

Panama Tourism: Free Health Insurance and Safety Issues

The Panama tourism industry has enjoyed remarkable growth in recent years which has seen tourism account to almost 10% of the country's GDP. As of 1995, there were only 345,000 tourists. However, by 2007, this figure soared over 1 million. Come 2012 and the figure reached over 1.6 million tourists, according to World Bank data. In the first half of 2013 (January to June), 1.1 million international tourists had come to Panama.

Given the impressive figures, you would expect the country to sit back on its laurels and savor the success. But this is hardly the case as the country's tourism body, Autoridad de Turismo de Panamá, has launched robust promotional campaigns in countries like Russia, Brazil and many other Asian countries in a bid to perk up the amount of international visitors trooping to the country.



The strengths

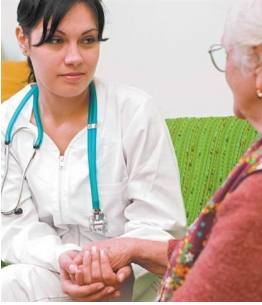
There are many reasons that make Panama a natural destination for many international travelers. Among these is the presence of American-style malls which offer world-class shopping experience and which are found all over Panama City. Another thing that endears many tourists to Panama is the strong and resilient US dollar, which by the way, is the national currency of Panama.

Free 30-day health insurance coverage

In a bid to woo even more international tourists, the country has put in place a free 30-day health insurance coverage. If you happen to catch a disease or get involved in an accident while visiting Panama, you can expect to be covered for medical and hospitalization expenses of up to \$7,000. Although this would not be enough for an incident requiring a longer stay in the hospital, it is definitely a good place to start. In order to access this insurance, visitors are required to ask for the user card at the country's tourist information office prior to going through customs.

The outlook of Panama's tourism

Ernesto Orillac, who is Autoridad de Turismo de Panamá sub-director, recently stated that Panama tourism grew by 7-8% between 2011 and 2012 alone, adding that the future of Panama tourism was looking bright for the coming years. According to Orillac, over 2.2 million people came to Panama in 2013, which is a striking figure considering that the country's total population is just 3.5 million.



Countries of origin

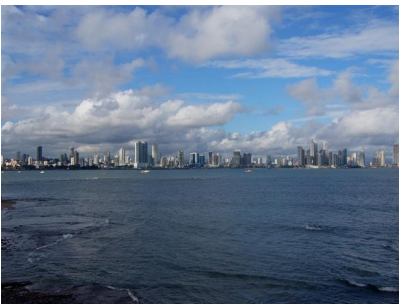
Many visitors from US and even the rich tourists from Colombia and Venezuela come to Panama every year. The country is fast becoming popular with visitors from the entire world, which even include many European countries.

At the moment, Panama stands as among the best tourist stops for visitors from most South American countries. In the year 2012, roughly 47% of tourists came from South America although recently there has been an influx especially of Peruvian and Paraguayan visitors.

Tourists from North America accounted to 28% of the total Panama tourist number last year while tourists from Europe made up 10% of the country's international visitors. Spanish travelers are especially fond of the country, as are those from France, Switzerland and Germany. In short, the country is fast becoming the hottest tourist stop for visitors from other parts of the world.

Challenges

On April 1 this year, two young Dutch girls, Lisanne Froom and Kris Kremers, disappeared shortly after a hike near Boquete, a small town located in Chiriqui, a western province in Panama. This is a mountainous area which is popular with travelers and is largely considered safe. The bodies believed to belong to these two girls have since been found, and it is something of a blemish to the Panama tourism industry.



While Panama is considered relatively safe in comparison to other Central American countries, it still has some security concerns. The murder rate might have dropped from 800 as of 2009 to 655 as of 2012, but rape incidents rose sharply from the reported 809 figure of 2009 to more than 1,100 rape cases in 2012. This is definitely something that the concerned authorities must work hard to address.

There is no doubt as to the appeal of this Central American nation to visitors. In order to accommodate even more visitors, the government of Panama worked on the metro, which was completed on April 2014. A new public bus system has also been put in place and this is expected to contribute to the economic expansion of the country. These developments are the current government's biggest priorities as droves of people troop to this small country in Central America.

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