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- VISITING GHOSTS • THE FARAWAY NEARBY • PHOTOGRAPHING PANAMA



Photographing Panama

By Carol Behan-Sokolow

Carol Behan-Sokolow photo

Panamanians refer to their country as “The Bridge of the World,” where North and South America come together in one direction and the Atlantic and Pacific oceans in another.

It combines colonial cities and modern skylines with quaint mountain towns where Ngabe-Bugle people in colourful clothing live alongside Western expatriots.

A narrow country with a mountainous backbone, Panama enjoys endless sandy beaches on the wild Pacific coast and calmer, more laid-back Caribbean resorts on the other, with coffee plantations and cloud forests on the hills in between.

As a tropical destination, this small country offers a multitude of subject matter for photographers.

Panama City

Flights from Canada arrive at Panama City's Tocumen airport. A few days in the city is worthwhile, either at

the beginning or end of your tour. Hotels and restaurants are plentiful and affordable.

Panama's main interests for photographers are the colonial city, known as Casco Viejo, and the spectacular views of the modern, Manhattan-like skyline from the coastal promenade. Fortunately, both are located within walking distance of each other.

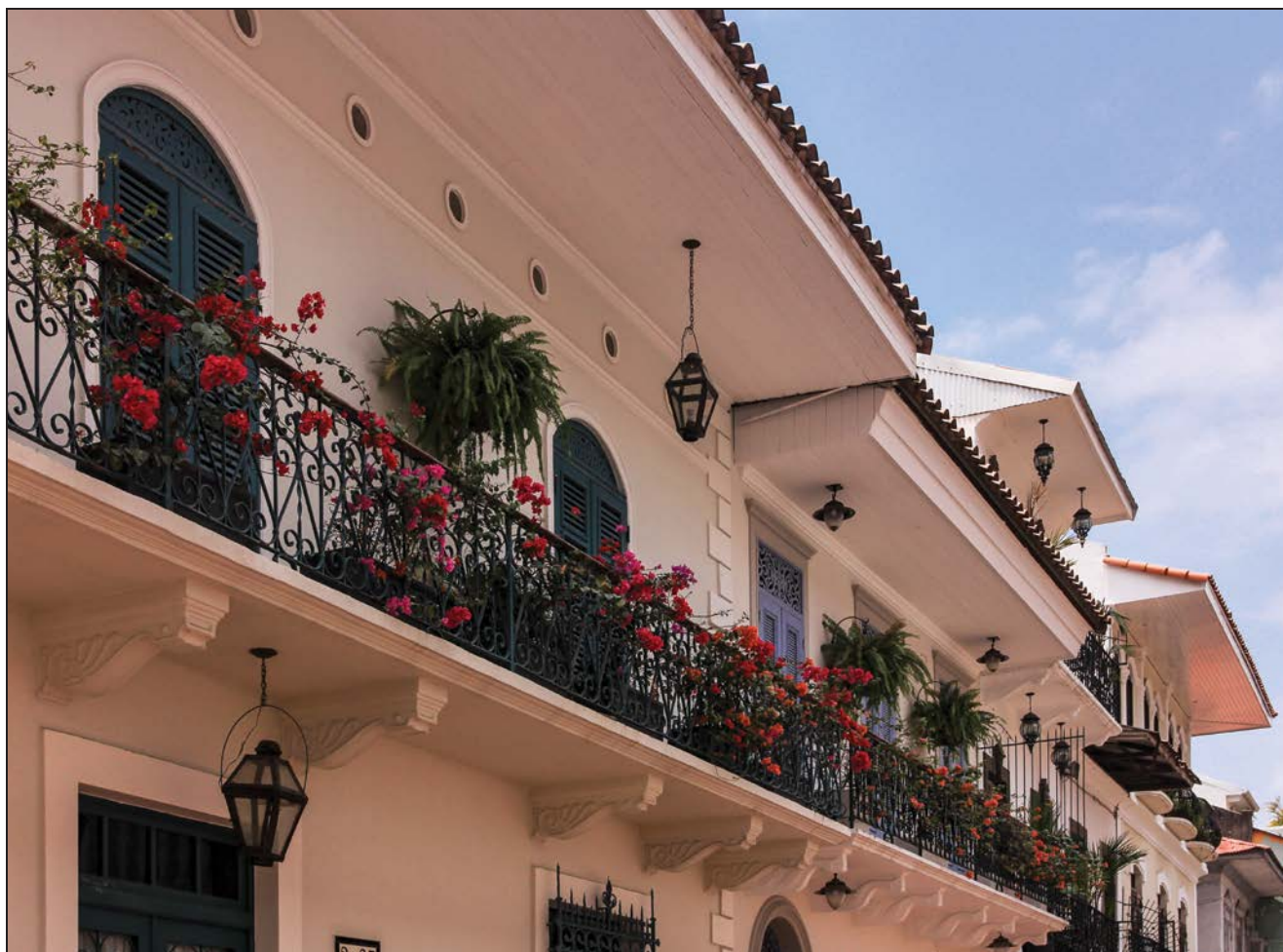
The best place to shoot the skyline is from the park near the famous fish market, itself a short taxi or metro ride from the downtown core. From this location, the curve of the bay presents the compact cluster of highrises face on, with the colourful old fishing boats in the foreground.

Overcast skies are often a feature of the city, with the clouds forming a dramatic backdrop to the scene.



Alex Sokolow photo

A 15-minute walk will take you to Casco Viejo (take it slowly – the humidity is oppressive). This compact city within a city dates from the 17th century and was designated a UNESCO heritage site for its elegant historic museums and churches.



Carol Behan-Sokolow photo



Alex Sokolow photo

If you enjoy architectural photography, you'll love to walk its narrow cobbled streets with their pastel facades, flower decorated balconies and a church on almost every corner.

Turning down a side street leads to the unexpected – a wide-open square

with the broad facade of a cathedral or a row of tiny coffee shops with doors open and ceiling fans slowly spinning and the aroma of Geisha coffee, Panama's prized brew, inviting you in for a break.

Alex Sokolow photo





Carol Behan-Sokolow photo

Boquete

One of Panama's most popular destinations for photographers is the mountain town of Boquete in Chiriqui province.

It sits about 1,200 metres above sea level on the eastern slopes of the dormant Baru volcano. It enjoys a perpetual spring-like climate and is set in a valley against a background of deep green forested hills.

It's a place where coffee plantations provide the local cafes with award-winning world-class coffee, as well as great opportunities for photographing the beans in various stages and colours of ripening.

In the town square, the traditional and the modern exist side-by-side,

where native Ngabe-Bugle people wait patiently for the local bus and tourists and expats browse the souvenir shops or enjoy a coffee on an outdoor patio.

Join them and find endless subject matter for street photography in the variety of faces and clothing you see passing by.

If you take a walk around town, you'll see that Boquete's flowers are literally everywhere – from cascading bougainvillea on practically every garden fence to lilies, hibiscus and bromeliads in the exhibition gardens by the bridge downtown. Those who enjoy floral photography will find plenty to occupy many hours putting a macro lens to good use.

Take a taxi up into the cloud forests and coffee plantations. The misty drizzle that falls here provides an ever-changing pattern of swirling mists and clouds that lend "atmosphere" to your photos. Get up close to the hummingbirds in the Finca Lerida plantation or stop at the San Ramon waterfall and Caldera River for some dramatic water shots.

If exotic birds are your interest, arrange a guided tour from a travel agent downtown to the forests where quetzal birds can be found. For the more adventurous, a tour by jeep to the summit of Volcan Baru to experience sunrise with a view of both the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean is another alternative.

Carol Behan-Sokolow photo





Carol Behan-Sokolow photo

Boquete is situated in western Panama, 40 kilometres north of the provincial capital, David. To get there, take a flight from Panama City to David, followed by a 35- to 40-minute drive along a modern highway. Alternatively, it can be reached by a seven- to eight-hour drive from Panama City along the Pan-American Highway.

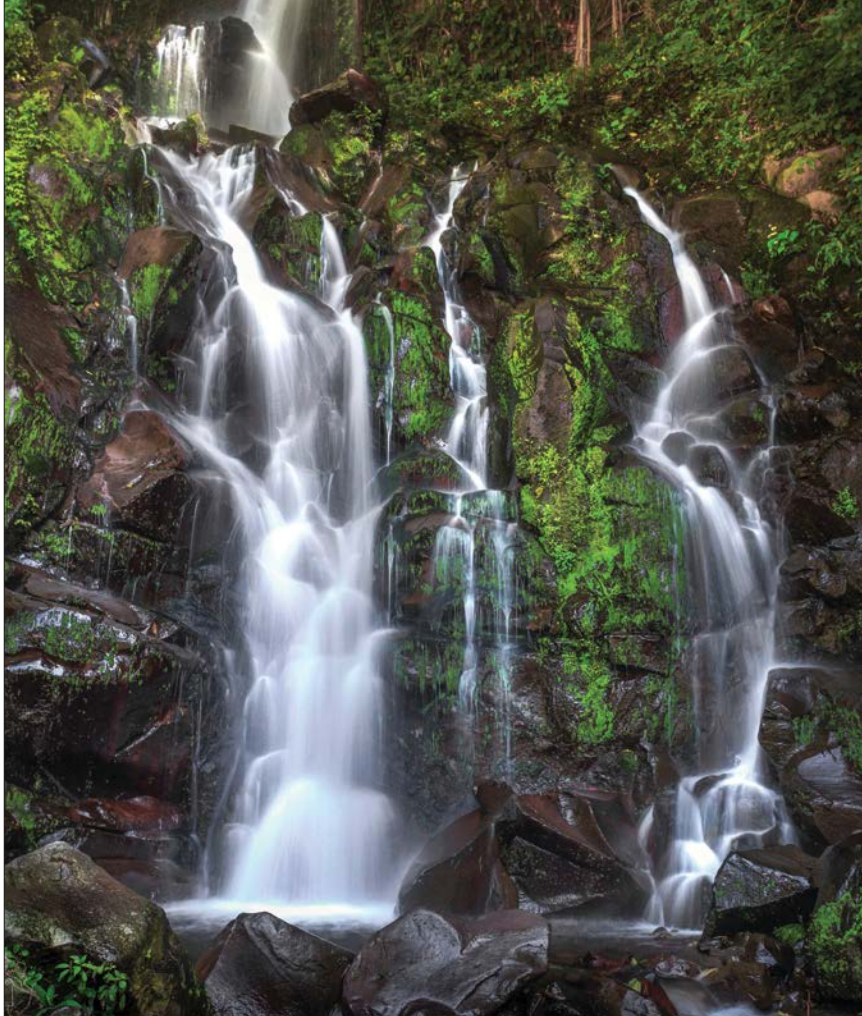
Beaches

With coasts on both the Pacific and the Caribbean, Panama has wonderful sandy beaches, which are for the most part deserted and unspoiled. A popular beach resort, not far from Boquete, is Las Lajas, where for \$10 you can buy a day pass to the hotel and use the restaurant, the pool and the sunbeds under the huge palm umbrellas.

If you enjoy shooting powerful crashing waves, catching them as they break, head down to the water's edge and capture them as they froth and foam, dwarfing the surfers who paddle out to challenge them.

Alternatively, head over the mountains to the Caribbean coast to the laidback archipelago of Bocas del Toro, where a water taxi will take you out to the island on which Bocas Town is located. Check into a hotel built out over the water, explore the town where reggae music is king and capture the golden light of a spectacular sunrise the next morning.

Take a water taxi to Red Frog Island, named for its tiny red namesakes, and wander through the tropical jungle and nature reserve on the island. If you have underwater camera equip-



Alex Sokolow photo



Carol Behan-Sokolow photo

ment, Bocas is also a great location for snorkeling and scuba diving among the mangrove roots and corals in the clear turquoise water of Almirante Bay.

Bocas can be reached by air from Panama City or by road from Boquete.

Panama is well worth a visit for its culture, biodiversity and spectacular

scenery. For photographers, it's a treasure to discover. ❄

Carol Behan-Sokolow lives in St. Stephen, N.B., with her husband Alex, who also contributed photographs to this article.