

A Perfect Day in Panama City

By **DAVID KAUFMAN** Monday, Apr. 23, 2012



Soak up the atmosphere in the Casco Viejo, Panama City's old quarter and home to both historic architecture and a lively restaurant-and-bar scene
Photograph by Tito Herrera for TIME

Panama City is rapidly emerging as Central America's Pacific-front boomtown. Already blessed with a UNESCO-lauded Old City (the Casco Viejo), a tower-filled skyline, an economy-boosting \$5.25 billion Panama Canal expansion program and a vibrant culinary scene, Panama City is now beefing up its cultural bona fides with the arrival of the first ever International Film Festival of Panama (iffpanama.org). Running from April 26 to May 2, and launched by a founder of the prestigious Toronto International Film Festival, the event will include some

50 screenings, myriad panels and workshops and a week's worth of parties and premieres. In between, make the most of your downtime with the following tips from Panama City — and film festival — insiders.

(MORE: [How to Spend One Night in Panama City](#))

K.C. Hardin, owner, Canal House and Las Clementinas hotels

Begin and end in the old quarter, the Casco Viejo. Start with a hike from the colonial section, past the turn-of-the-century buildings on Avenida Central and up into the rain-forested Cerro Ancón, which has a spectacular view of the city, the canal and the classic canal-zone architecture. It's best to begin the journey before 8 a.m. It takes about an hour and includes encounters with flocks of toucans.

On the way back, stop for brunch at my hotel Las Clementinas, on Calle 11, tel: (507) 228 7613, and then get out onto the water. Depending on the season, this could mean a fishing-and-barbecue excursion on Lake Gatun, or looking for whales in the Pearl Islands or going for a surf down the coast at Punta Barco.

Before dinner, enjoy the sunset over spicy ceviche and a beer at Ciao Pesca on Plaza Bolívar, tel: (507) 262 3700. Then head to the Marina Marina restaurant at Punta Pacífica, tel: (507) 390 1010, for *guiso de pescado* (Brazilian fish stew), which is one of the few things that will get me out of the old quarter.

Back in the Casco, finish off the night with a shot of *amaro* liqueur at Divino, on Calle 4a, tel: (507) 202 6867. Or have a nightcap at the ever changing indoor-outdoor gallery-bar La Casona de las Brujas, on Plaza Herrera, tel: (507) 211 0740, and see what amazing reuse of found objects owner Blanca Davalos has come up with that week.

(MORE: [Colonial Revival in Panama City's Casco Viejo](#))

Alejandro Ferrer, president, Biodiversity Museum

Start at the Amador Causeway, just a few minutes from downtown. It's bursting with restaurants, bars, marinas, bikers and joggers, who all enjoy spectacular views of the Bay of Panama and the city skyline. From there you can also admire the Biodiversity Museum (biomuseopanama.org), which opens early next year and is the only Frank Gehry-designed building in Latin America. It will tell the story of how the Isthmus of

Panama united two continents, divided one ocean and became a center of biotic exchange between North and South America.

After Amador, take a trip to the city of Colón on the Panama Canal railway, tel: (507) 317 6070. This journey goes through dense jungle before reaching Colón on the Atlantic Ocean in less than an hour. Once there, you can visit numerous historic sites including Fort San Lorenzo, a UNESCO World Heritage site that dates back to 1597 and once housed Spanish conquistadors. Colón is also noted for its excellent Caribbean-style seafood restaurants. There are many to choose from; I always order a plate of octopus with coconut rice.

If you want to stay put in Panama City, stroll through the Casco Viejo, full of history, with beautiful buildings, including our National Theater, the presidential palace and our cathedral. It's also filled with outstanding restaurants. For lunch, I'd head for Maito, at Final de la Calle 50, tel: (507) 391-4657. It offers Panamanian flavor married with international technique. The chef, Mario Castrellón, trained with Ferran Adrià and it shows.

Next I would head to the rain forest. Few folks know that there's three times more biodiversity in our small nation than in all of North America combined. One of my favorite places to experience it all is the Canopy Tower, tel: (507) 264 5720, at the Soberanía National Park, which is 30 to 45 minutes from town.

(PHOTOS: A Final Feast at elBulli)