



# MarkHitsTheRoad

Great Places. Cool Sights. Across America. Around the World.™

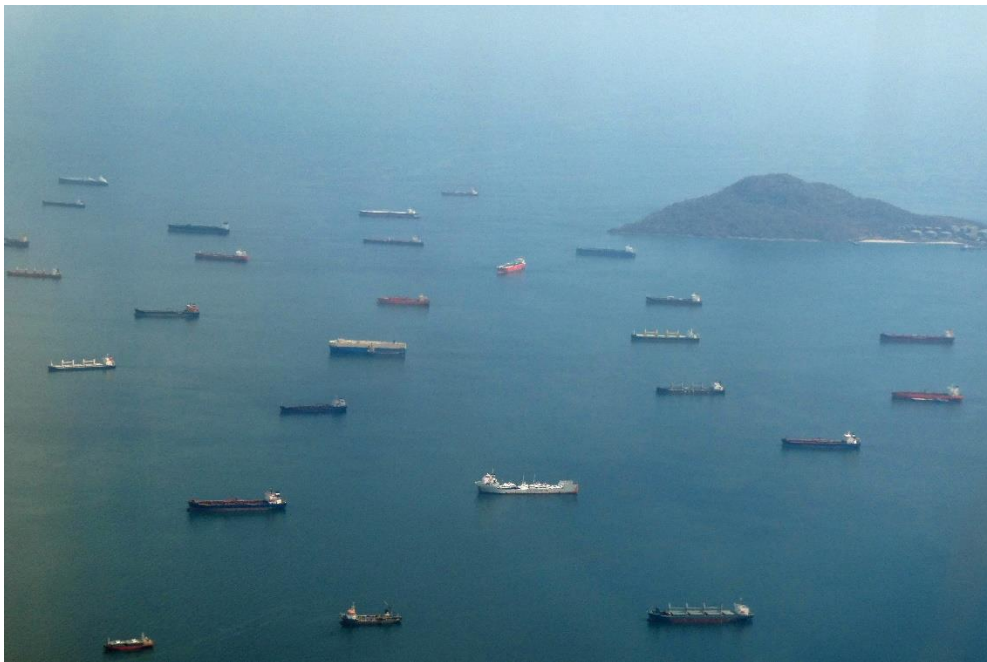
## Latin America Trip (L20A-3)

### Panamá – Panamá City

I headed down to Central America for a 19-day visit to Costa Rica and Panamá.

After wrapping up my San José, Costa Rica stay I headed for Panamá City. I used the city as my base for exploring the city and taking three day trips.

Where I stayed in Panamá City was much different than San José. In San José, my hotel was surrounded by the shops and sodas of Avenida Central and nearby streets, and everything I wanted to see was within walking distance. My Panamá City neighborhood was full of high-rises, and the key sightseeing targets in town were a good distance from one another, so I relied on taxis for local travel. I also had fewer day trip options, as many were centered on the same destinations. As with Costa Rica, most tourists who visit Panamá head for beach resorts, but I'm not much of a beach person.



As my flight approached Panamá City, I noted the large number of ships in Panamá Bay that were either waiting to transit through the Panamá Canal, or waiting for crew replacements or supplies before continuing across the Pacific Ocean.



Along Cinta Costera, the waterfront walkway

Christopher Columbus sailed along the Atlantic coast of Panamá in 1502, a year after Rodrigo de Bastidas stopped there. In 1513, Vasco Núñez de Balboa was the first European to cross the isthmus and lay eyes on the Pacific Ocean from the Americas. With gold discoveries in present-day Peru and Panama the easiest place to cross from the Atlantic to the Pacific, Spain took control of Panamá, and established a trade route across the isthmus.

In 1519, the Spanish occupied the site of a native settlement on the Pacific Coast, and established what would become Panamá City there, the first European settlement on the Pacific Coast of the Americas. Trade routes from there crossed the isthmus to Spanish ports on the Atlantic, facilitating the movement of gold from Peru to Spain. The original site was destroyed during a pirate attack in 1671, but the city was re-established on a peninsula about five miles to the west in 1673.

Proposals to build a canal across the isthmus started early, but the first serious effort for a sea level-based canal was led by the French builder of the Suez Canal starting in 1881. This effort failed. An American lock-based proposal was completed in 1914, but only after Panamá separated from Colombia, gaining independence in 1903, and granted the U.S. rights to a canal zone. In 1977, the U.S. and Panamá signed a treaty that transferred the Panamá Canal and the Canal Zone territory to Panamá in 1999. Panamá completed a project to enlarge the capacity of the canal in 2016.





Panamá Viejo Archaeological Site preserves the surviving ruins of the original Panamá City settlement that was established in 1519. Most of what survives are stone ruins of churches, convents and government buildings; more typical residences were made of wood and did not survive over the centuries. Pictured are the ruins of Convento de la Merced.



Ruins of the Convento de la Concepción





Ruins of the Cabildo government offices and the cathedral tower. The cathedral tower is one of Panamá's national symbols.



View west from the cathedral tower towards the modern Panamá City skyline



A necklace made from shells, on display at the Plaza Mayor Museum at Panamá Viejo. The museum presents a nice overview of the history of Panamá Viejo from pre-Columbian times through the city's destruction in 1671.

Casco Viejo, a.k.a. Casco Antigua, is the Old Quarter of modern Panamá City. It is where Panamá City was reestablished in 1673 in a better and more strategically defensible position. Casco Viejo features a number of old churches, many of which were continuations of those in Panamá Viejo, other older buildings, parks, plazas, museums, restaurants and the official residence of the president of Panamá.

Casco Viejo and Panamá Viejo comprise the Archaeological Site of Panamá Viejo and Historic District of Panamá, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.





The Panamá Metropolitan Cathedral



Our Lady of Mercy Church. The baroque stone face of the church was removed from the Convento de la Merced ruins site in Panamá Viejo and reassembled here.





Tradition holds that the gold-leafed altar of St. Joseph Church was protected from the pirates who attacked Panamá Viejo in 1671, and moved to this church in Casco Viejo. But the style and other records suggest that the altar is perhaps as much as centuries younger than that.

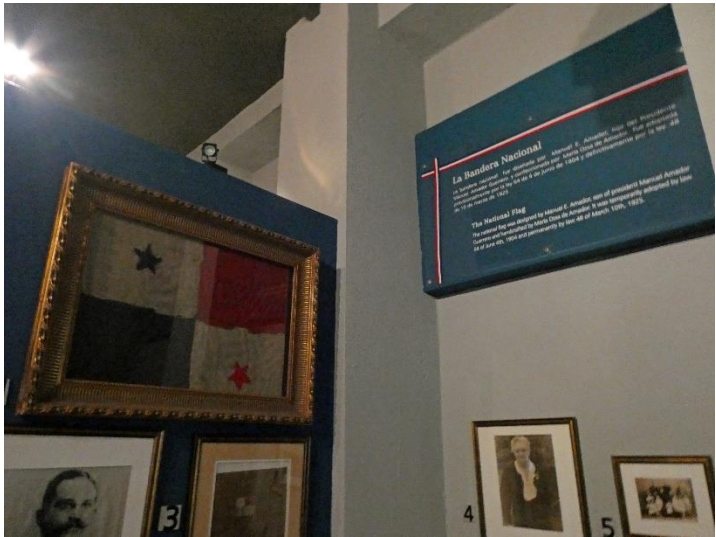


The San Felipe de Neri Church nativity scene that was donated to the church. It kind of struck me as an elaborate bible-themed model train layout except without the trains.





My first museum in Casco Viejo was the Museum of the Mola, which featured the mola handicraft of the Guna people. Guna women put several layers of cloth together, cut through top layers to reveal the colors of lower layers, and stitch around the edges of the openings to create these “reverse applique” technique patterns which they often then attach to their clothing.



My second museum was the underwhelming Panamá History Museum. It provides a brief, one-room overview of Panamanian history from colonial times to about the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

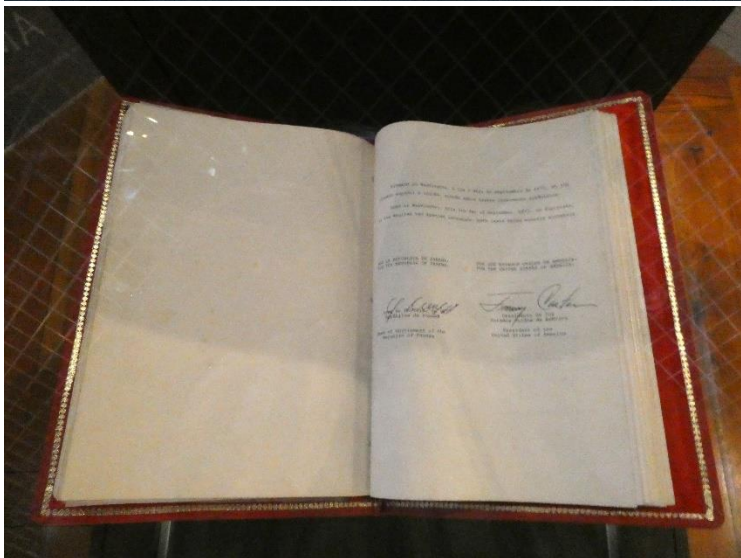
I wouldn't skip it, but don't figure on spending more than a half an hour there.





The Panamá Canal Museum next door was a far better museum, not just for its telling of the history of the Panamá Canal but of Panamá itself.

One of a handful of artifacts from pre-Columbian Panamá on display at the Panamá Canal Museum



The treaty that relinquished U.S. control over the Panamá Canal



A display on the Panamá Canal Expansion project

A bit of trivia... the building housing the museum served as headquarters first for the French effort to build the Panamá Canal, and then for the U.S. effort.



A small bit of beachfront in Casco Viejo. The waters of Panamá Bay are generally very polluted, which probably explains why I didn't see anyone in the water during my stay in the city.



The French Plaza features this tribute to the failed French effort to build a sea-level canal



The official residence of the president of Panamá is on the Casco Viejo waterfront.





Statue of Simón Bolívar in Casco Viejo. Bolívar was a Venezuelan military leader whose efforts led to the independence of Venezuela, Bolivia, Colombia-Panamá, Ecuador and Peru from Spain.



The Bridge of the Americas, as seen from Casco Viejo, is one of two bridges near the Pacific Ocean that cross the Panamá Canal. Some suggest that it connects North and South America. Politically speaking, today's Panamá is regarded as wholly part of North America. When Panamá was part of Colombia, all of Colombia including Panamá was regarded as wholly part of South America, making Panamá the only country to have changed continents. Geologically speaking, the Darién Mountains along the Panamá-Colombia border are generally regarded as the boundary between North and South America.



Leaving Casco Viejo, I walked along Avenida B, which had a lot more local character than the skyscraper-filled central business district where I was staying. Unfortunately, most travel guides warn of high crime in many of Panamá City's neighborhoods.



I got to Mercado de Mariscos, the city's main fish market, too late in the day to see it at its peak. There are a number of restaurants adjacent to the fish market if you're into fresh seafood.



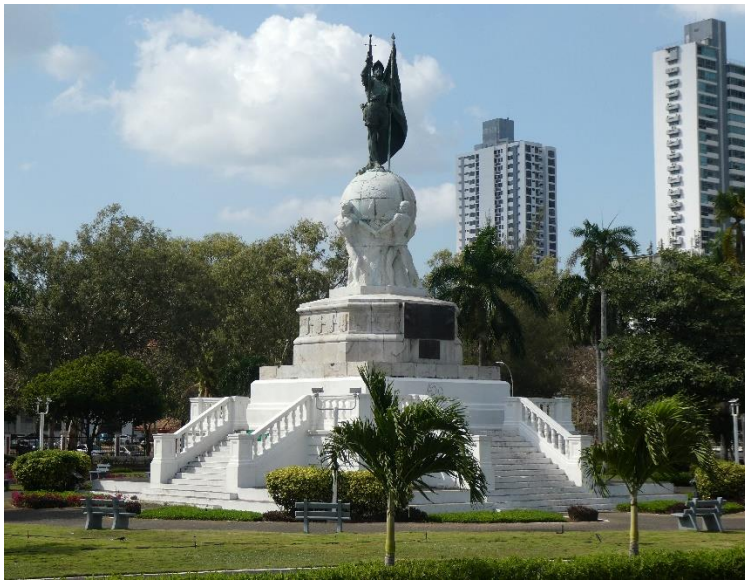
I walked along Cinta Costera, an oceanfront park and walkway, from the fish market to my hotel's neighborhood, a couple miles long walk. At various points I had views of Casco Viejo or the central business district.

Here I'm looking back at Casco Viejo. The towers to the right are part of the Panamá Metropolitan Cathedral.





The view from Cinta Costera back towards the Monument of the Flag of Panamá and Casco Viejo



A statue paying tribute to Vasco Núñez de Balboa, who discovered the Pacific Ocean in 1513 – with the help of the local indigenous people who had been fully aware of the Pacific Ocean’s existence for quite some time by then.

Balboa is such an important historical figure in Panamá that the name Balboa can be found on many places and businesses. And even the country’s currency is the balboa – although the currency is so tied to the U.S. dollar that you can use the dollar routinely across Panamá.

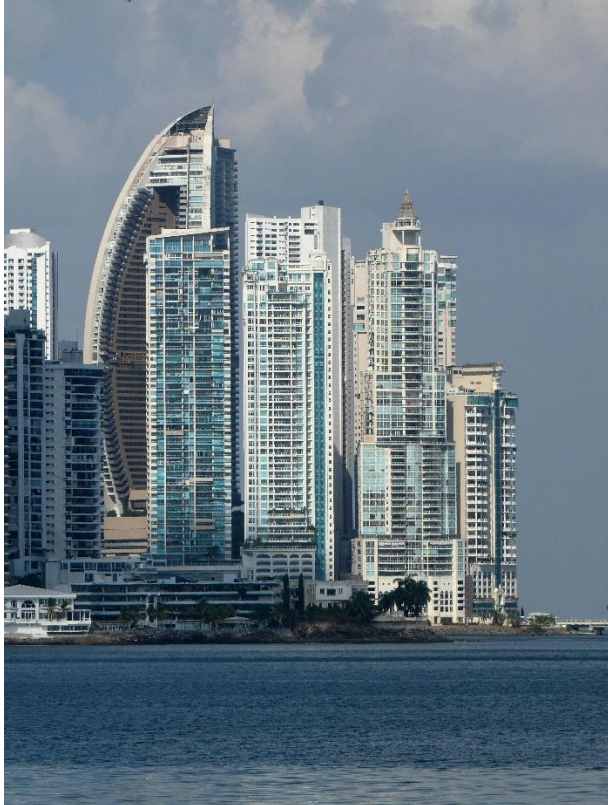


View of the central business district skyline from Cinta Costera



Some of the skyscrapers caught my eye.

Such as the F&F Tower, which put an eye-catching twist on high-rise architecture.



The tall building with the curved left side first opened as the Trump Ocean Club in 2011, the first international name-branded development of The Trump Organization to open. It was later renamed Trump International Hotel & Tower Panama.

Cypriot businessman Orestes Fintiklis bought a majority stake in the hotel condominium association, and had the Trump name removed from the building in 2015 and removed it from the hotel in 2018, according to Wikipedia.

Can you imagine someone wanting to remove Trump?





For my last day of sightseeing in Panamá, I headed for the Amador area, where I visited the Biomuseo, and then walked the length of the Amador Causeway out to the Causeway Islands. The Biomuseo focuses on the natural history of Panamá, from its geologic origins to how the creation of the isthmus connecting North and South America resulting in a tremendous intermingling of species between the two continents.



I thought the museum did a better job with geology than it did with biodiversity. Panamá is relatively young geologically, only about three million years old. Volcanos rose from the sea floor, eventually creating a string of islands. Sediment from subsequent erosion filled in the gaps, resulting in the isthmus. In addition to creating a land bridge across which flora and fauna spread from both continents, the isthmus blocked the long connected Atlantic and Pacific Oceans here, having a huge impact on the waters, currents and ultimately the weather on both sides. Evidence suggests that the creation of the isthmus even led us into a period of regular ice ages because of the impact it had on ocean currents.



The Amador Causeway lines the eastern side of the channel that ships use to enter or leave the Pacific side of the Panamá Canal. This ship is making its way into the canal.

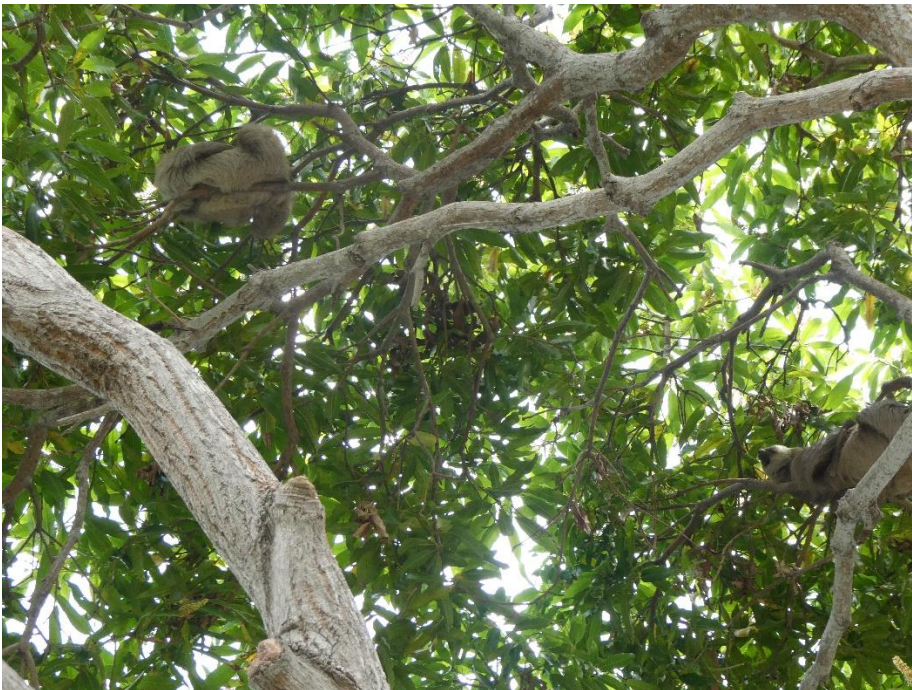


Two cargo ships pass one another beneath the Bridge of the Americas.





The first island that the causeway reaches is Isla Naos, home to Centro Natural Punta Culebra, a park-like nature reserve that the Smithsonian Institute operates. During my tour of the center I came across this iguana.



I also saw three sloths napping in the trees here, two of which were sharing this tree.





The second island, Isla Perico. The islands once were home to Fort Grant, a U.S. fort established to help defend the Panamá Canal. A few remnants of the fort are reportedly visible atop Isla Perico, but I didn't come across a route to the top during my walk.



Isla Flamenco is the last of the islands connected by the Amador Causeway.





The view from the causeway near the Biomuseo north towards Ancon Hill. The hill preserves a patch of jungle in the heart of Panamá City, and is home to a variety of wildlife.



Before



After

Looks like all that walking has finally paid off! (Along the Amador Causeway)



I had one unexpected wildlife sighting when I spotted this gecko on the wall opposite my bed in my 15<sup>th</sup> floor Panamá City hotel room. It showed up on my 6<sup>th</sup> night, so I suspect that it may have hitched a ride on my clothes or day pack on my last day trip.

In the middle of the night I got up to go to the bathroom. On my way back to bed, I discovered that the gecko at some point had joined me under the covers. I like a cool room when I sleep, probably too cool for a reptile, so it sought out a warm spot. Cuddling with me was probably the warmest spot it could find in the room – I am very cuddly, after all.

It wasn't really a problem. After all, it didn't snore or hog the covers. And it didn't spend the night jabbering away about car insurance.

It was gone the next morning. But it showed up again that evening, climbing up onto my shoulder to watch as I was sorting the day's photos on the computer.

I hope the next guests in that room enjoyed its company as much as I did.