the journey to and from your destination even more comfortable. They have also introduced a new Economy Class meal service on sun destination flights. Passengers flying south will now be welcomed onboard with a glass of champagne, while early morning passengers will be greeted with a mimosa.</p> <p>The meal service has also been improved. The airline will now offer passengers a more complete meal tray, including a choice of two hot meals, a complimentary glass of wine and dessert.</p>
<p>Best Leisure Airline</p>	<p>Air Transat was named World's Best Leisure Airline at the Skytrax annual World Airline Awards, held at the 2012 Farnborough International Airshow, near London in the UK.</p> <p>Distinctions were based on a survey measuring the satisfaction of more than 18 million customers. Conducted over a 10-month period, this survey included over 200 airlines that were rated on 38 different aspects of the passenger experience. The study analyzed customer satisfaction for the Airline Passenger Experience, from check-in to boarding, onboard seat comfort, cabin cleanliness, food and beverages, onboard entertainment, and service of staff.</p> <p>In the past five years, Air Transat has gained other recognitions as a result of its numerous environmental initiatives. In 2011, the Company ranked first worldwide in the Atmosfair Airline Index environmental performance indicator, in the long-haul category. Air Transat also obtained the Platinum LEED-EB (existing building) certification for its headquarters, located within the Montreal-Trudeau airport site.</p> <p>Air Transat was recognized as the Best Charter Airline for the fifth consecutive year at the Agents' Choice Awards, which represents the largest sampling of travel agents in Canada. The airline also received the Family Friendly Airline Award, which acknowledges carriers that provide additional services and extra comfort to children & parents.</p>
<p>Transat Compensation Plan</p>	<p>Transat has introduced a new compensation plan for clients affected by an advanced flight schedule change on all South, Florida and Europe flights, packages and cruises. This new policy applies to all bookings made with Transat Holidays, for Air Transat or CanJet flights.</p> <p>Applicable to schedule changes within 45 days of departure.</p> <p>Schedule change of 3 to 12 hours</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transat will offer a \$50 voucher for future travel.

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	<p>Schedule change of 12 to 24 hours</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transat will offer a \$75 voucher for future travel. <p>Schedule change of 24 hours or more and cancelled flights</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clients can cancel their flight and are entitled to a full refund in the event of a schedule change of 24 hours or more. • Transat will offer a \$50 voucher for future travel to clients who cancel. • Transat will offer a \$100 voucher for future travel to clients who accept the date change. • Clients who choose a product at a lower fare will be refunded the price difference, whereas clients who select a product at a higher fare will be required to pay the balance. <p>Schedule change of 3 hours or less</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No compensation will be offered to clients experiencing a schedule change that is delayed or advanced by 3 hours or less.
<p>Transat Club Class</p>	<p>Enjoy exclusive privileges such as complimentary seat selection, wider, more comfortable leather seats, a choice of gourmet meals and fine wines, priority check-in, baggage service and boarding.</p> <p>Club Service</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated Club attendants • Attentive, personalized service • Exclusive, spacious Club cabin <p>Drinks & Snacks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome cocktails • Complimentary non-alcoholic drinks, snacks and bar service <p>Club Privileges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased baggage allowance • 40 kg checked/15 kg carry-on • Exclusive, rapid check-in counter in most airports • Priority boarding • Practical travel items (on Europe flights) • Free headsets • Canadian newspapers <p>Comfort & Refinement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wider, more comfortable leather seats • More leg room • Complimentary Seat Selection: call 1-877-872-6728 • Choice of gourmet meals • Choice of wine and more
<p>Option Plus</p>	<p>This Economy class option includes many priority privileges and services including priority check-in, priority baggage handling, an extra 10kg baggage allowance and even champagne. Here's what you get:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advance seat selection on roundtrip flights

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Priority check-in at a dedicated counter • Priority baggage handling • Priority boarding • Complete Air Transat travel kit on flights to European destinations • Snacks from the On Board Bistro selection • Alcoholic beverages during drinks service 200ml bottle of champagne (Sun and Europe) • Supplementary baggage allowance up to 10 kg per flight segment • Wine or beer with the meal • Headsets <p>The cost is \$79-\$119 for southbound destinations and \$99-\$209 for European destinations as at October 2013</p>
<p>Transat and Sustainable Tourism</p>	<p>Transat recognizes the prime importance of the environment, host communities, cultural diversity, and their relationships with their employees, customers and partners. Transat is firmly committed to the responsible development of the tourism industry, and has adopted the following definition of sustainable tourism:</p> <p><i>“Sustainable tourism entails respect for nature, as well as for host communities and their values; it combines positive socio-economic benefits for local populations with an enriching experience for travellers.”</i></p> <p>The issue of the environment, as far as Transat’s own facilities are concerned, is a clear and basic target. Their environment committees have implemented concrete initiatives with regard to recycling, conservation of resources, the disposal of obsolete electronic equipment, and raising employee awareness.</p> <p>Air Transat has begun developing an environmental management system that could lead to an ISO 14001 certification in the future. To find out more, consult the Transat and the Environment sections at their website:</p> <p>http://www.airtransat.ca/en/Info/the-environment-its-everyones-business.aspx?ExitID=69&ContentType=voyageur</p> <p>Eco-responsible certified hotels</p> <p>Transat urges its hotelier partners to excel in social and environmental responsibility, and formally recognizes the efforts of accommodations that commit to certification in this area. Certified establishments must maintain performance levels to continue using such labels. The indicators used vary depending on the certification scheme, but many certification organizations have begun aligning their benchmarks with the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria.</p> <p>To help you make an informed choice when you take your next vacation, Transat list six certifications for hotels and beaches. You can also find certified hotels by searching by destination.</p>

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	<p>Certifications for hotels</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Biosphere Responsible Tourism 2. Green Globe 3. Green Key 4. ISO 14001 5. Travelife <p>Certification for beaches</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Blue Flag
Gift Certificates	<p>Here's your chance to make a loved one's dream come true. With Transat gift certificates you can offer the gift of travel from packages to car rental. Transat gift certificates are valid on all Air Transat, Nolitours, or Transat Holidays products in their brochures. They can be redeemed at a travel agent's office at the time of reservation. To order your gift certificates call 1-800-322-6649.</p>
2013 Hurricane Policy	<p>Nolitours and Transat Holidays provide you with true peace of mind. Vacationers can travel secure in the knowledge that you will be protected should a hurricane affect your destination city in Florida, Mexico, the Caribbean or Central America. This Nolitours/Transat Holidays policy covers reservations for departures between June 1 and November 30, 2013. If the conditions stipulated in the policy are met, you may choose one of these four options:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Travel at a later date 2. Travel to another destination city 3. Travel to the booked destination city 4. Cancel with a full refund in credit vouchers
Nolizone	<p>Nolitours' lively noliZONE was specifically created for travellers who would like to step outside their resort, meet new people and really get to know their destination. With tons of fun activities throughout the day and night, your biggest dilemma will be deciding what to do next. Introduced in 2011, the It Zone in Puerto Plata was so successful that this concept has been launched in other destinations.</p> <p>Their noliZONE representative will always keep you informed on upcoming activities and events, and you can also visit www.nolizone.nolitours.com to get the latest news and updates on what is going on in the noliZONE.</p>
Social Media	<p>Stay in touch with Transat and Nolitours at their two Facebook sites:</p> <p>http://www.facebook.com/airtransat</p> <p>http://www.facebook.com/nolitours</p>
Groups	<p>Group rates are available – as few as 10 adults make up a group. Talk to your travel agent to check the current details of Transat's group deals.</p>
Price Guarantee	<p>Transat's Price Guarantee on Luxury Collection resorts:</p> <p>Should your vacation package become available at a lower price than the one you paid, they will refund you the difference in cash (up to \$400)</p>

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	<p>per adult).</p> <p>Transat's Luxury Collection packages have been carefully chosen to offer only the best 5-star resorts with all the amenities for the most pampering of getaways.</p> <p>If you book by October 31, 2013</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enjoy this Price Guarantee - Receive a free upgrade to Option Plus or CanJet Select - Have the opportunity to change your travel date up to 7 days before departure
<p>Transat Discoveries</p>	<p>This is Transat's program to the exotic destination of your dreams! It features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - international flights on scheduled airlines like Cathay Pacific, Air France, KLM, South African Airways, Air Canada and LAN - 4 star accomodation (some 3 and 5 star) and transfers - Small-group tour with English-speaking guide - Unique experiences with most meals and excursions included <p>For more information contact your travel agent and view the tour itineraries in the brochure or at www.transatdiscoveries.com</p> <p>Here are some of their destinations they offer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Beach stays in Thailand and Vietnam - Health retreats in Tunisia and Morocco - Diving in the Red Sea and Galapagos Islands - Overland safaris in Kenya and Tanzania - More options in over 40 countries.
<p>Nolitours Excursions in Cartagena</p>	<p>Cartagena City Tour Visit Cartagena's most fascinating sights such as La Popa Convent, San Felipe Castle, and Los Zapatos Viejos. Then stroll the walled Old Town with its monuments and intriguing shops.</p> <p>Santa Marta City Tour Visit the oldest city in South America: Santa Marta. See Simon Bolivar's last home and other key sights. Stroll through America's Pearl Bay and finish up with a delicious lunch with open bar at the Decameron Galeon Hotel where you can swim in the pool or the ocean.</p> <p>Rosario Islands Tour a spectacular coral reef, bathe in the turquoise sea and marvel at the beauty of these islands. You will also experience a dolphin show.</p> <p>Snorkelling Tour Admire exotic marine life as you snorkel over crystalline waters. A knowledgeable guide will accompany you and provide explanations and information about what you are seeing. All this takes place off the</p>

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	<p>beaches of Baru and Rosario Islands.</p> <p>Mini Scuba Diving Course You will receive an initial training in the basics of scuba diving off the beaches of Baru and Rosario Islands. Take a break, and then you'll execute the second dive which takes about 40 minutes. A whole new world will open up for you.</p> <p>Fishing Expedition Set out on a fishing trip in the Portonaito Swamp and the coast of Baru Island to see what you can catch under the guidance of local experts.</p>
Special Deals with Nolitours and Decameron Resorts	<p>For Toronto departures as at October 25th, 2013:</p> <p>Panama ROYAL DECAMERON GOLF, BEACH RESORT & VILLAS PANAMA \$579 7 nights All Inclusive Mon, Nov 25, Dec 2, 9 + \$303 taxes & fees</p> <p>El Salvador ROYAL DECAMERON SALINITAS \$629 Thu, Nov 14, 21, 28 + \$313 taxes & fees</p> <p>Cartagena, Colombia DECAMERON BARU BEACH RESORT & SPA \$1099 Thu, Jan 23, 30 + \$360 taxes & fees</p> <p>Cartagena, Colombia DECAMERON CARTAGENA \$1029 Thu, Jan 23, 30 + \$360 taxes & fees</p> <p>Cartagena, Colombia ROYAL DECAMERON ISLA PALMA \$1159 Thu, Jan 23, 30 + \$360 taxes & fees</p>
Decameron Website	http://www.decameron.co/promosite/index.php/en/

HOTEL PRIZE PARTNER- CFRB	Hard Rock Hotel Panama Megapolis Avenida Balboa Multicentro Panama City Panama
Location	In downtown Panama City and approximately 20 km from the Panama airport
Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gym • Internet • Room service • Shopping centre

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spa • Wifi (in designated areas)
Accommodation	1,468 rooms in 66 storey highrise with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 king-size or 2 double beds • Air-conditioning • Full bathroom and Hairdryer • TV • Coffee maker • Mini-bar • In-room safe • Balcony • Occupancy up to 4 persons (max. adults: 3 / max. children: 2)
Activities	Pool, whirlpool, gym
Restaurants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bazaar: buffet À la carte restaurants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hard Rock Cafe • Soy (Pan-asian): • Tauro (Steakhouse): • Ciao (Light meal) • Express-0 (Snack)

HOTEL PRIZE PARTNER - CJAD	Royal Decameron Salinitas Paseo General Escalon no 4711, Col. Escalon San Salvador, El Salvador
Location	On El Salvador's Pacific Coast, approximately 125 km from the San Salvador airport
Facilities	Complimentary access to the Costa Azul Beach Club located approximately 23 km from the hotel, which includes a beach grill, unlimited domestic drinks, pool, changing room and shower facilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disco • Gift shop • Gym • Internet • Massage • Shuttle to the Costa Azul Beach Club • Temazcal steam bath
Accommodation	552 rooms in 3-storey buildings and two 6-storey blocks with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Air-conditioning • 1 king-size or 2 3/4 beds • Bathroom with shower and hairdryer • TV • In-room safe

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balcony or terrace • Occupancy up to 4 persons (max. adults: 3 / max. children: 2)
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Golf course nearby • Kayaking • Selected non-motorized water sports • Tennis • Bicycles • Introduction to scuba diving in pool (once/stay) • Daily activities program • Nightly entertainment
Families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scheduled children's activities
Restaurants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chack Balam :buffet À la carte restaurants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bamboo (Thai) • Maya Grill • Pastafari (Italian) • Fusion Mediterranean

EL SALVADOR	I am often asked on the Travel Show what are the hot new and up-and-coming destinations – and Central America is top of my list. It used to be that Costa Rica was the only country from the region to appear in the glossy vacation brochures. Now Panama, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Belize are all making a showing. I had been to the first three, but not to the others, so I was pleased to add El Salvador to my experience of the region – and so will you be!
Location	The country's 300 km of coastline, located between the south of Guatemala and Honduras, is bathed by the Pacific Ocean. With its tropical climate and fertile volcanic plateau, El Salvador's arable lands are well suited for coffee and cotton plantations.
Geography	A small state covering an area of 21,000 km ² , El Salvador is the only Central American country without a coastline on the Caribbean Sea.
Name	El Salvador is literally "The Saviour" in Spanish
Population	The country's dense and mostly rural population numbers about 6,700,000 inhabitants, most of them Roman Catholics of mixed origin (Amerindian and Spanish).
Language	Spanish, but English is spoken by many at the resorts and in San Salvador
Currency	El Salvador's official currency is the US Dollar since 2001. Carry only \$1, \$5, \$10 or \$20 dollar bills. Most stores, supermarkets and department stores won't accept \$50 or \$100 bills. If you need to exchange to lower denominations, you can go to any bank.
Tipping	El Salvador is a tipping country and 10% is the normal amount in appropriate situations for good service.

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Government	Presidential system within a constitutional republic
Documentation	Passport and Tourist Card are needed
Time zone	Central Time Zone, one hour behind Toronto and Montreal
Health	If you are not accustomed to food sold by street vendors, you might want to stay away from food sold on the streets until you acclimate. If you want to try a pupusa, you should try to find a restaurant to taste this popular dish rather than buying them from street vendors.
Safety tips	Although this Central American country has one the highest homicide rates in the world (four to five times that of Mexico for instance), I met with friendly warmth tinged with joyous sparkle from all the people I met on the trip. I was safety-conscious, but never had a moment's concern. My advice: do not let media shock stories deter you from visiting this destination.

CLIMATE	
General climate	Tropical; rainy season (May to October); dry season (November to April); tropical on the coast; temperate in the uplands
Today's weather	27C with sun and showers (19 October 2013)
Best time to visit	In the Canadian winter months.

GETTING AROUND	
Getting There	There are direct flights from both Montreal and Toronto with Nolitours using Air Transat in the winter months.
Colonial Towns	The blend of native culture and Spanish colonial history has produced a scenic mix of country towns throughout the region. All are laid out in a common fashion: a central Plaza bordered by the church, town hall and important civic buildings and market streets radiating outwards. I explored several of these gems... Izalco , with the looming volcano of the same name towering above; Juayua set high among surrounding coffee plantations; Santa Ana , bustling market town with a strangely Italianate look; and Nahuizalco , craft capital on the Route of the Flowers.
Distances	From the International Airport to the resort region of Sonsonate is 180 kms, but the trip is full of visual wonders, from the city outskirts of the capital to the countryside roadside markets and the looming volcanoes above the fields of sugar cane.
Trains	The last passenger train service ceased in 2002.
Car Rental	The major international car rental companies are available at the international airport.
Buses	Tica Bus: 2 terminals in San Salvador. Covers all Central American countries including Tapachula, Mexico. First Class option available on longer routes which include onboard meals and drinks. Pullmantur: connects Guatemala - San Salvador - Tegucigalpa. Luxury

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	Double Decker Coach Travel with First Class option available. Includes onboard meals and drinks.
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ACCOMMODATION TYPES	My base for exploring the region was at the anchor resort for Nolitours on the Pacific Coast at Salinitas in the west of the country. All-inclusive and all-embracing, you never need leave this resort to enjoy a week of R & R in the sun. It's a large resort with over 500 rooms in three storey linked blocks set in lush gardens between lagoon and ocean. The food was excellent: buffets, snack bars and five a la carte restaurants. But for me the best part about the resort was the beach.
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LIFESTYLES	
Kids	Younger kids will be happy to stay on the beach and around the pool of the Decameron resort, which lays on plenty of kids' activities throughout the day.
Teens	This is a great destination for teens! There's lots of soft adventure opportunities from hiking up a volcano to surfing the Pacific waves.
Honeymoons & Weddings	Spectacular sunsets over the Pacific Ocean and long walks on the beaches, romantic lunches under the arcaded edges of pretty colonial towns, hikes through verdant flower gardens and soaks in hot springs at dusk...romance is alive and well in El Salvador!
Seniors	There are some fascinating touring options available that are suitable for older travelers. I particularly recommend a local company called at Cuscatlan Tours for their personalized tours (follow them on facebook: https://www.facebook.com/pages/CUSCATLAN-TOURS/16853306651)

UNIQUES	
Surprising	Salvadorans are known for their great hospitality. They are among the nicest people in the world. They are friendly, industrious people always willing to help anyone. That is what has earned El Salvador the nickname of "the country with a smile".
History	The civilization of El Salvador dates from the pre-Columbian time, around 1500 B.C., according to evidence provided by the ancient structures of Tazumal in Chalchuapa. The Spanish Admiral Andrés Niño led an expedition to Central America and disembarked on the Island Meanguera, located in the Gulf of Fonseca, on May 31st, 1522. This was the first Salvadoran territory visited by the Spaniards. In June, 1524, Spanish Captain Pedro de Alvarado began a predatory war against the native tribes of Cuzcatlán. During 17 days of bloody battles many natives and Spaniards died. Pedro de Alvarado was defeated and abandoned the fight and fled to Guatemala, appointing his brother, Gonzalo de Alvarado, to continue with the conquest of Cuzcatlán. Later, his cousin Diego de Alvarado

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established the Villa of San Salvador in April 1525. King Carlos I of Spain granted San Salvador the title of City in the year 1546. During the following years, El Salvador developed under Spanish rule. Towards the end of 1810, a feeling of a need for freedom arose among the people of Central America and the moment to break the chains of slavery arrived at dawn on November 5th, 1811, when the Salvadoran priest, Jose Matías Delgado, sounded the bells of the Iglesia La Merced in San Salvador, making a call for insurrection. After many internal fights, the Acta de Independencia (Act of Independence) of Central America was signed in Guatemala on September 15th, 1821. In December of 1931, the corrupt and incompetent regime of the Labour Party, headed by Manuel Araujo, was overthrown and General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez assumed the presidency. The fraudulent elections of January 1932 were the detonating factor of the social outbreak. After two frustrated assaults on the Cuartel de Caballería (Cavalry Quarters) were conducted by the rebel forces, the government ordered martial law. Strict censorship of the press was implemented.

Over the next decades, many coups d'états followed, including the one that overthrew General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez. Relations with Honduras deteriorated in the late 1960s. There was a border clash in 1967, and a four-day so-called Football war (Soccer War), as it was named by the media, broke out in July 1969. The war ended with a cease-fire prompted by pressure from the United States and the Organization of American States. The Salvadoran forces that had invaded Honduras were withdrawn. They were just a few kilometers outside Honduras' capital.

A movement of organized leftist guerrillas sprang up in 1974 and 1975, amid increasing political violence. In 1980, three of the leftist organizations united to coordinate a fight against the government. This movement was called FMLN (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional. English: Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front). In March of the same year Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, the archbishop of San Salvador, was assassinated while he was celebrating mass. It is widely believed that the order for his execution came from Major Roberto D'Abuisson, the founder and leader of ARENA, a right-wing party. D'Abuisson is best known for his suspected involvement in death squad murders. He died of cancer in 1992. On January 16th, 1992, the government of El Salvador and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), signed Los Acuerdos de Paz (Peace Accords) in Chapultepec, Mexico, putting an end to one of the most painful chapters in the history of El Salvador. The 12 years of armed conflict claimed the lives of over 75,000 people and caused the exodus of hundreds of thousands more who fled to the

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	<p>United States, Canada, and other countries in order to escape the violence.</p> <p>Today, El Salvador is stable and with a growing economy, leaving behind its painful history.</p>
Books	<p>Explorer's Guides publish the best guide book to the country: "El Salvador: A Great Destination" by Paige R. Penland</p>
Must Sees	<p>The volcanoes, hot springs, Route of the Flowers, coffee plantations, the capital city of San Salvador and the ancient ruins of San Andres and Joya de Ceren are all unmissable.</p>

SPORTS ACTIVITIES	
Golf	<p>El Salvador golf courses include:</p> <p>Club Campestre Cuscatlan Paseo General Escalón, #5423 Colonia Escalón, San Salvador</p> <p>Club Salvadoreno Ilopango, San Salvador</p> <p>El Encanto Villas and Golf Blvd. Orden de Malta #420 Antigua Cuscatlán</p> <p>Las Veraneras Golf & Villas Resort Salinitas, Los cobanos Sonsonate, Sonsonate 0000</p>
Fishing	<p>El Salvador is home to some of Central America's prime fishing waters. There are a number of operators who can take you out for a day's sport. Paradise Fishing Lodge El Salvador is one example.</p>
Horse riding	<p>Tour operators in Suchitoto offer excellent horseback tours around Volcán Guazapa and Parque Ecológico de Cinquera. The upscale Entre Pinos Resort in La Palma has private horseback excursions in the surrounding mountains, as does Las Olas Beach House on the Balsamo Coast. Apaneca and the surrounding area in western El Salvador also offer some beautiful circuits.</p>
Hiking	<p>Volcano Hike: Volcan Santa Ana</p> <p>The lava on the beach at the Decameron came from a trio of volcanoes to the north: Cerro Verde, Izalco and Santa Ana. Early on my second morning I set out with Jorge from Cuscatlan Tours as my guide, to hike to the top of one of these: Santa Ana Volcano, the highest active volcano in the country at a little under 8,000 feet. Entering the Cerro Verde National Park, we drove up an incredibly rough road through mountain forest to the trailhead and began the long hike upwards. As we climbed, the views over the surrounding valleys, the caldera lake of Coatepeque and the sister volcano of Izalco grew more spectacular. We ascended through different vegetation zones, from montane forest through stunted and weird mountain flora to the almost lifeless lava and ash of the crater slopes. Smoke and clouds whirled around us and then</p>

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	suddenly we arrived at the summit, the clouds raced over us and the summit vista was revealed: around us were volcanoes, green valleys and misty mountains, but the real jewel was what was revealed beneath our feet, inside the volcano's precipitous crater walls: a vivid bright green crater lake of sulphurous waters. It's a uniquely beautiful view and well worth the hike to the heavens. Afterwards, we soaked tired limbs in the therapeutic warmth of Santa Teresa hot springs – another hint of the volcanic nature of this part of the Ring of Fire.
Cycling	This is not the greatest destination for cyclists unless you are very adventurous and can cope with huge climbs and equally huge potholes!
Diving	The opportunities for diving along the Pacific coast are many. You can explore offshore reefs and sunken wrecks in the safe hands of reputable local dive operations.

CULTURE	The archaeologists working at Joya de Ceren have a unique advantage: when they make a find that is puzzling, they can go ask the direct descendants of the people who lived there – the Maya people continue to live in Central America half a millennium after the Spanish Conquistadors nearly wiped them out with disease and religion. Throughout the region I met with Maya and people with Maya heritage in the markets, the colonial towns and the countryside.
Arts	The Museo de Arte de El Salvador (MARTE) in San Salvador is the place to go for the best artistic works produced in El Salvador. www.marte.org.sv
Music	The music of El Salvador has a mixture of Mayan, African, Pipil, Lenca and Spanish influences. This music includes religious songs (mostly Roman Catholic) used to celebrate Christmas and other holidays, especially feast days of the saints. Satirical and rural lyrical themes are common. Popular styles in modern El Salvador include salsa, cumbia, hip hop and reggaeton.
Museums	In San Salvador the Guzmán National Museum of Anthropology, the Museum of Art of Salvador, a sculpture museum, a popular art museum as well as the City museum. Those who are interested in ancient civilizations will definitely want to visit the museums in Tazumal and Casa Blanca.
Festivals	Easter is celebrated with carnival-like events in different cities by the large Catholic population. August 1 to 7 is a week long festival in celebration of El Salvador del Mundo, patron saint of El Salvador.

ATTRACTIONS	
Beaches	The Pacific Coast beaches are gorgeous. Some roll out for many kilometers of deserted strand...some are perfect for swimming and other for surfing.

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	I loved the beach at the Decameron Salintas Resort. At high tide (and the tidal range here is dramatic), there is a long beach under plenty of shady trees and thatch palapas; at low tide, the Pacific recedes to reveal a wonderland of jagged lava rock pools and marine life, plus bath-warm sheltered ocean lagoons.
Wildlife	Birding is big here and the brilliant macaws in Honduras were the bright spot here. And the flora in the gardens, along the Ruta de Flores and in the countryside was exotic and mesmerizing. It is estimated that there are 500 species of birds, 1,000 species of butterflies, 400 species of orchids, 800 species of trees, and 800 species of marine fish in El Salvador.
Parks	A well-maintained and practically deserted national park is found in the west at Bosque El Imposible. Additionally, there is Montecristo Cloud Forest, and a quaint fishing village with incredible local hospitality and remote coconut islands in La Isla de Méndez. Isla de Olomega in the department of San Miguel is an excellent eco-tourism destination, as are the beautiful Isla El Cajete in Sonsonate, Isla San Sebastian, Conchagua, Conchaguita, Isla Conejo, Isla Teopan, and Isla Meanguera.
Gardens	The capital of San Salvador has two superb botanical gardens. Also near the city is Balboa Park, a green space with playgrounds where families can escape the day-to-day city life.
Historical Sites	The Maya people are endlessly fascinating. Their cities and settlements stretch back over two thousand years over much of Central America – including El Salvador on the southeastern edge of the Maya World. Here I visited two of the most significant, but very different, Mayan sites in the country. San Andres was a ceremonial centre for the surrounding fertile valley and boasts the traditional pyramids and courtyards that are so characteristic of such major sites. Peaceful, beautiful – we were almost alone at the site in contrast to the much more visited sites in Mexico’s Yucatan. Just a few kilometers away, Joya de Ceren was just an ordinary Maya village until it was abruptly buried 1,400 years ago by its backyard volcano, creating “the Pompeii of the Americas”. Normally such humble structures would not have survived, but here you can gather a sense of what life was like for the ordinary Maya people all those centuries ago.

OTHER ACTIVITIES	
Shopping	
Markets	Marketplaces are the heartbeat of most cultures and this is certainly true of this region. I visited markets and street vendors across El Salvador, strolling the cobbled streets amidst brightly coloured stalls piled high with foods and crafts. From scrumptious and sweet chorros (a

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	local donut snack), to brilliant Maya fabrics, to the plumpest radishes I have ever seen – the markets are the best places to connect with the people, take memorable photos and simply absorb the sights, sounds and smells of a very different culture.
Nightlife	The Decameron Resort has shows and a disco every night for those staying there. In the capital of San Salvador there is a wide range of nightlife from rowdy bars to upmarket nightclubs.

CUISINE	
Food	<p>The restaurant scene in El Salvador is influenced by many different cultures. Food options include Italian, Korean, Japanese, French, Chilean, American, Peruvian, Mexican, Spanish, Middle Eastern, German, Chinese, Argentinian and others.</p> <p>You can also easily find American fast food chains such as Burger King, McDonald's, Wendy's, KFC, Subway, Quiznos, Pizza Hut, Little Caesar's, and Domino's, in the largest cities in the country such as San Salvador, Merliot / Santa Tecla, and Santa Ana. Other franchises include Tony Romas', Bennigans and others.</p> <p>The typical Salvadoran diet includes lots of rice and beans, seafood (particularly among those who live on the coast), and the most common Salvadoran dish, the famous Pupusa, a round corn tortilla filled with cheese and other elements, usually chicharon (shredded pork meat). It's widely agreed that the best pupusas in the country can be bought in Olocuilta, which you can get to along the highway on the way to the Comalapa airport. You will find 50+ pupusa stands there, competing for business.</p> <p>Also Salvadorans eat fried sliced plantains (platanos) usually with beans, sour cream, cheese and sometimes eggs, yuca con chicharron, pastelitos de carne, panes con pavo (turkey sandwiches), hand made tortillas among other very delicious Salvadoran foods.</p> <p>If you are staying on the coast, make sure you try the cóctel de conchas. It is a mix of black clams, lime juice, onions, tomatoes, cilantro, and chiles in a spicy black sauce. You can find them for about \$3/bowl, using freshly harvested clams. A wide range of other seafood dishes can also be found.</p>
Drink	Coffee is king in the highlands of El Salvador and I followed the progress from berries on the bushes high on the slopes of volcanoes to locals carrying enormous bags of freshly picked berries by the roadside, to the processing plants where the berries are dried to beans and most importantly, to the cup, where the fresh tasting local brew is marvelous!
Restaurants	La Ventana San Salvador Located in the heart of the bohemian bar-lounge scene, La Ventana is a smart, laid-back place that's popular day or night. Tables line the long windows - perfect for people watching - and the menu offers an

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	<p>excellent variety of international meals. Clients can choose from any number of creative sandwiches, big salads, pasta dishes and quiche... plenty of vegetarian options! Food is prepared fresh and portions are decent. Belgian and German ales are also served, as are tasty coffee drinks. A lively bar scene at night makes it a particularly cool place to have a bite.</p> <p>La Fonda del Mirador Suchitoto This Suchitoto institution has spectacular views of Lago de Suchitlán far below. The open air-dining room has exposed beams and a low-slung clay tile roof, with ferns hanging here and there. The food is great - gallo en chicha (chicken marinated in homemade moonshine) is a weekend favorite, and the boca colorada filete (fillet of smapper) is prepared with a homemade salsa of arrayan, mamey and tamarindo - all local fruits. The ensalada marinera (seafood salad) is a meal in itself.</p> <p>Paso de Alaska Santa Ana This good, friendly restaurant is located in Los Naranjos, El Salvador's highest town, in the shadow of Volcán Santa Ana and at the top of a scenic mountain pass between Santa Ana and Sonsonate (Hwy CA-12). The climate is cool, and you can see all the way to the ocean from the upper-level dining area. Hamburgers and sandwiches leave something to be desired - better to go with a typical lunch plate, like a quarter chicken with rice and garlic bread.</p>
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MORE INFO	
Brochures	Pick up the Nolitours 2013/2014 brochure from your travel agent to view their packages to El Salvador with Decameron Resorts
Website	www.nolitours.com

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES	<p>I have recently taken my family to El Salvador – check out my Travel Blog at http://www.chrisrobinsontravelshow.ca/Blog/tabid/400/EntryId/71/El-Salvador.aspx</p> <p>I have also created a Pinterest board on El Salvador to add a visual taste: http://www.pinterest.com/TravelShow/el-salvador-honduras-guatemala/</p> <p>I also highly recommend Jorge, Julio and Claudia at Cuscatlan Tours for their personalized tours (follow them on facebook: https://www.facebook.com/pages/CUSCATLAN-TOURS/168533066511)</p>
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PANAMA	<p>Explore one of Central America's best kept secrets – the untouched gem of Panama. Visitors can discover towering volcanoes, secluded beaches, exuberant rainforests bursting with exotic wildlife – and very few fellow travellers.</p> <p>Experience nature in all its glory as you gaze at the exquisitely transparent waters of the Caribbean from your own deserted cove. Swim under a magnificent waterfall surrounded by a lush tropical forest. Travel upriver in a piragua (dug-out canoe) to see a local village. The more adventurous may want to trek through the rainforest. Dance the night away in one of Panama City's lively nightclubs. Or try your luck at the casinos.</p>
Location	<p>The Republic of Panama is located in the centre of the Western Hemisphere where Central America narrows before joining the North and South American continents.</p> <p>Its borders are: to the North, the Caribbean Sea; to the East, the Republic of Colombia; to the South with the Pacific Ocean and to the West with the Republic of Costa Rica. Panama is the link between Central America and South America, constituting an isthmus of 80 km. wide in its narrower section.</p>
Geography	<p>Panama is an S-shaped isthmus that measures little more than 77,700 sq. km, yet there is a huge diversity of landscapes and microclimates within this tiny nation. Because Panama City faces southeast, travelers are presented with the uncommon view of the sun rising over the Pacific.</p> <p>Besides the isthmus, Panama is made up of than 1,500 islands, many of them uninhabited and cloaked in thick vegetation. These islands are grouped into four regions. In the Caribbean Sea there are the Bocas del Toro and San Blas archipelagos; in the Pacific Ocean, Las Perlas Archipelago in the Gulf of Panama, and Coiba Island and its accompanying tiny islands in the Gulf of Chiriquí.</p> <p>Panama is home to two mountain ranges, the Serranía del Darién in the east, and the Cordillera Central in the west, the latter of which is home to the highest peak in the country, the dormant Volcán Barú, at 3,475m (11,400 ft.).</p>
Name	Panama means "abundance of fish" in the local Indian language.
Population	<p>Panama has 3.2 million residents, and more than a third of them live in Panama City, Colón, and David, the country's three largest cities. The remaining population is concentrated mostly in small towns and villages in central Panama and the Azuero Peninsula. Officially roughly 70% of the population is mestizo, or a mix of Amerindians and Caucasians; 14% are African descent, 10% are white and other immigrant races, and 6% Amerindian. About 30% of the population is under the age of 14.</p>
Language	Spanish is the official language in Panama, though English is widely spoken in the tourism industry, and many hotel owners are native

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	English-speakers themselves. Panama's seven indigenous groups speak their own languages in their communities, and in some isolated areas indigenous groups do not speak Spanish fluently. On the Caribbean coast, creoles speak a patois called Guari-Guari or Wari-Wari, a mix of English, Spanish, and Ngöbe-Buglé. So many residents here speak English that it could almost be called Panama's second language.
Currency	The unit of currency in Panama is the U.S. dollar, but the Panamanian Balboa, which is pegged to the dollar at a 1:1 ratio, also circulates in denominations of 5¢, 10¢, 25¢, and 50¢ coins. (U.S. coins are in circulation as well.) Balboa coins are sized similarly to their U.S. counterparts, and travellers will have no trouble identifying their value. Currently (October 2013) the Canadian Dollar is close to parity with both the Panamanian Balboa and the US Dollar.
Tipping	Tipping in Panama at restaurants is 10%. Taxi drivers do not expect tips, but you might consider it if you've rented a taxi for the day. Porters and bellhops should be tipped \$2 to \$5 depending on the calibre of the hotel.
Government	Constitutional democracy.
Documentation	Citizens of the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and most European nations may visit Panama for a maximum of 90 days. No visa is necessary, but you must have a valid passport and a \$5 tourist card, paid when entering by land or at customs when entering by airplane.
Time zone	Panama is 5 hours behind Greenwich Mean Time (GMT), and 1 hour ahead of Costa Rica. Panama does not observe daylight saving, so from the first Sunday in November to the second Sunday in March, the time in Panama is the same as that in the Canadian Eastern Time Zone (Toronto, Montreal and others); from mid-March to early November, it's the same as that in the Central Time Zone (Winnipeg).
Health	No vaccinations are mandatory, but always consult your family doctor and remember to ensure you have travel insurance. The Panamanian hospitals are modern and most doctors are American-trained.
Safety tips	Panama is a safe country and Panamanians are some of the friendliest people in Latin America.

CLIMATE	
General climate	<p>Panama lies between 7 degrees and 9 degrees above the equator, which places it firmly within the Tropics. Accordingly, average year-round temperatures are a balmy 24°C-29°C, varying only with altitude. The average temperature in the Chiriquí Highlands, for example, is 16°C, and is the only area in Panama where you will likely feel cold.</p> <p>Humidity is always high in Panama, and rainfall varies noticeably between the Pacific and Caribbean sides of the country, with some</p>

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	areas in the Caribbean receiving almost twice the yearly rainfall of Panama City.
Today's weather	31C with sun and clouds for Panama City (19 th October 2013)
Best time to visit	The best time to visit Panama is during the summer dry season from mid-December to mid-April; this is also high season.

GETTING AROUND	
Getting There	All international flights land at the newly expanded Tocumen International Airport, near Panama City. Copa Air has direct flights from Toronto four times per week.
Cities	Panama City is the thriving commercial and financial hub of the Americas and 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. Signs of Panama City's reinvention are everywhere. The Amador Causeway, formerly a U.S. military base, is ground zero for several multimillion-dollar condominium and commercial-centre developments, such as the new Biodiversity Museum designed by famed architect Frank Gehry. The run-down 19th-century buildings of Casco Viejo have been revitalized with private and public funds and declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Along the coast, swiftly rising skyscrapers, spurred by an irresistible 20-year tax exemption, portend a megalopolis in the making: 5 of the 10 tallest buildings in Latin America are here in Panama City, including the tallest, at 104 stories.
Distances	Some distances are as follows: Panama City to Colon: 1 hour Panama City to Gamboa: 25 minutes Panama City to Portobello: 1 1/2 hours Panama City to Carti: 3 hours Panama City to Boquete: 7 hours Panama City to the Azuero Peninsula: 7 hours
Ferries	Boat trips are available on portions of the Panama Canal
Trains	The Panama Express, the first inter-oceanic railway, operates along the Canal to and from Panama City.
Car Rental	Driving in Panama allows you the most flexibility. Renting a car costs about as much as in Canada, and gas is a little more expensive, so while this isn't the cheapest option, it allows you to enjoy the scenery, adhere to your own schedule, make pit-stops, and visit destinations

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	<p>away from your hotel. Generally speaking, speed limits in Panama are about 60-80 km/hr on major roadways and slower on secondary roads. There are car rental kiosks at both the Tocumen Airport (car rental agencies at are open 24 hr), and each agency has a few locations in town. Tocumen Airport car-rental agency phone numbers are as follows: Alamo (tel. 238-4142; www.alamopanama.com), Avis (tel. 238-4046; www.avis.com), Budget (tel. 263-8777; www.budgetpanama.com), Dollar (tel. 270-0355; www.dollarpanama.com), Hertz (tel. 238-4081; www.hertz.com), National (tel. 238-4144; www.nationalpanama.com), and Thrifty (tel. 264-2613; www.thrifty.com).</p> <p>When renting a car in Panama, you must purchase two basic insurances. The agency will also offer a variety of other full-coverage options, but generally, your credit card rental insurance should cover you, and you really only need the obligatory insurances.</p> <p>Keep in mind that, depending on your destination, it's sometimes better to get a four-wheel drive vehicle, as some of Panama's roads are unpaved and rocky. If you're staying close to Panama City or all your planned destinations are right off the Pan American Highway, you should be fine with a two-wheel drive.</p> <p>Although most Panamanians drive stick shift vehicles, automatics are readily available at all car rental agencies, though you should expect to pay a bit more. Generally speaking, renting a car in Panama should cost you between \$40 and \$80 a day, depending on the kind of car and how you reserve.</p> <p>There are also car rental agencies in David, Colon, and other popular tourist destinations.</p>
<p>Buses</p>	<p>Bus routes between major and minor destinations in Panama are frequent and relatively inexpensive. Expect to pay about \$2 to \$4 per hour, depending on your destination. Panama City's bus terminal is located adjacent to Albrook Airport. It's not necessary to reserve your tickets ahead of time unless you are traveling on a holiday weekend or during December or Easter week. Be sure to arrive at the terminal at least 45 minutes ahead of time. Long-distance buses are air-conditioned, comfortable, have an on-board bathroom, and usually show several movies. Shorter routes tend to use smaller, less comfortable buses, but are usually air-conditioned. If your route is 4 or more hours, the driver will make a pit-stop about half-way through for lunch or dinner.</p>
<p>ACCOMMODATION TYPES</p>	<p>Panama offers a wide variety of lodging options, from five-star luxury eco-lodges to well-known chains, to budget backpacker hostels. Outside of Panama City, there aren't many chain hotels, however. In Panama City, the Marriot, Radisson, and Intercontinental are among the</p>

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	best chain hotels. Sprawling resorts are limited to the Pacific Coast, with the best bed and breakfasts in Boquete and the Valle de Anton. There are also eco –lodges and luxurious all-inclusive resorts.
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LIFESTYLES	
Kids	Panama is an excellent destination for families, especially those with young children who are easily bored by stuffy museums. Jungle cruises, wildlife sightings, interactive marine museums, and outdoor activities such as snorkeling and kayaking are kid-pleasers. Hotel resorts are generally family-friendly, with children's swimming pools, playgrounds, and even kids' organized activities.
Teens	Join an early-morning jungle cruise on Lake Gatún to visit "Monkey Island," and view other wildlife like crocodiles, capybaras, and sloths, and motor past huge tankers transiting the canal. Alternatively, ride a dugout canoe up the jungle-shrouded Chagres River to visit an Emberá indigenous community and get painted with jagua juice. At the Gamboa, take a bike ride to Pipeline Road in the afternoon, or visit the resort's serpentarium and butterfly exhibits, and take a ride on their aerial tram. In Panama City, pedal a bike ride along the Causeway and stop at the Punta Culebra Marine Exhibition Center. Visit the harpy eagle exhibition and see tapirs, ocelots, jaguars, and more at the Summit Gardens Park & Zoo . Afterward, stop at the Panama Canal's Miraflores Locks, tour the visitor center, and have lunch at their restaurant looking out over ships transiting the locks. Go to El Valle de Anton, 2 hours from the city, and stay at the Crater Valley Adventure Spa. Relax, bike ride, or let the hotel-activities staff teach your kids to ascend their climbing wall or obstacles course while you have a massage. Book a ride on the Canopy Adventure for a thrilling zip-line ride through the forest. Later, families can organize an easygoing horseback ride, bike ride on country lanes, walk to a waterfall, or explore the amphibian exhibit and mini-zoo at El Nispero.
Romance	What could be more romantic than a swim in the natural pool beneath the Yayas Falls , surrounded by a lush forest and amazing flora?
Honeymoons & Weddings	Weddings can be arranged in beautiful natural settings at beachside resorts and jungle eco-lodges.
Seniors	This is an excellent destination for Seniors, with first class resorts, good infrastructure and a thankful escape from Canadian weather in the winter!

UNIQUES	The Darien The easternmost region of Panama is known as the Darién Province, a swath of impenetrable rainforest and swampland that is undeveloped, save for a handful of tiny villages and indigenous settlements. It is
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	<p>Panama's wildest region and the most difficult to reach: This is the famous "missing link" of the Pan-American Highway that runs from Alaska to Puerto Montt, Chile. The interior of the Darién can be reached only by foot, boat, or small plane - and herein lies the allure of adventure for travelers. Within the province lies the Darién National Park, most of it inaccessible except for the Cana Research Station, an area revered by birders worldwide for the abundance of endemic and "show-bird" species such as macaws and harpy eagles, the largest predator in the world.</p>
<p>Surprising</p>	<p>Panama Hats: Not very Panamanian at all... Despite the name, Panama hats did not originate in Panama but in Ecuador, and were traditionally made by the Ecuadorian indigenous group from the Manabí Province using fibers from the toquilla palm. The hat was first popularized by Ferdinand de Lesseps during the French canal effort, and later during the canal building by the U.S., when thousands were imported from Ecuador and given to workers for protection from the blistering tropical sun. Hence, the name "Panama hat" stuck.</p>
<p>History</p>	<p>Early History Little is known about the ancient cultures that inhabited Panama before the arrival of the Spanish. The pre-Columbian cultures in this region did not build large cities or develop an advanced culture like the Mayans or the Incas did, and much of what was left behind has been stolen by looters or engulfed in jungle. We know that the most advanced cultures came from Central Panama, such as the Monagrillo (2500-1700 B.C.), who were one of the first pre-Columbian societies in the Americas to produce ceramics. Excavation of sites such as Conte, near Natá, have unearthed elaborate burial pits with huacas (ceremonial figurines) and jewelry, which demonstrates an early introduction to metallurgy during the first century, as well as trade with Colombia and even Mexico. What little remains of Panama's prized artifacts can be viewed at the Museo Antropológico Reina Torres de Araúz in Panama City.</p> <p>Spain Conquers Panama The first of many Spanish explorers to reach Panama was Rodrigo de Bastidas, who sailed from Venezuela along Panama's Caribbean coast in 1501 in search of gold. His first mate was Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, who would return later and seal his fate as one of Panama's most important historical figures. A year later, Christopher Columbus, on his fourth and final voyage to the New World, sailed into Bocas del Toro and stopped at various points along the isthmus, one of which he named Puerto Bello, now known as Portobelo. Estimates vary, but historians believe that between 1 and 2 million indigenous people were in Panama at that time. Groups such as the Kuna, the Chocó, and the Guaymí lived in small communities and were highly skilled in pottery</p>

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making, stonecutting, and metallurgy. Because they frequently wore gold ornaments, Spanish explorers during the following years would be further convinced of the existence of fabled El Dorado, the city of gold. Columbus attempted to establish a colony, Santa María de Belen, near Río Belen, but was forced out after a raid by local Indians. Meanwhile, **Balboa** had settled in the Dominican Republic but had racked up huge debts. In 1510, he escaped his creditors by hiding out as a stowaway on a boat bound for Panama. In the years since Columbus's failed attempt, many other Spaniards had tried to colonize the coast, but were thwarted by disease and indigenous raids. Balboa suggested settling at Antigua de Darién, where he became a tough but successful administrator who both subjugated Indians as well as befriended conquered tribes. Having listened to stories by Indians about another sea, Balboa set out in 1513 with Francisco Pizarro and a band of Indian slaves, and hacked his way through perilous jungle for 25 days until he arrived at the Pacific Coast, where he claimed the sea and all its shores for the king of Spain. Balboa was later beheaded by a jealous new governor, Pedro Arias de Avila (Pedrarias the Cruel), on a trumped-up charge of treason.

In 1519, **Pedrarias** settled a fishing village called Panama, which meant "plenty of fish" in the local language, and resettled Nombre de Dios on the Atlantic to create a passageway for transporting Peruvian gold and riches from the Pacific to Spanish galleons in the Caribbean Sea. The trail was called the Camino Real, or Royal Trail, but later a faster and easier route was established, called the Camino de las Cruces. The land portion of this trail was two-thirds shorter, and met with the Chagres River, which could be sailed out to the Caribbean Sea. This trail can be walked today, and portions of the stone-inlaid path still exist. With Incan gold nearly exhausted, the Spanish turned their interests to the immense supply of silver found in Peruvian mines, and in 1537 they held their first trading fair, which would grow into one of the most important fairs in the world. With so much wealth changing hands on the isthmus, pirate attacks became increasingly common, and ports like Nombre de Dios declined in importance after having been raided by the English pirate Sir Francis Drake twice in 1572 and 1573. Portobelo was refortified and became the main port of trade. Panama City, on the other side of the isthmus, flourished with trade profits, and was considered one of the wealthiest cities in the Americas.

By the mid-17th century, dwindling supplies of silver and gold from the Peruvian mines and ongoing pirate attacks precipitated a severe decline in the amount of precious metals being transported to Spain. In 1671, the notorious Welsh buccaneer Henry Morgan sailed up the Chagres River, crossed the isthmus, and overpowered Panama City, sacking the city and leaving it in flames. Those who escaped the attack

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rebuilt Panama City 2 years later at what is now known as Casco Viejo. Spain finally abandoned the isthmus crossing and Portobelo after the city was attacked by the British Admiral Edward Vernon, and returned to sailing around Cape Horn to reach Peru.

Independence from Spain & the Gold Rush

Spain granted independence to its Central America colonies in 1821, and Panama was absorbed into "Gran Colombia," a union led by liberator Simón Bolívar that included Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador. Panama attempted to split from Colombia three times during the 19th century, but wasn't successful until the U.S.-backed attempt in 1903.

Having been a colonial backwater since the pullout of the Spanish in the late 17th century, Panama was restored to prosperity from 1848 to 1869 during the height of the California Gold Rush. Given that crossing from the Atlantic to the Pacific of the U.S. was a long, arduous journey by wagon and prone to Indian attacks and other pitfalls, gold-seekers chose to sail to Panama, cross the Las Cruces trail, and sail on to California. In 1855, an American group of financiers built the Panama Railroad, greatly reducing the travel time between coasts. In 20 years, a total of 600,000 people crossed the isthmus, and both Colón and Panama City benefited enormously from the business earned in hotels, restaurants, and other services.

The Panama Canal

The history of the canal dates back to 1539, when King Charles I of Spain dispatched a survey team to study the feasibility of a canal, but the team deemed such a pursuit impossible. The first real attempt at construction of a canal was begun in 1880 by the French, led by Ferdinand de Lesseps, the charismatic architect of the Suez Canal. De Lesseps had been convinced that a sea-level canal was the only option. Once workers broke ground, however, engineers soon saw the impracticality of a sea-level canal but were unable to convince the stubborn de Lesseps, and for years rumors flew, financial debts mounted, and nearly 20,000 workers perished before the endeavor collapsed. Few had anticipated the enormous challenge presented by the Panamanian jungle, with its mucky swamps, torrential downpours, landslides, floods, and, most debilitating of all, mosquito-borne diseases such as malaria and yellow fever.

Meanwhile, Panama was embroiled in political strife and a nonstop pursuit to separate itself from Colombia. Following the French failure with the canal, the U.S. expressed interest in taking over construction but was rebuffed by the Colombian government. In response, the U.S. backed a growing independence movement in Panama that declared its

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separation from Colombia on November 3, 1903. The U.S. officially recognized Panama, and sent its battleships to protect the new nation from Colombian troops, who turned back home after a few days. A French canal engineer on the de Lesseps project, Philippe Bunau-Varilla, a major shareholder of the abandoned canal project, had been grudgingly given negotiating-envoy status by the Panamanian government for the new U.S.-built canal. His controversial Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty gave the U.S. overly generous rights that included the use, occupation, and sovereign control of a 16km-wide swath of land across the isthmus, and was entitled to annex more land if necessary to operate the canal. The U.S. would also be allowed to intervene in Panama's affairs.

The French had excavated 40% of the canal, built hospitals, and left behind machinery and the operating railway, as well as a sizeable workforce of Afro-Caribbeans. For the next 10 years, the U.S., having essentially eradicated tropical disease, pulled off what seemed impossible in terms of engineering: carving out a path through the Continental Divide, constructing an elevated canal system, and making the largest man-made lake in the world.

The 20th Century to the Present

A stormy political climate ensued in Panama for the following decades, with frequent changes of administration. Presidents and other political figures were typically rabiblancos, or wealthy, white elites loathed by the generally poor and dark-skinned public. One especially controversial character in the political scene was Arnulfo **Arias**, a racist yet populist, one-time sympathizer of the fascist movement who would be voted into and thrown out of the presidency three times. Increasingly, Panamanians were discontented with the U.S. presence and, in particular, its control of the canal. In 1964, several U.S. high-school students in the Canal Zone raised the American flag at their school, igniting protests by Panamanian college students. The protests culminated in the deaths of more than two dozen Panamanians, an event that is now called "Día de los Mártires," or Martyrs Day. By 1974, the U.S. had begun to consider transferring the canal to Panama. **Arias** was once again voted into power and after strong-arming the National Guard, he was deposed in a military coup led by Omar Torrijos Herrera, a colonel of the National Guard. **Torrijos** was an authoritarian leader but a champion of the poor who espoused land redistribution and social programs -- a "dictatorship with a heart," as he called it. His most popular achievement came in 1977, with the signing of a treaty with then-president Jimmy Carter that relinquished control of the canal to Panama on December 31, 1999. Also part of the treaty was the closing of U.S. military bases and the U.S. right to

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	<p>intervene only if it perceived a threat against the security of the canal. On July 31, 1981, Torrijos died in a plane accident. By 1983, the National Guard, now renamed the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF), was firmly controlled by Colonel Manuel Antonio Noriega, and continued to dominate political and everyday life in Panama. Noriega created the so-called Dignity Battalions that aimed to stifle citizen dissent through force and terrorize anyone who opposed the PDF. For the next 6 years, Noriega kept the Panamanian public in a state of virtual fear, running the country through presidents he had placed in power via rigged elections, killing and torturing his opponents, and involving himself in drug trafficking.</p> <p>The U.S. imposed tough economic sanctions on Panama that included freezing government assets in U.S. banks, and withholding canal fees, spurring widespread protests against Noriega across Panama City. In 1989, a fresh set of presidential elections pitted the Noriega-picked candidate against Guillermo Endara. When Endara won, Noriega annulled the election amid widespread claims by foreign observers of fraud on the part of the Noriega regime.</p> <p>With Panama veering out of control, the U.S. began sending troops to bases in the Canal Zone. On December 20, 1989, the U.S. launched Operation Just Cause, led by 25,000 soldiers who pounded the city for 6 days, leaving anywhere from 500 to 7,000 dead, depending on whom you asked. Noriega fled and hid in the offices of the Vatican nuncio, where he asked for asylum. He later surrendered and was flown to the U.S., where he was tried, charged, and sentenced to 40 years in prison. Panama's current president is Martín Torrijos, the son of the late Omar Torrijos, voted into office in 2004. The country's youngest president, he has a platform to increase jobs and security, and to fight against corruption.</p>
Books	Frommer's Panama, 2 nd Edition
1000 Places to See Before You Die	<p>Panama Canal – the 'greatest engineering show on earth'</p> <p>Archipelago de San Blas – a scattering of small, idyllic tropical islands off Panama's Caribbean coast</p>
Must Sees	The Canal, the rain forest, the local markets, the wildlife, the beaches.

SPORTS ACTIVITIES	<p>Kayaking & White-Water Rafting</p> <p>Panama has some of the most thrilling white-water rafting and kayaking in the Americas. The translucent rivers that pour down the Talamanca Mountain Range in the Chiriquí Highlands provide wild Class III and IV kayaking and rafting, principally on the Chiriquí River east of Volcán Barú, and the Chiriquí Viejo River west of the volcano, near the border with Costa Rica. Unfortunately, the Chiriquí Viejo is being threatened by a series of dams for a hydroelectric project, but for now it's a pristine river and a lot of fun to ride. There are tamer floats, too, such as the Esti</p>
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River, a Class II, that is perfect for younger rafters, families, and beginners. What's special about the Chiriquí area is that relatively few paddlers have discovered it, so rafters and kayakers have the river, and lush mountain scenery full of birds and wildlife, all to themselves. There are two local rafting companies in Boquete with years of experience and expert knowledge of the region; an option is to book with a tour operator that can put together multiday, multi-destination, or instructional trips. On the other side of the Talamanca, the Guarumo River has family-friendly Class I and II rapids that descend into the Caribbean Sea at Bocas del Toro; only two lodges offer this excursion, Tranquilo Bay and Casa Cayuco.

Closer to Panama City, there is rafting on the Class II and Class III Chagres River with Aventuras Panama, a 5-hour float through rainforest and past Emberá Indian villages.

Chiriquí River Rafting (www.panama-rafting.com) is owned and operated by Hector Sánchez, who has been rafting this region for more than 25 years. Hector and his professional crew offer year-round, half- and full-day rafting excursions around the Chiriquí, both for die-hards and families seeking an easy, fun float. Packages include lodging at their rustic bunkhouse or at the owner's private home and B&B.

Panama Rafters (www.panamarafters.com) is a young, American-owned company offering rafting and kayaking on the many rivers in the Chiriquí Highlands. They also teach beginning and intermediate kayaking. This company is especially good for rafters and kayakers seeking a wilder ride on the river.

Surfing

The powerful swells and hollow reef breaks off the Pacific and Caribbean coasts make Panama the destination for a surfin' safari. The water's warm, the waves are uncrowded, and surfing here is consistent year-round, with the largest swells between April and October in the Pacific, and December to March in the Caribbean. If you're a beginner or need tips on technique, a couple of camps specialize in surfing instruction.

Bocas del Toro is often compared to Tahiti or Hawaii for its huge swells - from December to March, and June and July - and monster waves such as Dumpers and Silverbacks, the latter a right-hand, reef-bottom point break comparable to Backdoor Pipeline in Oahu. Waves in Bocas range between 1.2 to 7.6m, and can be powerful beach breaks, big waves, reef point breaks, and spitting tubes. Isla Grande has powerful reef breaks and is a good bet if you want to surf the Caribbean but don't want to go as far as Bocas.

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	<p>In the Chiriquí Gulf, the surf meccas are at Morro Negro, and Santa Catalina, internationally renowned among surfers and located straight across the bay from Isla Coiba, in the Pacific. Farther east on the Azuero Peninsula is Cambutal, Punta Negra, Dinosaurios, and Horcones, other reliable spots for consistent breaks, including beach, point, and reef-bottom breaks that are sometimes even better than at Santa Catalina, and less crowded. The up-and-coming Playa Venado, near Pedasí, is a long beach break with lefts and rights and swells that can be as little as 1.5m or as high as 4.6m. The Pacific beaches that lie between 1 and 2 hours from Panama City are beach breaks and point breaks.</p> <p>If you just don't want to waste time planning your surf trip, or if you want a local's insider information on the best breaks, check Panama Surf Tours (www.panamasurftours.com), a respected company with flexible 5- to 8-day tours that run from economical to luxury.</p> <p>Yachting & Sailing Panama Yacht Tours (www.panamayachtours.com) is a Panama City-based operation with multiple-day charters to Coiba Island, Bocas del Toro, the Pearl Islands, and the San Blas Islands, as well as private charter rental for partial transit of the Panama Canal.</p> <p>The Panama Yacht Club (www.panamayachtclub.com), based out of Fort Amador Marina in Panama City, specializes in private excursions to the Pearl Islands, with a day excursion for \$800, and a 4-night, 5-day journey for six passengers for \$5,000, aboard their luxury catamaran.</p> <p>San Blas Sailing (www.sanblassailing.com), a French company, has a fleet of sailboats based in the San Blas Archipelago, offering 4- to 14-night all-inclusive adventures sailing around the islands, snorkeling, kayaking, and visiting Kuna villages.</p> <p>Ziplining: It's all the rage in Costa Rica, and now Panama has joined in to offer this adrenaline-fueled and exhilarating adventure. Participants climb high to a treetop platform, where they are strapped into a harness and then descend quickly using a pulley attached to a cable. Part of the experience is observing wildlife, mostly birds, from different vantage points in the forest. Both Canopy Adventures www.canopylodge.com, in El Valle, and Boquete Tree Trek www.canopypanama.com, in Boquete, offer canopy rides.</p>
<p>Golf</p>	<p>Panama provides golfers with a variety of championship courses, some of which are open for public day use, others as part of an all-inclusive resort. Close to Panama City, Summit Golf & Resort (www.summitgolfpanama.com) is the ideal venue for those staying in</p>

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	<p>the capital; it's located on the east bank of the Panama Canal on the Gaillard Highway, and is accessible by taxi from the city for about \$15 one-way. There is no hotel here, but there are swimming pools, a restaurant, and a pro shop. Designed by noted architect Jeffery Myers, the course is spread across rolling hills, with sweeping views of the Gaillard Cut of the Panama Canal. It's very classy, and there is a traditional 18-hole course as well as a 6-hole course for juniors and beginners. Rates Monday through Friday are \$90 per person; Saturday and Sunday \$100 per person, which includes a golf cart; and clubs are available for an additional \$15.</p> <p>The Coronado Golf & Beach Resort (www.coronadoresort.com) is a long-standing, premiere golf resort located on the Pacific Coast, about an hour from Panama City. Designed by Tom Fazio, this is the only seaside 18-hole course in the country; players can come for the day from Panama City, but the resort specializes in packages with lodging included.</p> <p>Costa Blanca Golf & Villas (www.costablanca.com.pa) is located next to the Decameron Resort on the Pacific Coast, about 1 1/2 hours from Panama City. It has an 18-hole course that, because of its lights, you can play both day and night. The cost a bargain: Monday through Friday it's \$30 per person, with an additional \$22 for a cart; weekends cost \$72 per person (including cart). The course is within a residential development, and there are a clubhouse and restaurant.</p>
<p>Fishing</p>	<p>Panama is a world-class fishing destination known for its fast and furious reeling-in of monster species such as blue, black, and striped marlin; yellowfin tuna; and wahoo and swordfish. Fishing takes place year-round; however, marlin and tuna are more abundant from January to April. The Pacific Ocean is where the best fishing is - there's also fishing in the Caribbean, but the infrastructure (marinas and such) isn't well developed. Anglers looking for a sure bet can't beat Lake Gatún for peacock bass - throw your line in and within minutes you'll snag one, guaranteed, making this a good excursion for kids. In addition to the information provided below for Lake Gatún, Gamboa Rainforest Resort offers fishing trips for guests and even for visitors not lodging at the resort.</p> <p>Fishing charters are available for day and multiday excursions, either as part of a trip organized by a competent operator, or by simply hiring a local boatman to take you out on the water. Custom sport-fishing tours head to the Pearl Islands, the Gulf of Chiriquí (around Coiba Island), and Piñas Bay - the latter is home to the Tropic Star Lodge, and when they're sold out, a fishing charter is a good second option. Charters typically include transportation, meals, fishing gear, and bilingual or native-English-speaking guides.</p> <p>Fishing Charters: Exploration Panama www.explorationpanama.com</p>

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	<p>an American-run company based out of Boca Chica, in the Chiriquí Gulf near David, operates a 15m refashioned U.S. Coast Guard vessel with a capacity for six overnight guests. Their all-inclusive day excursion around the Gulf of Chiriquí costs, per person, \$225; their 1-night, 1-day excursion is \$275; and their Coiba Island 2-night, 3-day fishing excursion is \$950; they can custom-build a trip to the Darién area, too. Exploration Panama also offers scuba diving and snorkeling during fishing trips.</p>
<p>Horse riding</p>	<p>Horseback-riding outfits are sparsely distributed throughout the country, and the only lodge that focuses solely on riding is Hacienda del Toro (www.haciendadeltoro.com), which offers short rides only, not full-day excursions. Still, it's a solid operation with high-quality horses. One of the best places to ride is in El Valle with Mitzila (tel. 6646-5813); she and her team charge \$4 per hour and operate daily. Trails here wind through thick forest, offering some wide-open panoramas. They have guides, but speak limited English. In Boquete, horses can be rented from Eduardo Cano (tel. 270-1750) for \$5 an hour for tours around the surrounding countryside. Horseback riding here takes place along mountain paths that provide riders with sweeping vistas of the Boquete valley. Eduardo speaks Spanish only, so depending on your own facility with el español, have your hotel make arrangements.</p>
<p>Hiking</p>	<p>Hiking in Panama ranges from strolls on the glorious beaches to strenuous tramping in the rain forest – Nolitour's Gamboa Rainforest Resort is an excellent base for this.</p> <p>Trekking the Camino Real: Centuries before the Panama Canal, the Spanish built an 80km cobblestone path to transport looted gold from the Pacific to galleons waiting in the Caribbean Sea. You can trace their path, much of which still exists in stone, in about 3 days, beginning with a canoe ride up the Chagres River, an overnight in an Emberá Indian Village, and a tramp through earthy jungle full of birds and wildlife to Nombre de Dios, near Portobelo. Lodging is in tents, and the return trip is by railroad to give you an idea of how revolutionary the railroad's construction was to increasing coastal access. Ancon Expeditions www.anconexpeditions.com is the company to call.</p>
<p>Cycling</p>	<p>Mountain biking is relatively new in Panama. There are few places suitable for riding other than well-established paved and dirt roads, but many of these roads can be dangerous if there is a lot of vehicle traffic. Roads in Panama are curvy, often with hairpin turns, and do not have bike lanes or a proper road shoulder, so keep alert for speeding vehicles coming around a bend. If you just feel like getting out and pedaling around town, you'll find bicycle rentals in more touristy areas that rent for an average of \$10 a day.</p> <p>In Panama City, the most popular and safest bike-riding area is the</p>

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	<p>Amador Causeway, which is flat and has bike lanes - and a pretty spectacular view to boot. Outside the city, the Gamboa Resort rents bicycles for touring around; from here it's a couple of kilometers to the Pipeline Road Trail, a dirt-and-mud road that is flanked by tropical jungle. El Valle de Anton was made for bike riding: Vehicle traffic is light, roads are flat and paved, and a few steep, technical dirt roads offer a good workout. Boquete, too, has picturesque, winding roads that provide moderate terrain and pastoral views. Note that rental bicycles around Panama are not top-of-the-line models and usually lack shocks and other deluxe features.</p> <p>Adventures in Panama offers two bike day trips around Panama City. Their day excursion to the Pipeline Road Trail gives cyclists a chance to get (a little) dirty and ride through jungle at one of the best bird-watching sites in Panama. Across the isthmus, they offer a day tour that begins with a bike ride across the Gatún Locks, connecting with a 6.4km dirt road to Fort San Lorenzo, a road known for birds and wildlife. The company Bike Hike Adventures combines biking on the Amador Causeway and near Fort San Lorenzo as part of their multisport package trips.</p>
<p>Diving</p>	<p>Isla Coiba, in the Chiriquí Gulf of the Pacific Ocean, is simply the best diving site in Panama, often described as a cross between the Cocos Islands in Costa Rica and the Galápagos Islands of Ecuador. Isla Coiba was the site of a notorious penitentiary until 2005, which kept visitors away, and therefore the surrounding waters are untouched. The snorkeling here is outstanding, too, but diving puts you close to pelagics such as white-tipped sharks, sailfish, manta rays, and dolphins. Coiba is also surrounded by one of the largest coral reefs on the Pacific Coast of the Americas. Other islands such as Islas Secas, and the islands within the National Marine Park in the Chiriquí Gulf, also provide outstanding diving.</p> <p>On the Caribbean coast, Bocas del Toro is where you want to go to view some of the best and most colorful hard and soft coral in the world. In the Caribbean, visibility is best from March to May, and during September and October. The reef at Baja Escribano, between the San Blas and Colón, is the new talked-about dive site for its clear waters and colorful sponges.</p> <p>Some of the best snorkeling in all of Panama is in the waters surrounding the Pearl Islands, for the abundance of marine life found here. Expect multitudinous schools of tropical fish and large pelagics such as white-tipped sharks. Bocas is billed as a top snorkeling site, but you'll need to get away from the standard tours to find the good stuff. Isla Iguanas, off the coast of Pedasí in the Pacific Ocean, is excellent for snorkeling, too.</p> <p>The outfitters listed offer diving trips around Panama, including</p>

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	<p>multi-destination trips. The resort Islas Secas in the Chiriquí Gulf and the Coral Lodge in the Caribbean are two lodges with on-site dive shops and personalized tours for guests only.</p> <p>Panama Divers (www.panamadivers.com) is the premiere dive operation in Panama, based in Panama City and Portobelo. They also offer dives around Las Perlas and Kuna Yala. Panama Divers, which is fully insured, has decades of experience and a PADI instruction facility.</p> <p>Scuba Panama (www.scubapanama.com) has a bicoastal dive that starts in the Caribbean Sea - visiting a sunken B-45 plane - and then goes to the Pacific Ocean for a dive there. They also have a unique (and spooky) dive in the Panama Canal, and dives around Portobelo and Isla Grande.</p>
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<p>CULTURE</p>	<p>Panama's seven indigenous groups' settlements are scattered in semi-autonomous territories. The Ngöbe, Buglé, Naso-Teribe and Bri-bri are the most representative native group in the Western part of the country, in the provinces of Chiriquí, Bocas del Toro and Veraguas. Together, they comprise 70% of the country's indigenous population. The Eastern side of the Panama is inhabited by the Emberá and Wounaan natives, in the Darien province, and by the Kunas, in the Kuna Yala Region.</p>
<p>Arts</p>	<p>Theatre tickets can be purchased by calling the theatre directly, or you can buy tickets at Blockbuster locations and at the bookstore El Hombre de la Mancha or Exedra Books. All theatre productions are in Spanish, with the exception of the Ancón Theater Guild (www.tga-panama.com ; admission donation around \$10). The well-respected guild has been around for more than a half-century, first opening its doors in Colón to provide entertainment to U.S. troops during World War II. The guild normally produces contemporary dramas and comedy with a mix of native English speakers and Panamanian actors trained in English-language schools.</p> <p>Classical music productions, plays, and ballet take place at Panama City's turn-of-the-20th-century National Theatre, on Avenida B in Casco Viejo. The best Spanish-language theatre productions can be found at Teatro la Quadra, on Calle D in El Cangrejo (www.teatroquadra.com ; tickets average \$10). This cultural centre was founded to promote and develop the art of theatre in Panama, and they receive acclaim for their nightly performances of well-known plays and children's theatre. Teatro ABA at Avenida Simon Bolívar (Transístmica), near Avenida de los Periodistas in front of the Riba Smith supermarket produces half its own shows and rents out its 200-person theatre to independent groups; productions are mostly</p>

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	<p>comedy, drama, and well-established plays. The historic Teatro Anita Villalaz on Plaza Francia in Casco Viejo, is administered by the National Cultural Institute (INAC); the intimate theatre is home to folkloric productions, concerts, and plays, some of which are produced by the University of Panama students.</p>
Music	<p>Panama has a rich and diverse music history, and important contributions to Cumbia, Saloma, Pasillo, Punto, Tamborito, Mejorana, Bolero, Jazz, Salsa, Reggae, Calypso, Rock and other musical genres. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_of_Panama</p>
Films	<p>The Tailor of Panama (2001) is an excellent spy-thriller starring Pierce Brosnan, Geoffrey Rush, and Jamie Lee Curtis and centers around the transfer of power of the canal from the Americans to the Panamanian people during the post-Noriega years.</p> <p>The recent James Bond film, Quantum of Solace (2008), doesn't take place in Panama, but the Bolivia scenes were filmed in Casco Antiguo, and Colón doubles as Jamaica. Actor Daniel Craig stayed in the Canal House Hotel in Casco Antiguo during much of the movie's filming.</p>
Museums	<p>Museo del Canal Interoceánico de Panamá</p> <p>Housed in a fine antique building that was once the Gran Hotel and later the French canal headquarters, this is the best museum in Panama City and an obligatory stop for every traveller. The museum is a study of the Panama isthmus - from pre-Columbian times, to the arrival of the Spanish, to the French and the American canal-building efforts, through the present day. The museum gives you a good understanding of the isthmus as the center of world trade; it also provides an explanation of the effect of the isthmus and the canal on the Panamanian identity. This is an impeccable museum, with interpretive information in Spanish and English and on-site guides who give bilingual tours. www.sinfo.net/pcmuseum</p>
Festivals	<p>Festivals are part of what make this destination so special. There's almost bound to be an event going on while you are there, but here are some of the festivals you may want to plan your trip around...</p> <p>February: Carnaval (Carnival). Panama's largest yearly celebration takes place during the 4 days that precede Ash Wednesday. The largest celebrations are in small towns on the Azuero Peninsula, such as Las Tablas, and Panama City, with parades, music, and dancing. Be prepared to get wet by mojaderos, or trucks that spray revelers with water.</p> <p>March: Semana Santa. During this week (Holy Week), parades, religious processions, and other special events take place across the country. Palm Sunday through Holy Saturday.</p> <p>Feria de David. The Chiriquí capital's largest festival draws more than</p>

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500 exhibitors from around the world to display industrial products and new technology. During the 10-day event, the city hosts plentiful cultural and folkloric events; www.feriadedaavid.com . Mid-March.

April: Feria de Orquídeas (Orchid Festival), Boquete. It's not as grand as the flower festival, but the Orchid Festival is enjoyable because it showcases thousands of varieties of these delicate flowers for public viewing. At the fairgrounds around mid-April.

Feria Internacional del Azuero, La Villa de Los Santos. This multiday festival is something akin to a county fair, with animal displays, food stalls, and lots of drinking. Mid-April.

June: Festival Corpus Christi, La Villa de Los Santos. The town explodes with activity for a 2-week religious festival known for its elaborate dances led by men in devil masks. Forty days after Easter.

July: Festival Patronales de La Virgen de Santa Librada, Las Tablas. This festival is famous for its Festival de la Pollera on July 22, which showcases the region's most beautiful pollera dresses and elects the "Queen of the Pollera" for that year. July 20 to 22.

September: Feria Internacional del Mar (International Festival of the Sea), Bocas del Toro. This 5-day event features food stands serving local cuisine, handicrafts booths, exhibits by the Smithsonian Institute and ANAM (the park service), folkloric presentations, and dances. Around the second week of September.

Festival de la Mejorana, Guararé. This nationally famous folkloric festival features hundreds of dancers, musicians, and singers coming together for a week of events and serious partying. Last week of September.

October: Festival del Cristo Negro (Black Christ Festival), Portobelo. Thousands of pilgrims come to pay penance, perform other acts of devotion, and do some reveling at the Iglesia de San Felipe, home to a wooden black Christ effigy that is paraded around town on this day. October 21.

November: Independence Days. Panama celebrates three independence days. November 3 and 4 are Independence Day and Flag Day and the largest independence celebrations, featuring parades, fireworks, and other entertainment in Panama City and larger cities like David. November 10th is a holiday for the "First Call for Independence," as is November 28th honoring Independence Day from Spain, with some regional festivities - but nothing matching November 3 and 4.

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	<p>Feria de las Tierras Altas, Volcán. This Highlands Festival is a 5-day celebration of agriculture, local arts, and culture. Around the last week of November.</p>
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ATTRACTIONS	
Beaches	<p>Panama has hundreds of kilometers of coastline on both the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean. Here some favourites:</p> <p>Comarca Kuna Yala: This is the premier beach destination in Panama, with over 350 islands scattered off the Caribbean coast that offer picture-postcard beaches with powdery white sand, coral reef, piercing turquoise water, and clusters of swaying palm trees. The colorful Kuna indigenous population administers this province, and their fascinating culture is part of the reason to visit the region, too. The glitch is that scuba diving is prohibited, and lodging is mostly Robinson Crusoe rustic, but all you'll want to do here anyway is swim, sun, and swing in a hammock.</p> <p>Isla Bastimentos National Park, Bocas del Toro: Cayos Zapatillas, or the "Slippers Islands" (so-called because they resemble footprints), not only fulfill the beach lover's fantasy with their soft sand backed by a tangle of jungle; they are also surrounded by a rich display of coral that attracts hordes of fish, providing good snorkeling. The park's main island, Isla Bastimentos, offers terrific beaches with clean sand and blue water, such as Red Frog Beach, Wizard Beach, and Playa Larga, which can be reached by a short walk or hike, or by boat during the calm-water season from August through October.</p> <p>Las Perlas Archipelago: Despite this Pacific archipelago's proximity to Panama City, its top-notch snorkeling, white-sand beaches, and calm-water swimming conditions, the Pearl Islands are a relatively unsung beach destination. Outside of holidays and the hard-core summer, you won't find crowds here, even during weekends. It's also drier here during the rainy season. Isla Contadora offers lodging and day trips for fabulous snorkeling and visits to uninhabited beaches, and there is a luxury lodge, Hacienda San José, on Isla San José.</p> <p>Isla Coiba National Park: Beyond ranking as Panama's number-one diving site, Isla Coiba National Park boasts fine beaches backed by dense jungle. Tiny islands such as Granito de Oro are so idyllic that midsize cruise ships make a stop here. Even the beach fronting the park station seems too perfect to be true.</p> <p>Las Lajas, Chiriquí Province: It's not the most beautiful beach in</p>

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	<p>Panama, but the water is the perfect temperature and produces just the right amount of waves for bodysurfing - though there's little current. All of which means that Las Lajas is ideal for swimming, and since the beach measures more than 13km in length, you can walk forever. Rustic shacks and cheap restaurants are clustered on the beach at the end of the road, but it's best to bring your own snacks. If you're looking for a beach closer to David (and Boquete), try La Barqueta. Strong currents at this black-sand beach mean the water is not ideal for swimming, but it is lengthy like Las Lajas and good for walking, and there is a nature reserve here, too.</p> <p>Playa Los Destiladores & Playa Venado, Azuero Peninsula: Of the multitude of beaches lining the coast of the Azuero Peninsula, these two are the cleanest and the most attractive, and they are within a 20-minute drive from each other. A protected cove at Playa Venado means it's calm enough for a toddler, and farther east crashing waves have converted the beach into a surfing hot spot. A major bonus here is the nearby picturesque town of Pedasí, and three gorgeous lodges.</p> <p>Santa Clara & Farallón, Pacific Coast: These two are the most appealing beaches along the Pacific Coast, and the best for swimming. Best of all, they lie within a 2-hour drive of Panama City. The beaches' water is bluer and the sand cleaner and whiter than its neighbours closer to the city. The Decameron Resort produces throngs of beachgoers at Farallón, but for the most part this long stretch of sand sees few crowds outside of weekends. Be warned however, that swimming conditions can be treacherous due to large waves and strong riptides.</p>
<p>Wildlife</p>	<p>If you're a nature lover, consider that Panama is a land bridge between North and South America, and hundreds of wildlife species - more than 900 species of birds alone - meet here at the isthmus, providing a rich environment for eco-travel.</p> <p>Panama is home to more than 225 species of mammals. While it is very unlikely that you will spot a puma, you have good odds of catching a glimpse of a monkey, coatimundi, agouti, or sloth.</p> <p>Whale watching: The migratory humpbacked whale spends the winters in the Southern Hemisphere and migrates north along the Pacific Coast from June to September. These mammals have black backs and whitish throat and chest areas. Whales breed when spending time off the coast of Panama. Humpback whales can be spotted off the shore of the Pacific Coast, around Coiba Island, the Pearl Islands, and the Azuero Peninsula.</p>

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<p>Parks</p>	<p>Natural Metropolitan Park, Panama City: Panama City is the only metropolis that boasts a tropical rainforest within its city limits. Travelers with ample time will want to visit national parks like Soberanía, but there's no denying the appeal of hopping in a cab and, within 10 minutes, exchanging the city streets for a steamy jungle teeming with wildlife.</p> <p>Volcán Barú National Park (Chiriquí Highlands): The rugged, 3,505m (11,500-ft.) Barú Volcano, the highest point in the country, is this national park's centerpiece and a "bioclimatic island." It's home to a wild, dense rainforest packed with bamboo gardens and towering trees dripping with vines and sprouting bromeliads and orchids from their trunks and branches. In higher reaches, an intermittent cloud forest evokes an eerie, prehistoric ambience. The park is very popular with bird-watchers, who come to glimpse the famous resplendent quetzal. One of the most enjoyable full-day hikes in Panama is here along the Quetzal Trail, which links the towns of Guadalupe/Cerro Punta with Boquete, and the crystalline rivers that descend from the volcano provide thrilling white-water rafting. On a clear day, hikers can see both oceans from the summit of the volcano.</p> <p>La Amistad International Park (Chiriquí Highlands): Like Isla Coiba, UNESCO rated this park a World Heritage Site because it is one of the most biodiverse regions in the Americas. The park is "international" because half of it is in Costa Rica, and it's managed by both nations. Characterized by virgin forests, La Amistad's rugged Talamanca Range is home to more than 400 species of birds and 100 species of mammals, many of them endangered. The park is mostly inaccessible, except near Cerro Punta, where there are several outstanding walking trails suitable for all ability levels, and enjoyable rain or shine.</p>
<p>Gardens</p>	<p>Summit Garden & Zoo near Panama City: Wildlife is notorious for shying away from humans, but you can view jaguars, monkeys, tapirs, harpy eagles, and other species endemic to Panama at this zoo. It's not a fancy attraction, but there are extensive lawns and gardens, and the zoo is undergoing a progressive renovation during the next few years.</p>
<p>Historical Sites</p>	<p>Panama Viejo was the first city of Panama, founded by the Spanish back in 1519. It was the first city founded at the Pacific and it became rapidly a prosperous point where gold from the southern colonies would make it to the Caribbean and later on to Europe. It was attacked by pirates several times, the last of them by Pirate Henry Morgan who destroyed it forever in 1671. In 1673, a new city was built, but this time using the knowledge painfully acquired by experience. The Spanish by then knew well the risks of settling cities in tropical swamps: mosquitoes, tropical diseases and difficulty to defend its territory. The</p>

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	<p>second city was founded at the opposite side of the bay in very different conditions: a rocky peninsula easy to defend and with crossed winds that would ensure the health of its inhabitants. This city is known today as Casco Antiguo, and it is here where the Republic of Panama was born as it is known today</p> <p>Currently a UNESCO protected site, Casco Antiguo (or Casco Viejo) is Panama City's second touristic destination and the reason is that its buildings reflect the diversity of Panamanian society. Although a Spanish colonial city, because of several fires and the influence of merchants from all around the world, it became a vibrant city with styles ranging from Caribbean to French and even Art Deco. Today, Casco Antiguo undergoes an interesting revitalization process.</p>
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OTHER ACTIVITIES	
Shopping	<p>The major shopping malls in Panama City offer excellent quality and national and international brands. A principal shopping avenue is Vía España, where both high- and low-end shops vie for business, as well as grocery stores and pharmacies. Designer stores are located around Calle 53 in Marbella and in the nearby World Trade Center's Centro de Comercio. Also try Plaza Paitilla in the Paitilla neighborhood. You'll find electronics shops around Vía Estronga, in the Financial District.</p>
Markets	<p>The Mercado de Mariscos, located on Avenida Balboa and Calle 15 Este, is distribution headquarters for fresh seafood pulled from the Pacific and Caribbean. It's a vibrant market with lots of action as fishmongers shout while they deftly fillet corvina, tuna, octopus, and more. You can dine here at their upstairs restaurant. Several food stands sell seafood snacks like ceviche. Next door is the brand-new Mercado Público, the covered farmer's market of Panama City with exotic fruits and vegetables, meats, dried spices and nuts, and a food court of fondas, or cheap food stands serving Panamanian fare. Don't forget to bring your camera.</p> <p>Artesanía, or indigenous handicrafts, are the number-one buy here in Panama. Molas, the reversed appliqué panels made by Kuna Indian women, rank high on the list of popularity for souvenirs and gifts, either sewn onto a beach bag, as a shirt, or sold individually for you to frame or stitch onto anything you'd like (pillowcases are an ideally sized canvas). Other popular handicrafts, such as tagua nuts or vegetable ivory carved into tiny figurines, Ngobe-Buglé dresses, and Emberá Indian baskets and masks, can be found at the following markets. These markets are open daily with the general hours 8 or 9am to 5 or 6pm (until about 2pm Sun). The Mercado Nacional de Artesanías, in Panama Viejo next to the visitor centre, is expansive and sells handicrafts from around the country. In Balboa, on Avenida Arnulfo</p>

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	<p>Arias Madrid and Amador, is a small YMCA Handicrafts Market, with mostly Kuna and Emberá indigenous arts and crafts, and clothing. A little farther east and up Avenida Arnulfo Arias Madrid is the Kuna Cooperative, featuring Kuna handicrafts. This market is fun for kids because Kuna women offer to affix their traditional beaded bands onto the arms and legs of tourists, just as they themselves wear them.</p> <p>For the more adventurous traveler seeking an "authentic" shopping experience, you can't beat Avenida Central, a pedestrian street and market that stretches from where Justo Arosemena meets Vía España to the Santa Ana Plaza, and that is near Casco Viejo. It's a scrappy, run-down neighborhood, with cheap stores, outdoor fruit and vegetable markets, and a bustling fusion of ethnic groups shopping for a bargain. Visually, it's the most colorful neighborhood in town. Apart from \$1-and-under kind of shops, vendors lining the streets hawk clothing, accessories, plastic gizmos, and knickknacks. Shopkeepers like to blare music or announce their deals through megaphones to pull buyers in. It's a slice of everyday Panama, but it's also street theatre and people-watching as fascinating as catching sight of Kuna Indian women lining up at McDonald's.</p>
Nightlife	<p>You don't have to experience 5 days of Carnaval to know that Panamanians are party-loving people. When the sun goes down, Panama City lights up with a vibrant scene that caters to all ages, interests, and levels of stamina.</p> <p>Nightspots are concentrated in four neighbourhoods: Bella Vista (also called Calle Uruguay), the Amador Causeway, Marbella (Calle 53 Este), and Casco Viejo.</p>
Spas	<p>The recently opened Inter-Continental Playa Bonita Resort & Spa (www.ichotelsgroup.com) is located on the Pacific, just a 30-minute drive from Panama City. The plush beach resort has a sybaritic spa facility with all the trimmings; services are booked individually, or as part of a package that combines fruit- and chocolate-infused skin treatments, massage, aromatherapy, and body wraps.</p> <p>Decapolis Radisson (www.radisson.com), a sleek, trendy hotel, has the Aqua Spa, the top spa in Panama City in terms of service and hip decor, and you don't have to be a guest to book an appointment. They offer a full range of treatments and a stylish beauty parlor for one-stop makeovers.</p> <p>Gamboa Rainforest Resort (www.gamboaresort.com) is the best-known spa in Panama. The top-notch service, along with the recently renovated premises, make this one of the best spas in Panama. Expect traditional massages, body scrubs, and facials. If you're not staying at the resort, you can visit the spa anyway, and combine it with a bike ride and lunch.</p>

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Casinos	<p>Gambling is legal in Panama, and virtually every major hotel in the city has an adjoining casino. You'll find slot machines, video poker, gaming tables, sports betting, and special shows and parties.</p> <p>The hottest casino at the moment is at the Veneto Hotel & Casino. The Veneto has a sophisticated gaming area and often hosts over-the-top parties such as E! Entertainment's Wild On.</p>
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CUISINE	
Food	<p>Panama is a melting pot of ethnicities, and its cuisine is accordingly influenced by its diverse population. Within Panama City, travelers will find something from every corner of the world, including French, Japanese, Italian, Thai, Middle Eastern, and Chinese food - all of it very good and true to its roots. In regional areas, traditional Panamanian cuisine is an overlapping mix of Afro-Caribbean, indigenous, and Spanish cooking influences incorporating a variety of tropical fruits, vegetables, and herbs. Most Panamanian restaurants are casual - diners, beachfront cafes, and roadside fondas (food stands). A large U.S. population has spawned North American cafes and bistros serving burgers and the like, and fast-food chains are plentiful in Panama City.</p>
Drinks	<p>When in Panama, do as the locals do and down an icy cold local beer. Beer is Panama's most popular alcoholic drink, and there is a wide variety of national brands to sample, such as Balboa, Atlas, Panamá, Soberana, and Cristal - all light pale lagers, none of which are particularly outstanding, but all taste divine in a hot, sticky climate. International brands such as Heineken, Corona, and Guinness can be found even in small-town markets.</p> <p>Panama's most famous drink is seco, a sugar-cane-distilled alcohol produced in Herrera and commonly served with milk and ice. You won't find seco in trendy bars or high-end restaurants; it's consumed mostly in rural communities and cantinas. Also popular in Panama are rum, vodka, and scotch.</p>
Restaurants	<p>There's a huge range of dining opportunities from roadside stalls to first class restaurants. Here's some recommendations from our friends at Frommer's guides:</p> <p>Manolo Caracol (Panama City; tel. 228-4640): The city's most innovative restaurant features an adventurous and creative daily menu that embraces in-season products and the freshest and most exotic fish of any restaurant in town. Sit back in the colonial, artsy ambience and wait for a "surprise" of 12 courses to be slowly ushered to your table - you never know what you're going to get, but you know it will be good.</p> <p>Market (Panama City; tel. 264-9401): This snazzy new restaurant is one of the most popular dining spots in Panama City, and it's easy to</p>

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	<p>see why. Contemporary, yet classy, Market serves up some of the best burgers and steaks in Panama City.</p> <p>Palms (Panama City; tel. 265-7256): It's one of the hippest restaurants in Panama City, with a tropical-chic and sleek decor, and delicious, well-conceived dishes that expertly blend Mediterranean, Asian, and Latin American flavors and ingredients. Upstairs is an ultra-modern bar for a nightcap.</p> <p>Madame Chang (Panama City; tel. 269-1313): Few diners are aware that some of the best Chinese food outside of China is here in Panama, and Madame Chang is where you come to savor it. The Peking duck is the restaurant's showcase dish. The owners have merged Old China with new, both in terms of cuisine and their smart-casual atmosphere.</p> <p>La Casa de Lourdes (El Valle de Antón; tel. 983-6450): The cuisine is so to-die-for good that some residents of Panama City endure the 4-hour round-trip to El Valle de Antón just to have Sunday lunch. Ultra-fresh ingredients and exotic fruits are used to create updated takes on Panamanian and Latin American fare. Dining is alfresco: under the archways of a Tuscan-style manor house, next to an outdoor swimming pool.</p> <p>Restaurant Vista Mar (Vista Mar; tel. 215-1111): This restaurant is run by a renowned French chef, and sports a chic Moroccan decor, plus outdoor dining with ocean views. The Mediterranean-style seafood is well-conceived and bursting with flavor. The restaurant is within the Vista Mar residential community, on the Pacific Coast.</p>
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MORE INFO	
Brochures	Online brochures are at www.visitpanama.com
Website	The Panama Tourist Board , known as the Autoridad de Turismo de Panama (ATP), has a website and toll-free number for North Americans tel. 800/231-0568 www.visitpanama.com ; English-language brochures are available. The website has links to other helpful sites. Make sure to check out www.panamainfo.com as well; it's probably the best travel site currently available on Panama and they also publish a quarterly magazine with tourist, real estate, and restaurant information.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES	<p>I have taken my family to Panama – check out my Travel Blog at http://www.chrisrobinsontravelshow.ca/Blog/tabid/400/EntryId/62/Panama.aspx</p> <p>I have also created a Pinterest board on Panama to add a visual taste: http://pinterest.com/TravelShow/panama</p>
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COLOMBIA – CARTAGENA & SAN ANDRES

Colombia is bursting onto the Tourism scene with its rich heritage, undiscovered Caribbean coastline and perfect weather way south of the hurricane belt.

The magnificent destination of **Cartagena** in Colombia is a UNESCO World Heritage Site – and Cartagena promises an extraordinary vacation. The colonial city within stone fortifications offers historical treasures. And there are modern, luxurious hotels, beautiful beaches, diverse restaurants, exciting excursions and a vibrant nightlife.

The city was one of the first sanctuaries of freed African slaves in the Americas and is currently populated by an ethnic mix representative of Colombia's own variety. Cartagena is located on Colombia's northern coast, facing the Caribbean Sea. Nearby coral reefs, powdery beaches, impressive mangroves, and waterways complement the historic and urban beauty.

The Colombian **Island of San Andres** is a miniature paradise in the southernmost Caribbean. Perfect beaches, warm waters that are home to many fish and coral, excellent water-sports, diving and ecotourism await you by day - and music and dancing by night. Nolitours flies direct to San Andres Island from Montreal in the winter. (see special section later in these notes for more on San Andres)

Nolitours also flies directly to Cartagena, offering all inclusive packages as well as a number of spectacular excursions from Cartagena:

Cartagena City Tour: visit fascinating sights such as the La Popa Convent, San Felipe Castle (a fortress built in 1657 by the Spanish for protection against pirates while shipping gold out to Europe) and Los Zapatos Viejos (a massive sculpture of an old pair of shoes - created by Hector Lombana in memory of a local poet).

Cartagena's 500-hundred year-old coralstone forts and great parts of its walled city are admirably intact and represent some of the finest examples of civil and military architecture of the Spanish colonial times.

Santa Marta City Tour: visit the oldest city and South America and Simon Bolivar's last home amongst other sights. Stroll through "America's Pearl" Bay and finish up with a visit to the Decameron Galeon Hotel for lunch and the opportunity to swim in the ocean or pool.

Rosario Islands: Tour a spectacular coral reef and bathe in a the

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	<p>turquoise sea as you visit these beautiful islands. Also experience a dolphin show.</p> <p>Snorkelling Tour: Admire the exotic marine life off the beaches of Baru and Rosario Islands.</p> <p>Dolphinarium and Eco Tour: Head to Isla Palma with white sand beaches, surrounded by coral reefs. Swim in crystal clear waters, explore the mangroves and enjoy a spectacular dolphin show.</p> <p>Archeological and Cultural Adventure: Travel to the town of San Juan Nepomuceno. Then stop at the handicraft centre at San Jacinto. Visit the Ethnic Archeological Museum and attend a regional folk dance show</p>
Location	Cartagena is positioned on the northern Caribbean coast of Colombia. Colombia itself is situated in South America, and bordered to the north by the Caribbean Sea; Panamá and the Pacific Ocean are to the west, Brazil and Venezuela to the east, and Peru and Ecuador to the south.
Geography	<p>You'll probably be spending most of your time in the small historic Old Town, where most tourist sites are located, or at the city's beaches. The modern part of the city has a Miami-style resort feel and consists of Bocagrande, El Laguito, and Castillo Grande. This is where you'll find modern high-rises, all inclusive resorts, many of the city's top-notch hotels, and some of Cartagena's better beaches. The outer walled city consists of the Getsemaní neighborhood, a poorer, less glamorous version of the inner walled city. However, this is rapidly up-and-coming. The exclusive neighborhood of Manga, about a 5-minute taxi ride from the Old Town, is home to Cartagena's yacht club.</p> <p>The best way to explore the picturesque inner walled Old Town is on foot. You can stop and take in Cartagena's imposing churches, people-watch in its many plazas, and enjoy a bit of shopping.</p>
Name	<p>The Spanish colonial city was founded on June 1, 1533 and named after Cartagena in Spain.</p> <p>The country name "Colombia" comes from Christopher Columbus.</p>
Population	The city had a population of nearly 900,000 in the last census, making it the fifth-largest city in Colombia.
Language	Spanish, although much English is spoken in the resort areas.
Currency	<p>The Colombian peso (COL\$) is the official currency. Money is denominated in notes of 1,000, 2,000, 5,000, 10,000, 20,000, and 50,000, and coins of 20, 50, 100, 200, and 500 pesos.</p> <p>Currently, the exchange rate is COL\$1,830 to \$1 as at 19th October 2013.</p> <p>Unlike in other Latin-American countries, the U.S. dollar is not widely accepted in Colombia, except in a few super-high-end establishments.</p>

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	You can convert your currency in upscale hotels, at casas de cambio (money-exchange houses), at most banks, and at the airport. Credit cards , particularly Visa and MasterCard, are generally accepted in midrange and upscale shops, as well as at upscale restaurants and hotels around the country. In rural areas and small towns, you are unlikely to find establishments that accept credit cards.
Tipping	In midrange and expensive restaurants, there is usually a 10% tip included in the bill. It's not common to tip in budget restaurants or in taxis, so there's no need to do so unless you're feeling generous.
Government	Presidential republic.
Documentation	Currently a Passport but no visa is required for Canadians – but always check with your travel agent ahead of travel.
Time zone	EST: Colombia is on the same time zone as Ontario and Quebec, being almost directly due south.
Health	There are good health facilities in Cartagena. As South America is a more exotic destination, I recommend that travellers consult with their family doctor with regard to the possible need for inoculations such as yellow fever or anti-malarial pills, though no vaccines are required to enter Colombia.
Safety tips	There's no doubt that Colombia has had safety issues in the past – however, this has really applied to other parts of this large country and anyway the security issues have been largely dealt with by the present government. No place of course is entirely free of crime, so you should always take sensible precautions. The fact that a major tour company like Transat and Nolitours is sending charter planes into the destination – and that 300,000 cruise-liner passengers a year now visit Cartagena – tells you that you need have no additional safety concerns in planning a trip to Cartagena and this part of South America.

CLIMATE	
General climate	Cartagena has a pleasantly warm climate, temperature average 28°C to 30°C throughout most of the year.
Today's weather	Today, October 19 th 2013, the temperature is 29C with a sun and showers mix.
Best time to visit	Winter is the best time for Canadians to visit – the winter weather is idyllic in Cartagena and there are direct charter flights from Toronto to Cartagena.

GETTING AROUND	
Getting There	Nolitours features weekly flights with Transat this winter to Colombia: Thursday departures from Toronto direct to Cartagena from December 19th 2013 to April 3rd 2014

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	<p>Friday departures from Montreal to Cartagena from November 15th 2013 to March 28th 2014</p> <p>Monday departures from Montreal to San Andres Island from December 23rd 2013 to April 7th 2014</p> <p>Flight time is 5.5 hours to Cartagena and 4.25 hours to San Andres</p> <p>Cartagena's Rafael Núñez Airport is about 3km from the historic Old Town of Cartagena.</p>
Cities	<p>Apart from Cartagena which is explored in more depth in these notes, Colombia has many other cities worthy of exploring:</p> <p>The capital, Santafé de Bogotá, is a unique, modern and thoroughly charming city. Everywhere you look different panoramas unfold within its colourful, mountainous setting.</p> <p>One of the oldest cities in Colombia, Santa Marta, lies in the midst of a singular landscape, facing a heavenly bay on the Caribbean coast. This congenial little city can easily be toured on foot, and its main centres of interest adjoin the beach.</p> <p>Nicknamed the "city of eternal spring," Medellín is the birthplace of world-renowned painter Fernando Botero. It is also Colombia's principal cultural centre, where art galleries can be found in all the big hotels.</p> <p>Middle-class and a bit straight-laced, Pereira stands out for its monuments, murals, parks, and streets. The public scribes on the sidewalk with their typewriters also add a quaint touch to the city. For only a few pesos, they will pen love letters or formal requests, as the case may be.</p> <p>Santiago de Cali, stretches languorously between the wide-open arms of the two cordilleras, and basks in an enviably sunny climate. It is nicknamed the "city of women" because of its many beautiful women. This city features enchanting colonial buildings, long shady avenues and patios overflowing with flowers.</p> <p>With its charming atmosphere, Popayán is one of the country's older cities that is most typically Colombian. The downtown area is a veritable history book; all its buildings are like works of art in an outdoor exhibition. The churches, hotels and residences are lovingly polished gems. San Agustín, located 110 km from Popayán, is undoubtedly the most fascinating archeological site in South America.</p>
Distances	<p>Cartagena is 473km NW of Medellín and 658km NW of Bogotá, Colombia's capital city.</p>
Ferries	<p>There are boats for the offshore islands and for trips along the coast.</p>

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	There's even a hovercraft service to Isla Baru which is exciting if a little expensive at \$60.
Trains	There is no train service operating here.
Car Rental	Budget, Hertz and National are represented in the city, but car rental is not recommended for any but the bravest visitors!
Buses	To reach destinations outside of the Old Town such as the San Felipe fort, there are many buses running all over the city. Ask the driver or other people who are waiting which bus goes to your destination. Chiva Bus is a must do fun activity in Cartagena. These are open air, colorful buses going through the city loaded with people having fun, drinking and enjoying the loud beat of local music. A good activity for couples, families or groups. There are various pickup locations at mostly tourist hotels.

ACCOMMODATION TYPES	There's a wide range of accommodation options here from all inclusive beach resorts to small hostels in the Old Town. See the prize hotel description later in these notes for a recommended example of the former.
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LIFESTYLES	
Kids	The beach activities and boat trips to the islands should keep the youngsters happy. Many of the all inclusive resorts also feature Kids Clubs and babysitting.
Teens	Active teens will love this destination. From snorkeling and diving to windsurfing and bargaining for souvenirs. And then there are the best forts on the Spanish Main to explore!
Romance	Cartagena, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is the Venice of Colombia and the country's most romantic city, with one of the most impressive old towns in the Western Hemisphere. With just the right mix of sun, sand, and colonial charm, it's likely to be the highlight of your trip.
Honeymoons & Weddings	Cartagena is Colombia's top honeymoon destination and is full of romance, five-star hotels, and excellent dining options. For a ride in a horse-drawn carriage, ask as a hotel or at a carriage-station - there are several in the historic centre. The service is available by day or night inside and outside the old city.
Seniors	Seniors will relish the upscale resorts that are comfortable bases from which to explore one of the most fascinating cities on the continent. There are plenty of excursions available that make seeing the sights a breeze.

UNIQUES	Cartagena has more nicknames than any other city I know! The Heroic City The Door of the Americas
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	<p>Capital of the Caribbean The Mother City The Walled City The Key of the West Indies The Fort of the Kingdom Best Fortified City of the Americas</p>
Surprising	<p>Colombia is the only South American country to have coastlines on both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean.</p>
History	<p>Cartagena was founded on June 1, 1533 by Spanish commander Pedro de Heredia, in the former location of the indigenous Caribbean Calamarí village. The town was named after Cartagena, Spain, where most of Heredia's sailors had resided.</p> <p>Initially, the city had fewer than 2000 inhabitants and only one church. The dramatically increasing fame and wealth of the prosperous city turned it into an attractive plunder site for pirates and corsairs – French privateers licensed by their king. 30 years after its founding, the city was pillaged by the French nobleman Jean-François Roberval. The city set about strengthening its defences and surrounding itself with walled compounds and castles. Martin Cote, a Basque from Biscay, attacked years later. A few months after the disaster of the invasion of Cote, a fire destroyed the city and forced the creation of a firefighting squad, the first in the Americas.</p> <p>Many pirates planned to attack Cartagena, which became more and more interesting to them. In 1568, Sir John Hawkins of England tried to trick Gov. Martín de las Alas to go against Spanish law and open a foreign fair in the city to sell goods, planning to ravage the port afterwards. The governor declined, and Hawkins besieged the city, but failed to reduce it.</p> <p>In 1586, Sir Francis Drake, a nephew of Hawkins, came with a strong fleet and quickly took the city. The governor, Pedro Fernández de Busto, fled with the Archbishop to the neighboring town of Turbaco, and from there negotiated the costly ransom for the city: 107,000 Spanish Eight Reales of the time, or around 200 million in today's US dollars. Drake had destroyed one-quarter of the city, the developing Palace of the Township, and the recently finished cathedral.</p> <p>After this disaster, Spain poured millions every year into the city for its protection, beginning with Gov. Francisco de Murga's planning of the walls and forts; this practice was called Situado. The magnitude of this subsidy is shown by comparison: between 1751 and 1810, the city received the sum of 20,912,677 Spanish reales, the equivalent of some 2 trillion dollars today. The city recovered quickly from the attack and occupation by Drake and kept growing, and continued to attract attention from its opponents.</p> <p>The Raid on Cartagena in 1697 by Sir Bernard Desjean, Baron de</p>

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Pointis and Jean Baptiste Ducasse was an all-out invasion that was politically motivated. Absent a male successor to the Spanish Habsburg throne, King Louis XIV wanted his grandson Felipe V to assert the right of succession, and the taking of Cartagena de Indias could help significantly. The political purpose behind the invasion was somewhat undermined by Ducasse, the governor of Saint-Domingue – today's Haiti – who brought his soldiers with a plan to steal, but ended with pirates and thieves destroying the city. Entry to the city was not easy because of the recently finished first stage of walls and forts, which slowed the invasion and made it costly. While Desjean only asked for 250,000 Spanish reales in ransom, Ducasse stayed a few months and dishonored the baron's promise to respect the churches and holy places. He left the inhabitants with nothing.

During the 17th century, the Spanish Crown paid for the services of prominent European military engineers to construct fortresses. Today these are Cartagena's most significant identifiable features.

Engineering works took well over 208 years and ended with some eleven kilometres of walls surrounding the city, including the Castillo San Felipe de Barajas, named in honor of Spain's King Philip IV. It was built during the governorship of Pedro Zapata de Mendoza, Marquis of Barajas and was constructed to repel land attacks. It is equipped with sentry boxes, has buildings for food and weapons storage, and contains underground tunnels connecting the fortifications.

When the defenses were finished in 1756, the city was considered impregnable. Legend has it that Charles III of Spain, while reviewing in Madrid the Spanish defense expenditures for Havana and Cartagena de Indias, looked through his spyglass and remarked, "This is outrageous! For this price those castles should be seen from here!" Cartagena was a major trading port, especially for precious metals. Gold and silver from the mines in the New Granada and Peru were loaded in Cartagena on the galleons bound for Spain via Havana. Cartagena was also a slave port; Cartagena and Veracruz, (Mexico), were the only cities authorized to trade African slaves. The first slaves were transported by Pedro de Heredia and were used as cane cutters to open roads, as laborers to destroy the tombs of the aboriginal population of Sinú, and to construct buildings and fortresses. The agents of the Portuguese company Cacheu sold slaves from Cartagena for working in mines in Venezuela, the West Indies, the Nuevo Reino de Granada and the Viceroyalty of Perú.

On February 5, 1610, the Catholic Monarchs established the **Inquisition** Holy Office Court in Cartagena de Indias by a royal decree issued by King Philip II. With Lima and Peru, it was one of the three seats of the Inquisition in the Americas. The Inquisition Palace, finished in 1770, preserves its original features of colonial times. When

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	Cartagena declared its complete independence from Spain on November 11, 1811, the inquisitors were urged to leave the city. The Inquisition operated again after the Reconquest in 1815, but it disappeared entirely when Spain surrendered six years later to the troops led by Simón Bolívar, the Liberator of South America.
Books	Frommer's South America South American Handbook – Ben Box Andes – Michael Jacobs: a new travelogue which includes a passage on Cartagena and is reviewed at http://www.pinterest.com/pin/228768856041917440/
1000 Places to See Before You Die	Cartagena has its own entry in this book, where the Ciudad Vieja, or Old Town, is described as “an open-air living museum”. It's one of just two entries for Colombia, the other being the spectacular Gold Museum in Bogota .
Must Sees	In 1984, Cartagena's colonial walled city and fortress were designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. La Popa , Cartagena's highest point, is where you'll find the convent of Nuestra Señora de La Candelaria. El Castillo de San Felipe de Borajas is another Cartagena must-see, and one of the military wonders of the world. The castle/fort was built (1536-1657) to protect the city from attack. Be sure to check out its dark underground tunnels and peek through its many lookouts.

SPORTS ACTIVITIES	
Golf	The exclusive golf course Karibana has one of the best 18-hole golf courses in the country and is situated close to the major resorts in Cartagena.
Fishing	Fishing is available from numerous operators and is excellent, both in the Caribbean and in the swamps along the coast.
Horse riding	Horseback riding is available through many of the resorts.
Hiking	Long walks along the beach to the many fishing villages are possible and exploring the Old Town of Cartagena is best done by foot.
Cycling	Colombia has a strong biking community and bike rentals are possible from several locations.
Diving	This is an excellent location at which to learn to dive or if you are already qualified, to enjoy spectacular dives off some the nearby Caribbean islands. Nolitours offers an excursion that is great for first time divers.

CULTURE	
Arts	Cartagena is the Arts Capital of Colombia as the various arts festivals

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	noted below attest. The Modern Art Gallery is the best in the country.
Music	<p>The cumbia is the traditional Colombian musical genre best known in the world. Its origins date back to Guinean dances. It emerged from musical and cultural syncretism between Indians, Africans and Europeans in the Magdalena delta region. Cumbia combines their contributions. It is performed in groups by couples who dance in a circle to the beat of the drums and gaita music and hold a lit candle in their hands. Nowadays, vallenato and national pop music are the stars of the world's musical scene. Colombian music is an always-reinventing melting pot of tendencies and rhythms.</p> <p>Cartagena International Music Festival. World-renowned musicians and orchestras flock to crumbling, colonial Cartagena on Colombia's Caribbean coast for the Cartagena International Music Festival each January. The Adolfo Mejía Theatre, Plaza San Pedro Claver and Plaza de la Trinidad are just some of the concert venues. Organised by the Victor Salvi Foundation, run by the harpist Victor Salvi and his Colombian wife, the festival has filled some of Cartagena's most historic venues since it began in 2007.</p>
Films	<p>Cartagena de Indias International Film Festival Feb – March Catch films from Colombia, Latin America and across the world at the annual Cartagena de Indias International Film Festival. Heredia Theatre and the Naval Museum are among the venues and open-air screenings take place in the old city too.</p> <p>Gabriel García Marquez's novel Love in the Time of Cholera although set in an unnamed city, is obviously in Cartagena. The 2007 film movie of the novel was filmed in Cartagena.</p>
Museums	<p>Cartagena is a city full of history, which can be visited at the Palacio de la Inquisición (Palace of Inquisition), where the Spanish Inquisition tortured, judged and convicted men accused of crimes against religion. It is situated in 'Plaza de Bolivar', in the historic centre. There's also the Gold Museum, the Naval Museum and the Modern Art Museum.</p>
Festivals	<p>Hay Festival Cartagena January Latin American and global literati swarm the magical, crumbling old town and modern part of Colombia's colonial coastal city during the Hay Festival Cartagena. The Colombian branch of the famous literary festival hosts talks and readings with authors and poets. Head to Plaza Santo Domingo, Casa Mapfre, Adolfo Mejía Theatre and</p>

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	<p>other city venues for daily scintillating talks, discussions and readings on a range of subjects that are translated where necessary for both an English- and Spanish-speaking audience.</p> <p>There are also film screenings and music concerts in the evenings and art and photography and science exhibitions in Cartagena History Museum, Cartagena Museum of Fine Arts and other cultural spaces. Look out for events with major world-renowned authors, like Mario Vargas Llosa, Ian McEwan and Michael Ondaatje.</p> <p>The Hay Festivalito spreads the buzz of the large festival to nearby towns and communities - El Pozón, Membrillal, La Boquilla, Las Palmeras and Boston - and lays on free talks and workshops with top writers and musicians for children and teenagers.</p>
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ATTRACTIONS	<p>About 16 km north of Cartagena is the Volcán del Totumo, a 15m high mud volcano. You can enter the crater and take a mud bath (entrance C\$2.000), which is enormous fun and highly recommended. The nearby laguna then serves as a natural bath for washing off the mud.</p>
Beaches	<p>If you don't have time to head to Las Islas del Rosario, visit Cartagena's main beaches: Bocagrande, El Laguito, and Castillo Grande, in the south, and, in the north, La Boquilla and Marbella.</p> <p>Playa Blanca is widely regarded as the best beach of Cartagena, but is not that easy to reach. With its white sand and crystal clear water it is probably one of the best beaches in Colombia.</p>
Parks	<p>Las Islas del Rosario, a national park popular with tourists, is famous for its coral reefs, crystalline waters, and beautiful beaches. The islands are about 45km from the city and can only be reached by boat. You can arrange a trip to Las Islas del Rosario through your hotel or by heading to the Muelle Turístico, where you can buy tickets directly. Your hotel will also be able to arrange tours directly. Boat trips generally cost between COL\$35,000 and COL\$60,000, though you will also have to pay a national park tax of COL\$9,400.</p> <p>Your boat will most likely take you to the Acuario San Martín on the Isla San Martín de Pajarales, where you can enjoy a dolphin show and observe other marine animals. Another choice on Isla San Martín de Pajarales is to go snorkeling. The island has excellent coral reefs, and if you've already seen your share of aquariums and dolphin shows, go for the snorkeling.</p> <p>After visiting the aquarium, most boats will head to Isla de Barú, where you'll have a typical Cartagena-Caribbean lunch, complete with coconut rice, fried plantains, and a whole fish (eyes and all). Your tour will give you about 3 hours on Barú, where you can go swimming, sunbathe, or explore the island.</p>
Gardens	<p>Botanical gardens Jardín Botánico de Guillermo Piñeres</p> <p>A pleasant escape from the city rush, 18 km out of Cartagena close to</p>

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	<p>“Turbaco”, a small town 20 km from the centre of Cartagena. Take a bus to the bus terminal and get off at “la Bomba de Amparo”, a big gasolin station 25 minutes out of the centre. Together with your entry ticket you get leaflet which lists about 250 plants identified in the gardens, including some varieties of coca plants.</p>
<p>Historical Sites</p>	<p>Enter the city through the historic Torre del Reloj, one of Cartagena's most recognized architectural sites. From there, you'll find yourself in the Plaza de los Coches, where you can buy traditional Colombian and Cartagenian candy and sweets at the Portal de Los Dulces. Next head down Calle de la Amargura, past La Plaza de La Aduana (stop here if you're looking for tourist information), to La Plaza de San Pedro, where you can visit the Iglesia/Claustro/Museo San Pedro Claver, constructed in 1580, as well as the Museo de Arte Moderno, a decent modern-art museum right off the square. Walk down Calle San Juan de Dios to the Cartagena Naval Museum, where you can take in antique naval instruments and objects. Walk past La Plaza de Santa Teresa, up Calle de A. Ricaurte (which becomes Calle Santa Teresa) to Plaza de Bolívar, where you can visit the free Museo del Oro as well as the Palacio de La Inquisición and La Biblioteca Bartolomé Calvo, once Cartagena's most important libraries. Be sure not to miss Cartagena's much photographed Catedral, built in 1586, destroyed by English pirate Francis Drake, and recently remodeled and opened to the public. Now walk up Calle Nuestra Señora del Carmen before arriving at the Plaza de Santo Domingo, one of Cartagena's most popular and vibrant plazas. Be sure to visit the Iglesia/Claustro Santo Domingo, a lovely 450-year-old church. Take a break at Plaza Santo Domingo for a light lunch or snack at one of the plaza's many outdoor cafes, where you can enjoy the colonial atmosphere.</p> <p>With your energy restored, head north on Calle de la Iglesia (which becomes Calle de Don Sancocho), past El Teatro de Heredia and La Plaza del Merced, and turn right on Calle de la Merced (which becomes Calle Del Estanco del Aguardiente and Calle del Sargento Mayor). Next turn left on Calle Chochera del Hobo, where you'll find La Plaza de San Diego, with its many stores, restaurants, and the famous Hotel Santa Clara. A short walk up the Calle de las Bóvedas will take you to Las Bóvedas, a former jail, used during the independence period that has been converted into 23 souvenir shops</p>

<p>OTHER ACTIVITIES</p>	
<p>Shopping</p>	<p>If you are looking for handicrafts, head to Las Bóvedas - former jail cells turned souvenir shops. In the historic centre are also plenty of high-end boutique shops selling Colombian designer clothing, leather goods, and emeralds. For discount shopping, head to Getsemaní, where you can buy cheap clothing, shoes, and just about anything else you can</p>

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	<p>imagine.</p> <p>Emeralds are of course Colombia's most famous buy - and are available for sale all over Cartagena, including polished and uncut loose emeralds and beautiful jewelry. The prices are extremely reasonable and the variety available is extensive in the old walled city. The stores that sell emeralds and emerald jewelry use various names such as "Taller y Fabrica de Joyas" (workshop and manufacturer of jewelry), "Museo de Artesanias y Esmeraldas" (museum of crafts and emeralds) or simply "Joyeria" (jewelry).</p>
Markets	<p>Bazurto Market in Cartagena is a fun place to lose yourself among the colours and scents of this bustling local market full of produce from the surrounding tropical farms.</p>
Nightlife	<p>Half the reason Cartagena is Colombia's top tourist destination is because of its vibrant nightlife. Cartagena's party scene is well developed with something for everyone - whether you want to sip cocktails on the beach, salsa dance Caribbean-style, or jam to '80s rock. Much of the nightlife is centred on Calle del Arsenal, in the Getsemaní neighbourhood, though there are also several party options in the inner walled city.</p> <p>Mr. Babilla, Calle Arsenal no. 9B-137, plays crossover music and is by far Cartagena's most famous nightclub. The eclectic decorations, tasty cocktails, and party-hard atmosphere bring in Colombia's cream of the crop and a large foreign clientele. La Carbonera, Av. del Arsenal no. 9A-47, another popular nightclub in the Getsemaní neighborhood, plays a little bit of everything.</p> <p>Café Havana, Calle Media Luna and Calle del Guerrero, in the Getsemaní neighborhood, is dedicated to Cuban music. This place also offers decent sandwiches and light fare, and it's one of the more atmospheric places in town. There is often live music and the clientele tends to be foreigners.</p>

CUISINE	
Food	<p>The kitchens of the Colombian Caribbean blend many intense flavours from the wide variety of produce in the fertile soils of the region, in combination with poultry, red meat and river-fresh and salt-water fish and seafood.</p> <p>Cartagena's cooks naturally start by using local techniques of fried dishes with rice, soups and dressings; but they also adopt things from other climes around the world, such as meat cooked over a low fire, with vegetables, all with delicious and distinctive sauces and strong flavours. One of the best traditions of Cartagena's cooking is arroz con carne en tabaquito. It is made from diced salted meta with a dressing, mixed in with rice to form a delightful savory dish with a distinctive aroma.</p>

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	You will find almost everything in the Colombia Caribbean kitchen, with every shade of taste and flavour.
Drink	<p>Coffee is of course the most famous drink produced in the country. Until you have tasted Colombian coffee made fresh in Colombia, you have not truly tasted coffee at all. It is one of the highlights of any visit to the country. On a personal note, I did not like and therefore did not drink coffee at all at the time of my first visit to Colombia. I have drunk coffee ever since...in part trying to recapture that wonderful aroma and taste of true Colombian coffee!</p> <p>You must try the local juices which are made from tropical fruit, such as the mamón and the corozo, when in season. Other flavors include water-melon, mango, tamarind, carambolo, peaches and plums.</p>
Restaurants	<p>La Cocina de Pepina is a typical Colombian-Caribbean restaurant in the Getsemaní district. It is an attempt to recreate the tastes of a region known as “Bolívar Grande”, now the Departments of Córdoba, Sucre and Bolívar. Plantain, yucca, yams and marrows come from the smallholdings that supply the restaurant. The dishes of “Pepina” evoke the age-old customs of the lands around the Caribbean, some drawn from the times when foods were preserved by sun and salt, such as the salazones.</p> <p>They also serve dishes based on beef, pork or chicken, placed in the sun with salt and spices. Then they are cooked with steamed vegetables and served with yucca, yams or plantains. And since they are not served with soups or rice, they are called “viudas” (“widows”).</p>

MORE INFO	
Brochures	Pick up the Nolitours Sun 2013-2014 brochure from your local travel agent.
Website	www.nolitours.com for packages to Cartagena and San Andres from

AIRLINE PRIZE PARTNER	Air Transat
Flight details	<p>Thursday departures from Toronto direct to Cartagena from December 19th 2013 to April 3rd 2014</p> <p>Friday departures from Montreal to Cartagena from November 15th 2013 to March 28th 2014</p> <p>Monday departures from Montreal to San Andres Island from December 23rd 2013 to April 7th 2014</p> <p>Flight time is 5.5 hours to Cartagena and 4.25 hours to San Andres</p>

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES	I have been fortunate enough to travel throughout Colombia, from the Venezuela border to the Ecuador border on two occasions.
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**SPECIAL FEATURE:
SAN ANDRES
ISLAND**

Vacation in the “sea of seven colours”

San Andres is 700 km from the Colombian mainland, a miniature paradise with influences from England and Spain, pirates and corsairs, blended into a rich culture which moves to the beat of reggae. Perfect beaches, excellent water-sports, diving and ecotourism.

Your first glimpse of San Andres island is the sea of seven colours, home to many-hued fish and coral, working their magic on the visitor. After an afternoon on the beach or shopping duty-free, night falls and the air is alive with music and dancing.

No-one knows exactly when the Dutch settlers arrived to set up their faros, but they were soon followed by the English and the Irish; and then came the fight with the Spaniards to keep possession of the island. But despite the comings and goings of the pirate Sir Henry Morgan between here and Jamaica, something of the Dutch culture remained in San Andres.

Then the African slaves, European settlers and Spanish colonists passed through, each leaving behind a few seeds of their wisdom, not to mention aromatic plants and some traces of their favorite foods, which have now come together to form part of one of Colombia’s richest culture: the native or **raizal tradition**.

It’s another language, another very special way of looking at life, something that has the most profound effect on the visitor – something really different. The people there speak to each other in creole, a mixture of 17th century English, Spanish and African dialects. They also speak modern English and Spanish – very useful for the visitors! This blend of cultures had a very special effect on their music, which happily combines reggae, reggaeton, raga, soca, calypso, merengue, vallenato and salsa. All kinds of music, for all kinds of dance.

As part of their dedication to the island culture, some ecotourism parks have been created, such as Granja de Job Saas and West View, where the guides will tell you not only about the natural features to be seen there but also about the values and customs they preserve. This is also where you can buy craftwork made from coconut wood and totumo, which are typical of the island.

Geography

San Andrés is the largest of the island group in the Department of the Archipelago of San Andrés, Providencia and Santa Catalina – a part of Colombia. San Andrés is located in the Caribbean Sea, about 230 km

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	<p>from the coast of Nicaragua and north-eastern Costa Rica, and 750 km northwest of the coast of Colombia.</p> <p>The island is 12.5 km in length and 3 km in width. It has an area of 26 km² within the total area of the group of islands of 45 square kilometres making it the largest island in the archipelago.</p> <p>San Andrés is crossed from south to north by a small mountain range whose highest peak is Cerro La Loma, also known as El Cliff. San Andrés' soils indicate that their formation is due to the eruption of a volcano which threw rocks older than the seafloor to the surface, creating the islands. Despite this, there is fertile soil and the soil is mostly red clay. It is easy to find small deposits of quartz on the island, especially in the neighborhood of Loma Cove. Aside from the main settlements, the island is almost entirely covered in grass, trees and other vegetation, as well as sand along the coastline rather than rocks. The central area is marked by a chain of hills (Flowers, Orange, Shingle and Lion's Hill). The island has only small, ephemeral streams draining the land area, but no major rivers.</p> <p>On the southwest coast of the island are some features, namely (from north to south) Bobby Rock, Boobie Rock, Fisher Rock and Tyler Rock. A feature named Rock Point is located on the southeastern coast. Suky Bay lies in the central western part of the island near Cove Sea Side. The northern part of the island has a beach, while the western part of the island has no beaches.</p>
Attractions	<p>Activities include a visit to San Luis, a small stretch of white sand; a tour of the island; the aquarium; Johnny Cay; the Blowing Hole; and Big Pond, a lake at the top of the island. At La Loma, visit the oldest Baptist Church in America. Enjoy partying to the rhythms of Caribbean music and savoring a typical dish at Fisherman's Place.</p>
Johnny Cay	<p>A quarter of an hour by launch from San Andres is the tiny island famous for its beaches and Coco Locos: Johnny Cay. White sand embraces the green shade of the palms. Fried mojarra fish with plantains Delicious cocktails.</p> <p>Johnny Cay is a destination of sun, sand; and for being caught up by the beat of the island music.</p> <p>The beach is perfect for walking too – you can go all round the island. In some places there are exotic coral formations with pools that reflect and merge with the deep, blue of the sky.</p> <p>The soundtrack to all this is reggae and the colours are those of the Rastafarians. Johnny Cay is an invitation to join in the beat with the islanders who attend to their visitors with a smile on their faces and a joke on their lips. And the palm leaves provide more than shade: before your eyes the local people the make them into hats, baskets and any number of woven objects.</p>
Beaches	<p>The beaches of San Andres are bathed by a seven-colour sea made</p>

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	<p>placid and safe by coral barriers. The following are worth mentioning: Bahía Sardina (Spratt Bight) located in the northern part of the island, near the main hotel and tourist sector. It is a city beach with white sand shaded by palms and a nice view of the Johnny Cay Island. San Luis Beach is located only ten minutes by car or bus from downtown San Andres. This is an option for resting on a beach with a more isolated and tranquil atmosphere.</p>
<p>Coconut Handicrafts</p>	<p>In the year 1853, following several social and economic upheavals, the cultivation of coconut palms displaced the cultivation of cotton in the Archipelago of San Andrés. From then on, the islands began to smell and taste of coconut. Not only did coconuts become the main characters in the gastronomy of the islands; they also became the basic material for the handicrafts of the region. The shell of the coconut is the part most used for handicrafts. These are primarily bowls, sauceboats, spoons, necklaces, earrings, bracelets, barrettes, card holders, belts, dishes, coasters, cups, sugar bowls, and lamps. But for the shell to become a product, some preparation is necessary. The shells must be soaked in water for ten to fifteen minutes or until they have absorbed the maximum amount of water. Then, the outside of the shell is scraped and cleaned with a knife or a spoon. Later, the shell is sanded until its surface becomes absolutely smooth and shiny. When the shell is ready, the desired shapes, previously cut out from cardboard, are outlined on it. Finally, the shell is cut and the assembly of the handicraft begins. The inhabitants of San Andrés are so skillful they seem to make use of magic use in manufacturing their products. Not only do they surprise everyone with new designs every day; they also combine coconuts with other natural materials like wood, leather, ceramics, seeds, tagua, and silver.</p>
<p>Diving</p>	<p>Dive in coral reefs and the aquarium accompanied by fish in many colours, butterfly, sergeant, bishop, and globe, among them. You may see seahorses around the gorgonias, rays, and, perhaps, barracudas. Visibility is between 15 and 30 m, the currents are few, and there are over 40 dive sites such as La Caleta de José, La Calera, Las Piedras de la Langosta, Trampa Tortuga, Nirvana, Bowle View, Wild Life, La Rocosa, El Avión, and others.</p>
<p>Nolitours Excursions</p>	<p>Island Tour Tour the island's main attractions, including Captain Henry Morgan's Cave and the Pirate Museum, an island lookout point, the Coconut Museum, and the most exuberant landscapes and residential areas of the island.</p>

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	<p>Johnny Cay and Acaurio Enjoy swimming, sunbathing and snorkeling (equipment not included) on the magnificent beaches of Johnny Cay, Aquario and Haynes Cay.</p>
Flora and Fauna	<p>The island has rich floral diversity in its vast mangrove swamps, the largest mangrove forest on the island being the Old Mangrove Point Regional Park. There are 12 mangrove forests in red, black and white colours, rich with many species of flora and fauna revitalizing the ecosystem. There are also coconut palm trees, breadfruit trees, tall growth of local trees, green and lush pastoral lands and farm lands. The bird species named San Andres Vireo or St. Andrew Vireo (<i>Vireo caribaeus</i>), occurs exclusively on the island, favors mangrove and scrub bush habitat. It is a small, innocuous, but delicate bird, green in colour, in the Aves class of Passeriforms of the Vireonidae family. It is about 5 inches (130 mm) in length, weighs about 16–20 g, found in clutch size of 2, and feeds on insects and fruits. IUCN has listed this bird species under the Critically endangered list. Its habitat has been threatened due to large-scale expansion of the island lands for development of the capital city in the last few decades. It is reported that habitat of these birds is now confined to about 18 km² area in the southern part of the island.</p> <p>Another bird found in abundance on the island is the White-winged Dove (<i>Zenaida asiatica</i>). The aqua faunal species found here are oysters and crabs. The coral species found in the island's shores are: Cuerno de Venado, Cuervo de Arce, Coral Columna, Brain coral, Coral Látigo, star coral, fan coral, finger coral and Coral Pluma.</p>
Shopping	<p>San Andres is a tax free zone - so prices are often cheaper than on the Colombian mainland. There are lots of shops in the town centre, many of which specialize in perfumes.</p> <p>You can purchase alcoholic beverages at very competitive prices; bargain as much as possible, you may cross the street and find the same object cheaper.</p> <p>Clothing is very cheap too and you can find famous brands as well as good quality local clothing. Beware of counterfeit merchandise - shop only in reputable stores and boutiques.</p>
Language	<p>The island population of around 75,000 speaks Spanish but most of them also have enough English to make communication no problem for Canadians.</p>
Flights	<p>Nolitours has Monday departures from Montreal to San Andres Island from December 23rd 2013 to April 7th 2014 Flight time is 4.25 hours to San Andres</p>

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