



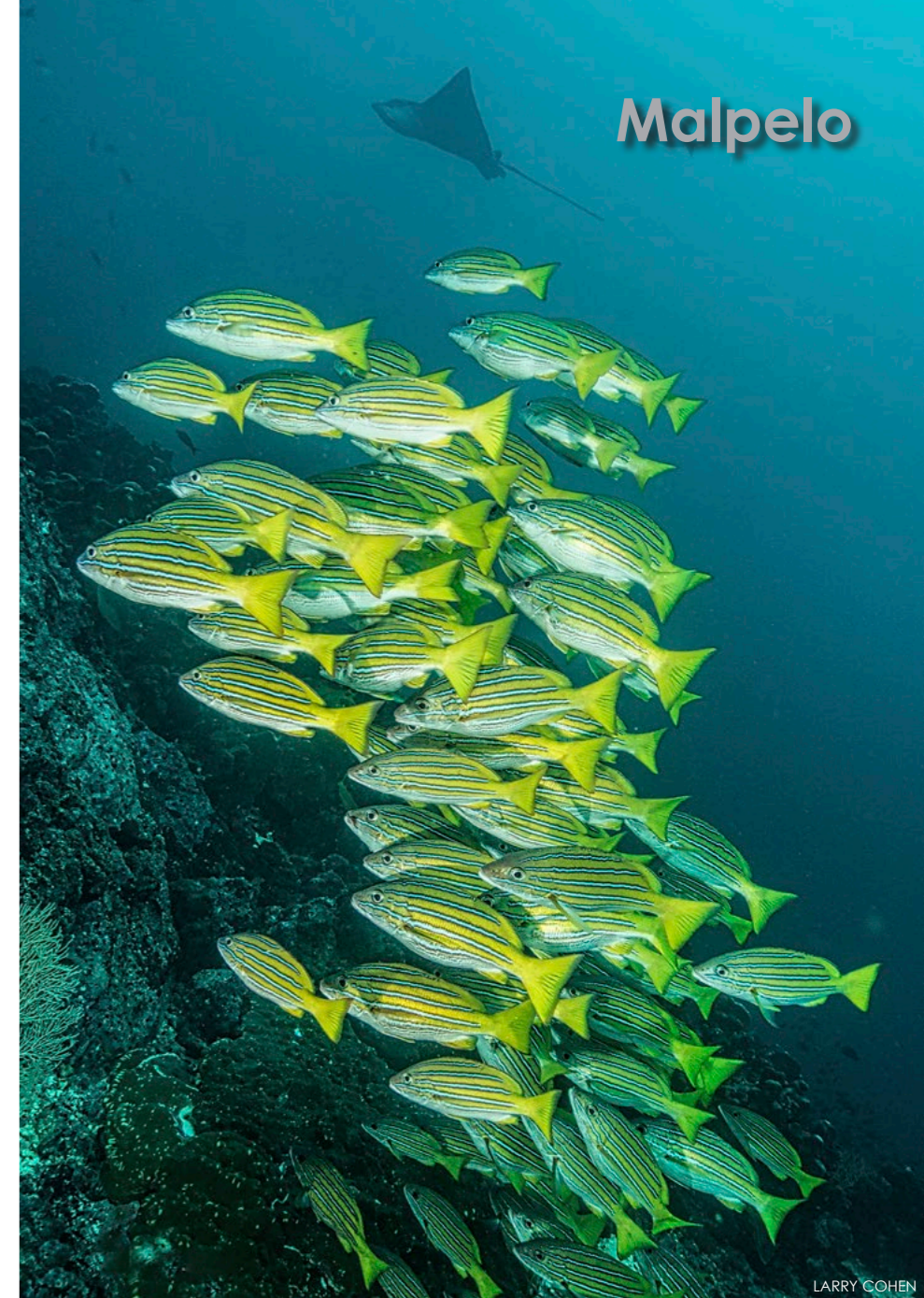
Panama's

Malpelo Island

Text and photos by Larry Cohen
and Olga Torrey



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Malpelo Island (above). PREVIOUS PAGE: Divers with whale shark at the Aquarium dive site

The main reason for diving Malpelo Island is the sharks. The area is known for large schools of hammerheads, silky sharks, Galapagos and whitetip sharks. In the winter there is a population of sand tigers, and in late summer and fall, whale sharks call these waters their home. Other large pelagics can also be viewed. Tuna, jacks and eagle rays are not uncommon, with the occasional manta ray making an appearance.

The reason for all of this large life is an abundance of food being brought in by strong ocean currents. So diving conditions are not easy. Currents could be very strong and visibility clouded by all the nutrients in the water. But this is the price to pay for hanging out with the big boys.

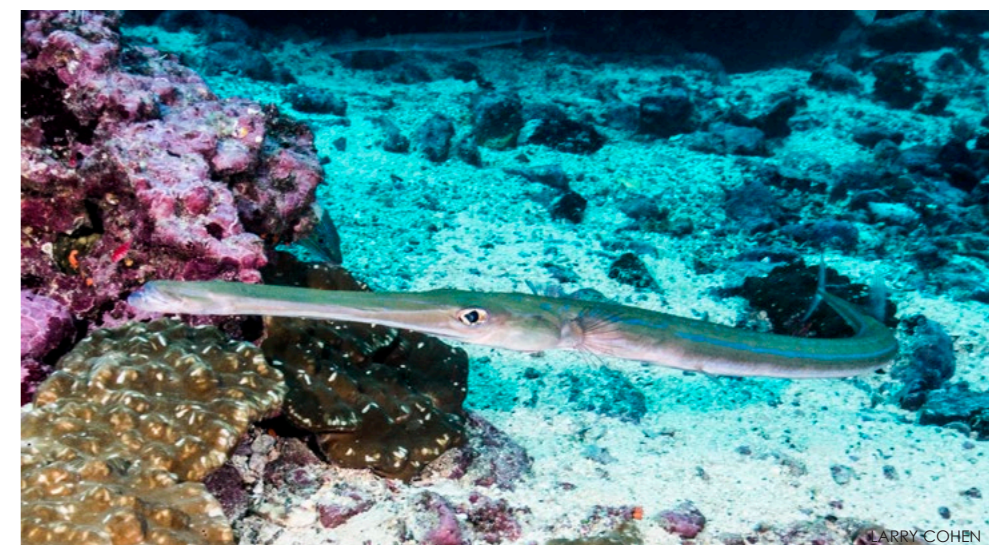
Two hundred and thirty miles from Panama and 270 miles from the coast of Columbia is the large rock rising from the Pacific Ocean that is Malpelo Island. The rock itself is home to a small Columbian military base, ranger station and colony of sea birds.

A number of boats from Panama and Columbia run trips to Malpelo. Leaving from Panama the journey takes 30 hours,

depending on current and wind.

Leaving Panama in the late afternoon on a Monday, one will not see land until sometime on Wednesday. It is not unusual for sea conditions and weather to be rough. So it is nice to be on a comfortable seaworthy vessel. During the journey, there is time to relax, make new friends and dream about the wonders that will soon be seen below the surface. There is plenty of time to setup scuba gear and cameras.

Before long the rock appears in the distance. As time goes by, it slowly starts getting larger and larger. Before your eyes appears a magical enchanted land. When Robert Lewis Stevenson wrote *Treasure Island*, he must



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Trumpetfish on the rocks at Bajo del Monstruo (above); Spanish grunts with eagle ray in background (top right)

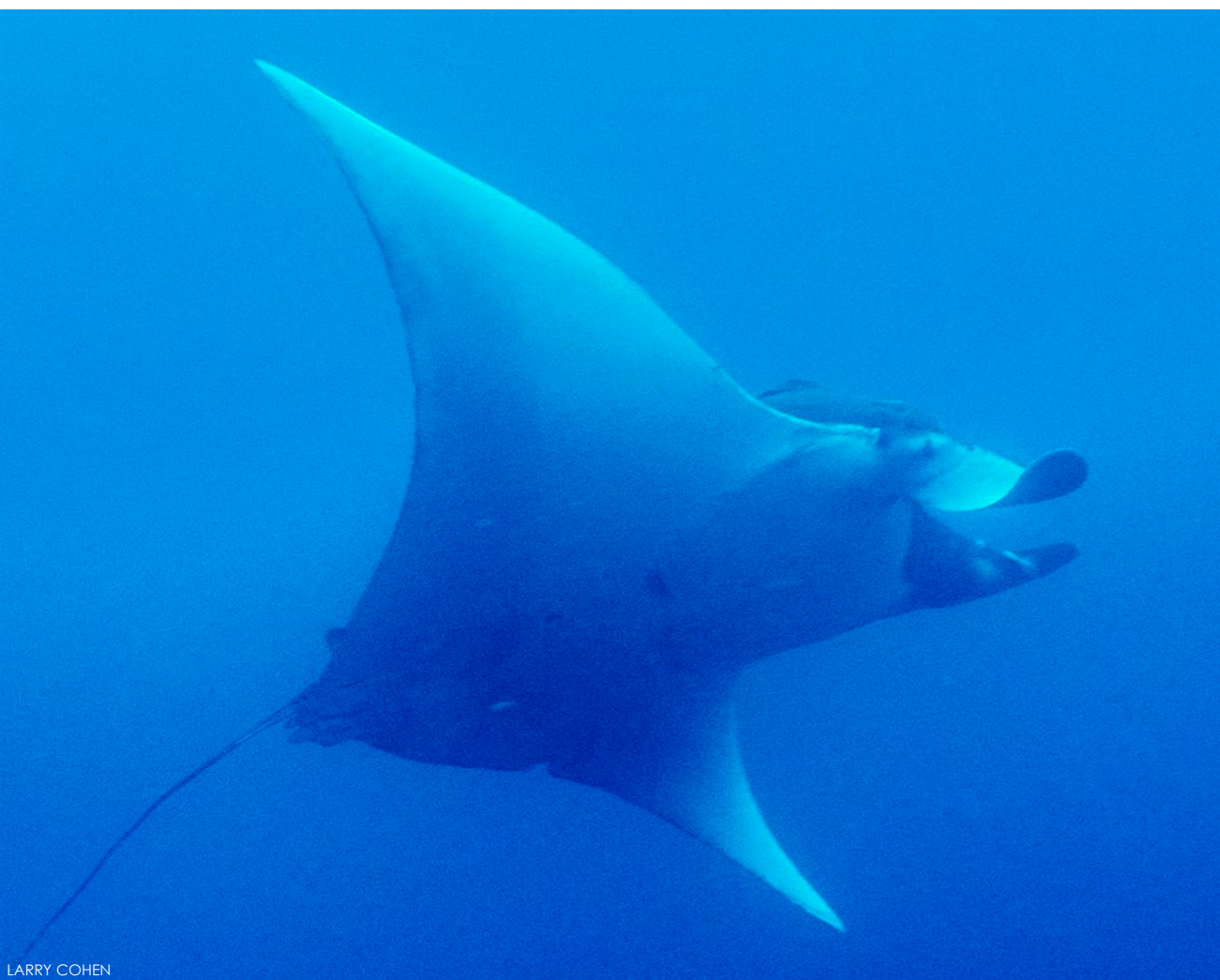
Leather bass in swim-through at La Gringa



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School of hammerheads in the distance (above); Scorpionfish at the Aquarium (right)

have been thinking of Malpelo. This looks like the perfect place for pirates to hide treasure.

All the diving on Malpelo is done around the rock and nearby pinnacles. If you removed all the large marine life, this would still be a world-class dive site. Sea fans and other soft coral decorate the rock. There are more moray eels here, than we have ever seen. Many are free swimming even in the daylight hours.

Leatherback grouper and Mexican hogfish are everywhere. These fish along with butterflyfish also perform a useful service for the big pelagics. The marine life on all the rock reefs are cleaning stations.

Sharks and other large animals come

in to have the parasites, dead skin and loose scales removed from their mouths and bodies. The butterflyfish and other cleaners use these parasites as food and don't get eaten. Diving on a cleaning station offers the opportunity to observe these animals.

Once arriving, divers do a check out dive at El Altar de Virginia. This site is in a protected area and there is not much current. Divers do a backward roll from the small skiff.

Diving

Coiba Dive Expeditions goes to Malpelo more often than other operations. Their liveaboard vessel is the 115-foot (35m) *Yemaya' II*. The ship has eight comfort-



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able staterooms plus crew quarters.

The diving station is on the lower deck while the top deck is for dining and socializing. Half of the top deck is covered while the other half has lounge chairs for enjoying the sun. There is an indoor salon with a TV, video and book

Manta ray spotted at La Puerta del Cielo; Large numbers of moray eels on the rocks (top left)





Galapagos shark at Bajon dive site (left); Butterflyfish on cleaning station at Los Tres Mosqueteros (right)

Conditions

In August 2014, El Nino was affecting the area. With water temperatures in August being between 76°F and 87°F (24-31°C), it was comfortable to dive in a 3-5mm wetsuit.

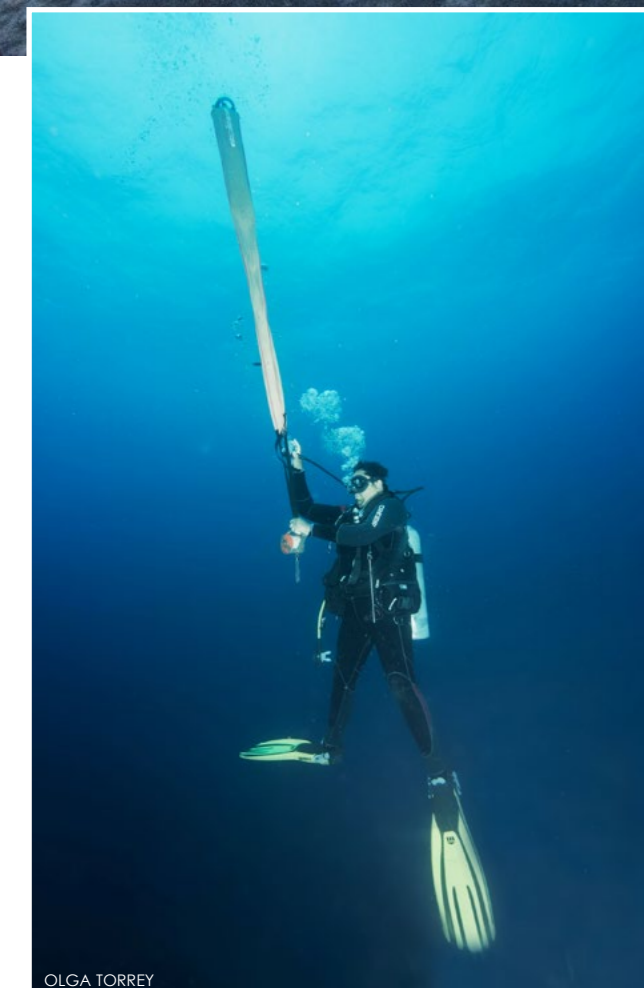
These warm temperatures push the hammerheads and other sharks away from the wall. They seek out cooler waters away from Malpelo.

At times we hit a thermocline where the cold water and warm water mixed, creating a hazy look of gauze in the water.

Once on the bottom, everyone lined up looking into the blue—hoping to get



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library. Two skiffs are towed behind the ship. All diving takes place from the skiffs. Nitrox 32 is produced from a membrane system and whips are used to fill tanks without removing them from the skiffs.

All diving is done in groups. The dive guide counts, "Uno, dos, tres!" and everyone rolls in at the same time. Doing this comfortably with a camera housing and strobes takes some practice.

After seeing the first cleaning station and a large school of hammerheads in the distance, it is time to surface. Everyone is asked to deploy a surface marker buoy (SMB) for practice.

From now on, many dives will be in a current, so a negative entry is necessary. With BCs empty everyone rolls in at the same time and frantically swims to the rock before the current wipes them away. If everything

goes right, the group stays together and the dive guide shoots the surface marker buoy at the end of the dive. If someone gets separated, they have their own reel and SMB.

The boat supplies Nautilus Lifelines to all the divers. This device invented by Nautilus Explorer owner, Mike Lever, is perfect for this diving environment. It is a combination radio and GPS. The lifeline has three buttons. The green button allows a diver to chat with the boat and skiff. The GPS numbers are displayed. If you are lost, you can tell the skiff driver where you are located.

The orange button allows a diver to communicate on Channel 16. This channel is reserved for emergencies and is monitored by all vessels. This way divers can tell any nearby ship their location.

The red button will keep transmitting a diver's location to all stations, but divers are not able to talk when using this function. Having a Nautilus Lifeline on all dives will give one a warm and fuzzy feeling, but this device is a requirement when diving remote locations in these conditions.



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Map of Malpelo Island

a glimpse of a school of hammerheads or other pelagic animals. We felt like we were at a theatre waiting for the show to begin.

If everyone stays close together the bubbles will scare away the animals. By spreading out and being observant, divers might get to see a shark or eagle ray. Because of the current, it is important to not get too far away from the dive guide. Also keep an eye out behind you. While everyone is looking for the actors to appear on the stage, sometimes one might sneak back to perform in the balcony.

Diver inflates a surface marker buoy



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Swim-through at La Gringa (left); Gunieafowl puffer in golden phase (above); Divers with whale shark at the Aquarium dive site (right)

kinds are inside this rocky passageway. On the other side of the swim-through, one might spot a large school of hammerheads.

One of the other dive sites of note was the Aquarium. Cur-



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Coral hawkfish can be seen at La Cara de Fantasma dive site

If no sharks appear, the group swims, or drifts in the current, to a different area. While looking for the large animals, don't get tunnel vision and forget about the rocks. Spanish grunts, giant hawkfish, coral hawkfish, puffers and other creatures put on a colorful show.

Dive sites

There are many dive sites around the island. There is an area in the rock that looks like a face staring down at you. The dive site below

the face is known as La Cara de Fantasma, or the ghost face. The skiff ride could be as interesting as the dive. It is possible to see bait balls and humpback whales breaching close to the tiny boat.

La Gringa is a site named because a dive instructor from the United States had a butt the size and shape of the rock. But the great feature of this site is a long swim-through. Fish of all

rent varied from strong to insane, but at least the dive staff deployed a buoy decent line for reference.

At the time of our visit, a male and pregnant female whale shark could be seen on this site. To have a 30-foot (9m) fish swim overhead and block out the sun, then swim down and look you in the eye was a life-changing experience. These gentle plankton eaters were as curious about the divers as the divers were curious about them. It was hard to tell who was watching

whom, but the whale sharks did not have cameras.

After the diving days were finished, it was time for the long ride back to the mainland. There was now time to relax, socialize with new friends, pack gear and dream about the incredible wonders we just experienced under the surface.

Topside attractions

When planning a trip to Malpelo, one should also plan to explore Panama. Both the city and the remote areas have much to offer.

Panama City. Panama City is an important town since the Panama Canal allows ships quick access





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Traditional fishing boats in front of modern Panama City (above); Freighter enters Panama Canal (right)



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Old Town has the look and feel of many cities in Spain combined with a bit of New Orleans flavor



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between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Before the canal was built, ships had to go around South America to make the trip. At the ports, trains would transport cargo across the narrow country to the other side. Then the containers were distributed onto ships going to different locations. The first ship entered the canal on 15 August 1914.

The influence of the United States is everywhere. This is because the United States had complete control of the Panama Canal from 1914 to 1979. From

1979 to 1999, the canal was under joint American–Panamanian management. In 1999 the canal was handed over to the Panama Canal Authority, a Panamanian government agency. But the U.S. dollar is still the local currency, and 110v with North American outlets are still used for power.

Panama City is a study of con-

trast. The new city has modern skyscrapers with a variety of quirky architecture. One building has a twist while another is designed to look like a ship, influenced by the Burj Khalifa skyscraper in Dubai. Many of these buildings are residential. This modern skyline can be seen from the water with a fleet of traditional fishing boats sitting in the fore-

ground.

Old Town Panama City has the look and feel of many cities in Spain, combined with a flavor of New Orleans in the United States. Colorful buildings with shops, restaurants and bars line the narrow streets. There are many squares and public areas for people to gather and enjoy the hot tropical weather. Around the squares are

churches and government buildings.

Visual arts play an important roll in the life of the Panamanian people. Parades, public events and parties always include a host of decorated floats. On our visit, a number of artists could be seen working on these floats into the evening through open doorways. School buses purchased second

MALPELO: The Mount Everest of Sharks

Nowhere else in the world can you dive with so many sharks—hammerheads, silkies, big fish. Dive Malpelo on the 116-foot liveaboard Yemaya for the ultimate shark experience. On the way touch Coiba's coral reefs, white sands, rainforests, monkeys, and macaws.



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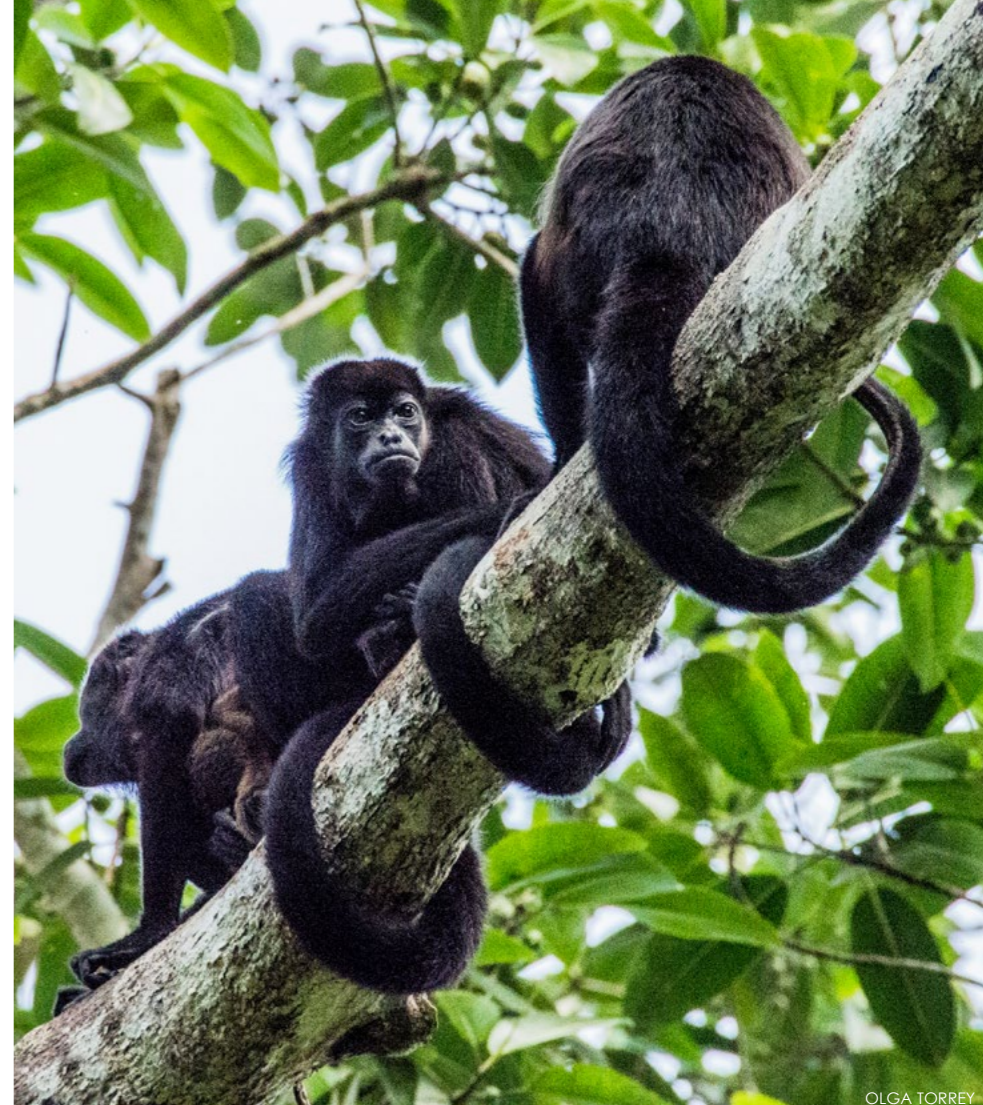




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Kayaking where the Chagres River meets the Panama Canal forming Gatun Lake (above); Mono Titi monkeys are the smallest found in Panama (right inset)

hand from the United States were used as public transportation. Artists used the buses as canvases for their work. Known as *diablos rojos* (red devils) they are

now being replaced with modern buses. But some of these buses are still on the road.

Gamboa. Gamboa is a town near Panama City that was populated by people from the United States. It is now an international community with a pristine rainforest in its backyard. The canal

needs millions of gallons of water to feed its lock system. For this reason the rainforest has been preserved to provide water. The Smithsonian Institute maintains their tropical research facility in Gamboa. The institute's mission is to understand the past, present and future of tropical biodiversity and its relevance to humankind.

This is where the scenic Chagres River meets the Panama Canal forming Gatun Lake. A boat tour with kayaking was an excellent way to explore this area. It was interesting to see the contrast of dredging and other work being done on the canal right next to a tropical wonderland where a variety of birds, monkeys and reptiles could be observed. Snail kites could be seen looking out for their prey.

One of the highlights was being able to get up close to the rufous-naped tamarin, also known locally as the Mono



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Titi monkey. This is the smallest monkey found in Panama. Bringing our kayaks close to the trees, we could observe Titi monkeys running, galloping and leaping from tree branch to tree branch. They did not hang from their tails but used them for balance.



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THIS PAGE: Wildlife found in the rainforest at Soberania National Park, such as the snail kite (top center) and a family of mantled howler monkeys (top right)

Soberania National Park. Hiking in Soberania National Park is another way to observe life in the rainforest. As we walked on the main trail, we heard the sounds of many different birds.

Part of life in the rainforest is hiding, trying not to become a meal. So seeing these birds needs patience.

The way the light filtered through the trees was magnificent. As our eyes adjusted, we began to see movement in the trees. Magnifying the spectacle with binoculars or a telephoto lens, we could spot a community of mantled howler monkeys. Howlers are

among the largest monkeys in Panama. We could see them hanging, climbing and leaping on the tree branches. Sometimes they walked upside down and wrapped their tails around the tree. Their prehensile tails are strong enough to support their entire body weight. Vocal communication was an important part of the howlers' social behavior. When they barked, we felt like King Kong was coming down from the trees to kidnap us—just like what happened to Faye Ray.

Guna region. One third of the Caribbean side of Panama is the Guna region. The population of these indigenous people is round 40,000. The name was Kuna until 2012, when the spelling was changed to Guna. The Guna region starts at the Continental Divide and continues offshore to a chain of about 360 coral reef islands that stretch along the





CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Guna Yala, as it is called by locals, is known as San Blas Islands in the tourism industry; Beadwork known as Wini is traditionally worn on the limbs (left inset); Molas are sold as art work and used for clothing; Portrait of a Guna woman; Traditional wooden canoes are used to bring supplies to the island; Guna men are excellent free divers and spearfishers; Guna women own their homes (lower left inset)

from the Guna for US\$30. Tourism is now a big part of the Guna economy. The

so many unique experiences. Diving with a variety of sharks and other pelagic marine life and then having encounters with the wildlife in the rainforest is a well-rounded trip for which it is well worth spending as much time as possible to enjoy. ■

of the Yemaya' Il, as well as Yala Tours Panama (www.yalatour-spanama.com).

Larry Cohen and Olga Torrey are well-traveled and published underwater photographers based in New York City, USA. They offer underwater photography courses and presentations to dive shops, clubs and events. For more information, visit: Liquidimagesuw.com.

The authors wish to thank Coiba Dive Expeditions (www.coibadive-expeditions.com) and the crew

tradition of trade and self-determination is one of the reasons the Gunas have been able to successfully function independently, compared to other indigenous groups.

Afterthoughts

An adventure to Malpelo Island and a tour through Panama offers



The women are the owners of their houses and many of them manage businesses. They create the Molas and Wini. Preparing the fresh food and cooking is a part of their activity.

Many Gunas used to work on the U.S. bases in the former Canal Zone. Having a strong sense of community, money was sent back home to build schools and hospitals. Now many are professionals, working in Panama City.

The Guna people have a history of selling goods through family-owned venues. They place a strong emphasis on economic success. Small retail stores owned by the Guna people sell Molas throughout Panama and abroad. Coconuts and lobster are important exports. Colombian trade boats buy a hundred coconuts

omy of the well-functioning traditional democracy they maintain.

The Guna religion is called Baba and is based on nature, involving a Father Baba and a Mother Earth. The governmental process in the big meetings of the

Guna includes (religious) metaphors of their view of the world.

Artwork known as Molas decorate the blouses of the Guna women and are used as the base for clothing. The designs replace what used to be body paint. The women wear attractive beadwork on their legs known as Wini.

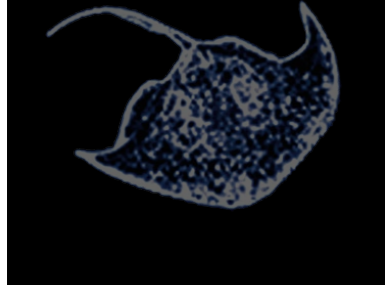
The men farm, collect coconuts and fish. Scuba diving is illegal for both locals and tourists, but many Guna men are excellent freedivers and spearfishers.



coast down to Columbia. The tourist industries call these islands the San Blas Islands, but the locals know them as Guna Yala. Yala translates to *mountain* and *land*.

In the past, the Panamanian government tried to dominate Guna culture, suppressing traditional customs in order to control the people. In 1925 the Dule Revolution resulted in a treaty in which the Panamanians agreed to recognize the Guna people's cultural freedom and semi-auton-

fact file



Panama



SOURCES: U.S. CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, XE.COM, OECD.ORG, DATA.WORLDBANK.ORG

History In the 16th century, the Spanish settled in Panama. In 1821, Panama gained independence from Spain and—together with Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela—formed the Republic of Gran Colombia. This was dissolved in 1830, but Panama formed an alliance with Colombia. However, in 1903, Panama separated, and collaborated with the United States for the construction of a canal. The Panama Canal was opened in August 1914, after a decade of construction work undertaken by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. In 1977, it was agreed that the Canal would be transferred to Panama by the end of the century. Over the years, certain portions and responsibilities over the Canal were transferred to Panama. In 1989, the dictator Manuel Noriega was deposed. A decade later, the Canal, the area supporting the Canal and the remaining U.S. military bases were turned over to Panama. Government: Constitutional democracy. Capital: Panama City

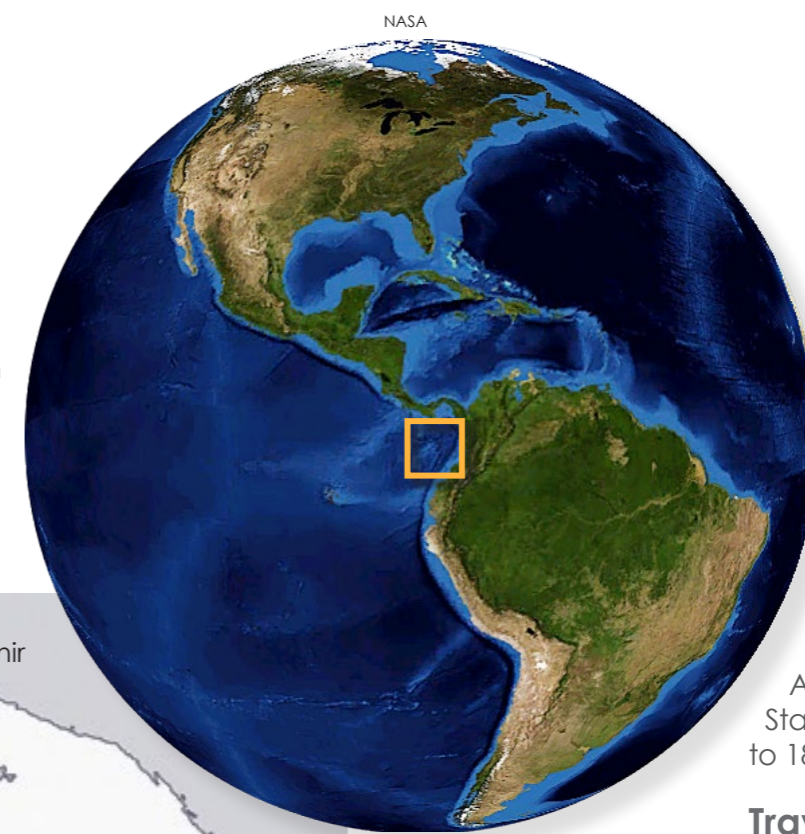
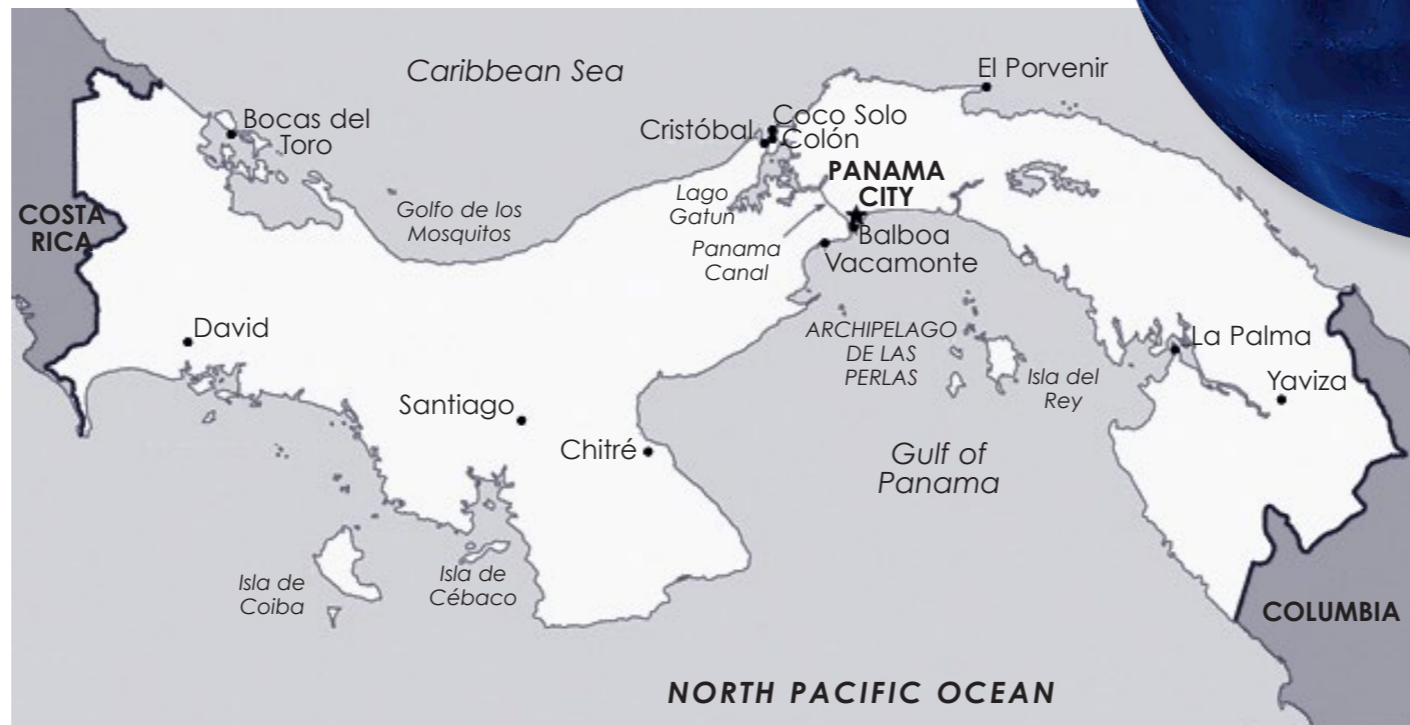
Geography Panama is located in Central America, and borders the Caribbean Sea and the North Pacific Ocean, between Costa Rica and Colombia. Coastline: 2,490km. Terrain: Panama's interior comprises mostly of sharp, rugged mountains and divided, highland plains. The country's coastal areas

are primarily comprised of rolling hills and plains. Lowest point: Pacific Ocean 0m. Highest point: Volcan Baru 3,475m. Note: Panama occupies a strategic location at the eastern end of an isthmus which forms a land bridge that connects North and South America. The nation controls the Panama Canal, which links the North Pacific Ocean with the North Atlantic Ocean, by way of the Caribbean Sea.

Economy About 75% of Panama's GDP comprises the services sector, which covers various areas such as the Panama Canal, the Colon Free Zone, logistics, banking, insurance, container ports, flagship registry and tourism. In 2013, the unemployment rate dropped to 4.5%. Part of the economic boost stems from the expansion of the Panama Canal, which started in September 2007. Costing US\$5.25 billion, it sought to double the waterway's capacity by creating a new lane of traffic along the

Canal. This would improve economics of scale, boost the international maritime trade and maintain the Canal's competitiveness. To date, more than 30,000 jobs had been created as a result of the expansion. As at December 2014, the project was 83% completed. Although Panama's economy has performed progressively well over the years (thanks to its strong transportation, logistics services sectors and infrastructure development), the income distribution is the second-worst in Latin America. In 2013, 25.8% of the population lived in poverty. This figure has been steadily falling, down from 38% in 2006. Panama's most important trad-

RIGHT: Global map with location of Malpelo Island, Columbia
BELOW: Map of Panama



Language Spanish is the official language, with 14% speaking English, as many Panamanians are bilingual.

Visa Visas are not required for visitors from Europe, Australia, Great Britain, United States and Canada for visits of up to 180 days.

Travel advisory From the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, recommends avoiding travel to remote areas off the Pan American Highway in the Darién Province. The number of incidents remains low, tourist and Panamanian citizens are potentially at risk of violent crime in this area.

Environmental issues Water pollution due to agricultural runoff, deforestation, siltation due to soil erosion and land degradation, urban air pollution and natural resources threatened by mining are problems. On the positive side, the government is creating

parks and wildlife refuges, passing environmental laws, and establishing conservation agencies.

Currency United States Dollar and Panama Balboas (PAB)
Exchange rates: 1USD= 1PAB;
1EUR= 1.13PAB; 1GBP= 1.50PAB;
1AUD= 0.77PAB; 1SGD= 1.74PAB

Population 3,608,431 (July 2014 est.) Ethnic groups: mestizo (Amerindian and white) 70%, Amerindian and mixed (West Indian) 14%, white 10%, Amerindian 6%. Religions: Roman Catholic 85%, Protestant 15%. Internet users: 959,800 (2009)

ing partner is the United States. The U.S. Congress approved the U.S.-Panama Trade Promotion Agreement in 2011, and this was entered into force on 31 October 2012. In December 2003, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) listed Panama as one of the jurisdictions committed to improving transparency and establishing effective exchange of information in tax matters.

Climate Panama has a tropical maritime climate that is cloudy, hot and humid. The rainy season is May to January and the dry season January to May.

Health Routine vaccines should be current, including measles-mumps-rubella (MMR), diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis, varicella (chickenpox), polio, Hepatitis A & B, Typhoid and yearly flu shot. Tourists from countries where yellow fever is endemic must be vaccinated for yellow fever in order to enter Panama.

Decompression chamber
Multiplace Chamber
Panama Canal Authority Bldg.
706, Balboa Panama City.
Telephone (507) 272-8738
Transportation from Malpelo to the chamber is not practical. In-water decompression procedures are used.

Websites
Visit Panama
www.visitpanama.com ■