

The Seven Best Daytrips in Chiriquí, Panama

By Linda Card

Spectacular mountains, a towering volcano, azure waters, and verdant rainforests with a wealth of wildlife: Chiriquí province is Panama’s natural treasure trove. It’s also the place I—and about 20,000 other expats—call home, and it’s Panama’s most popular tourist destination. Whether you live in Chiriquí, plan to retire here, or just come on vacation, here are seven of my favorite daytrips that Chiriquí has to offer.

Mysteries of Panama’s Distant Past. One of Panama’s most intact archaeological sites, Sitio Barriles was a center of the native Barriles culture, which thrived in the area until around 800 AD. The Barriles people left behind them ornate stone statues (14 in total) and monuments, some of which still defy explanation.

Sitio Barriles lies outside the highland town of Volcán and has been owned and maintained by the same family for decades. Hostess Edna Landau, who lives with her family on the property, will explain all about the site and the people who once lived here. (See: *Volcan. Chiriqui.org/atractivos.*)

The World’s Best Coffee. Some of the world’s best coffee is grown in the highlands of Panama, including the ultra-expensive Geisha variety. Low coffee bushes with shiny, dark-green leaves dot the hillsides of the volcano on numerous coffee plantations. Both large-scale producers and small boutique operations offer tours and demonstrate the production process, from planting to brewing the perfect cup.

Janson Coffee Farm is one of these *fincas*, located not far from Sitio Barriles on the outskirts of Volcán. The scenic drive to the processing plant takes you past pastures of horses and cattle and a small private airstrip. In front of the long, low buildings, coffee beans are spread out on the concrete to dry in the sun. After your coffee tour, you can climb the stairs under a bower of evergreens to a café and gift shop, and at the top you’re rewarded with splendid views of the countryside. (See: *Lagunasadventures.com.*)

Hold a Howler Monkey. Located on the Ha Batipa Peninsula, Alouatta Sanctuary is a wildlife rehabilitation and education center bound to leave a lasting impression. Have you ever held a howler monkey? In this privately owned sanctuary, howlers and other primates are saved and returned to the wild. The wildlife habitat supports many birds and other indigenous animals, and the extensive botanical gardens are lush and tranquil. The sanctuary is about an hour east of the city of David. (See: *Alouattasanctuary.org.*)

Climb a Volcano. No trip to Chiriquí would be complete without climbing the dormant Barú Volcano, Panama’s highest peak (11,400 feet). On a clear day you can see both the Atlantic



Seeing howler monkeys is just one of the exciting possibilities that awaits you in the highlands of Chiriquí, Panama.

and Pacific Oceans from the summit—one of two places in the world you can do this. The main trail runs between the towns of Boquete and Volcán, so you can start at either end. Go with a guide who knows the trail and, if possible, camp overnight, as the hike is long and climbing down after dark is dangerous. Some hikers opt for a shorter, easier hike along one of the many trails that wind through the rainforest. For birders, especially, this is a must-do: The forest is home to over 250 species, including the endangered Resplendent Quetzal. Local tour operators offer a variety of hiking options. (See: *Boquetecoutdooradventures.com.*)

Botanical Bounty. Beyond Cerro Punta, at the end of the road up the volcano, is Finca Dracula, an orchid research center and botanical garden. It’s named for one of the 2,200 orchid varieties raised there: a riot of varying sizes, shapes, and brilliant colors. Finca Dracula boasts the largest collection of rare orchids in all of Latin America.

Call ahead to tell the center you’re coming, and while you’re there, stop for lunch at nearby Los Quetzales Ecolodge and Spa for its organic, home-made meals. My favorite dish is the rainbow trout, which the chef prepares with fresh herbs and greens, all raised on site. Afterward, be sure to stroll around the landscaped grounds of flower beds. (See: *Fincadracula.com* and *Losquetzales.com.*)

Fly Through the Rainforest. You haven’t seen the highland rainforest until you’ve seen it from the treetops! This adrenaline-rush ride takes you through two miles of cloud forest via overhead cables that offer spectacular views of the Barú Volcano. You’ll see this tropical world from a bird’s perspective, with all the diversity of local plant and wildlife among countless shades of green. This zipline is the only one on Barú Volcano and just one facet of a mountain resort that also features log cabins, hiking, and bird-watching. (See: *Boquetetreetrek.com.*)

Snorkel with Sea Turtles. The Gulf of Chiriquí, which flows into the Pacific, is the southern border of Chiriquí province. Much of the offshore water is part of the Gulf of Chiriquí National Marine Park, which encompasses 25 islands and 19 coral reefs. Abundant marine life inhabits the area, including sea turtles, whales, dolphins, and dozens of species of game and reef fish.

Access this water-lover’s paradise in the small town of Boca Chica, east of David off the Pan-American Highway. Snorkel and scuba dive, go deep-sea fishing, laze on the beach, go kayaking, or enjoy a slow boat tour. Seagullcove Lodge is a boutique hotel perched on the hillside overlooking the anchorage and nearby islands. It offers a full range of marine activities. (See: *Seagullcovelodge.com.*) ■

See the Pacific and Atlantic at the same time.”

Enjoy the Caribbean With a French Twist

By Alyssa James

When you think of France, tropical beaches may not spring to mind. But there is a place where you can experience the best of both these worlds: a taste of French language and culture with an infusion of rum, sun, and laidback island life.

The bulk of France lies in Europe, but a small piece is sandwiched between the Caribbean islands of St. Lucia and Dominica: Martinique. Martinique is, for all intents and purposes, French. The locals use the euro, speak French, and vote for the president who resides in Paris.

But the culture and lifestyle is undeniably Caribbean. Spices dominate the food, most Martinicans speak a local Creole language, and they drink *rhum agricole* (cane juice rum).

Francophiles who love culture but not the cold will find a home in Martinique. The surf, the Tour des Yoles festival, and miles of ocean—home to dolphins and whales—make it the perfect place for nature lovers. And the restaurants, run by world-renowned chefs, make it a foodie paradise.

While this island in the Lesser Antilles covers only 436 square miles, it has a population near 400,000 and a diversity of landscapes. Martinique is divided into four regions: the north Atlantic, the north Caribbean, the south, and the center. The center is home to the capital, Fort-de-France, as well as the towns of St. Joseph, Schoelcher, and Le Lamentin.

In the south, beautiful white-sand beaches and mangroves dominate. It’s where you’ll find most of the tourists, working on their tans over their brief vacations, as well as expat communities—especially in Trois-Îlets, Sainte-Anne, and Anse d’Arlets. This region is more densely populated, and many people tend to work in tourism. My favorite beach here is Anse Meunier. It’s part of the famous Les Salines coastline but completely deserted save for the occasional catamaran. You can drive to it, but I prefer to hike there from the town of Sainte-Anne, because you emerge from

dense woods into what seems like your own private piece of paradise.

The north of the island is known for its untamed wilderness and for Mont Pelée, the third-most deadly volcano in the world. The Mont Pelée eruption in 1902 gave the north the ideal soil for lush greenery, abundant agriculture, and the unusual black sand on beaches like Anse Couleuvre and Le Carbet. Many people who visit the north feel that it more authentically represents Caribbean life. The north Atlantic is known for its surf and the Caribbean for fishing and agriculture. Le Carbet

is an excellent place for foodies. In just this small town you can have breakfast at L’Inattendu, the north’s best bakery (great pastries for less than \$4.50), eat lunch at Chez Les Pecheurs for freshly caught grilled fish (around \$10.50), and indulge yourself at Ziouka Glaces, which serves creative sorbet and ice cream options at just over \$2 per scoop.

Sea, Sun...and Rum

Rum in Martinique is more than an export, it’s a lifestyle. The rum here is AOC—*appellation d’origine contrôlée*—which means it is regionally protected and held to the highest production standards, similar to Champagne and Camembert cheese.

To see a fully operational distillery, head to Depaz Distillery in Saint Pierre. It’s the only one on the island that allows tours during production and admissions is free. Clément Estate offers a historical experience. The estate is home to a botanical garden, art galleries, and a house dedicated to George H.W. Bush’s visit to Martinique. The estate is owned by the Hayot Group, a dynasty descended from the earliest settlers in Martinique.



Martinique boasts great beaches and delicious Caribbean cuisine.

Average temperatures range between 68 F and 85 F in two seasons: a dry season from December to May and then a rainy and humid season.

Unlike much of the English Caribbean, Martinique has excellent infrastructure, from regularly maintained roads to quality, state-run medical care. Large French supermarket chains like Carrefour and Leader Price can be found throughout the island.

Eating locally is the best way to keep costs down, and every commune has a local market where you can pick up fresh fruit

and vegetables that are in season and locally grown. You’ll find plenty of vegetables and provisions like plantains, yams, and sweet potatoes available year-round. Mango season is my favorite. A kilo of ripe, juicy mangos won’t cost more than \$5—if you can’t get them from your own tree in the garden.

There are few resorts and hotels, so visitors typically rent short-term apartments, especially away from Fort-de-France.

Rental prices vary, depending on location and amenities. A two-bedroom, two-bathroom villa in Le Diamant, in southern Martinique, near the beach with a terrace and garden, will start at around \$1,100 per month, while a studio apartment with a terrace in Trinité, in the north-central area, will start at around \$500.

Le Marin has one of the largest marinas in the Caribbean, with plenty of skippers who are willing to take you on a catamaran trip around the Caribbean (around \$158 for three days). In Martinique you’re bound to make a friend who is a licensed skipper, and that’s how I arranged my first trip to Dominica—just by asking a friend who hired the catamaran. ■

World-renowned chefs make this a foodie paradise.”