

Understanding the Port

Colón is the Atlantic doorstep of the Panama Canal, and one of the most rewarding port days in the Caribbean — but only for guests who arrive with a plan. Nothing beyond the terminal gate is walkable. Book something before you sail and this port pays you back handsomely.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

The Port Area

You dock alongside at Colón 2000, a secure complex of shops, restaurants and a taxi rank. That complex is the whole pedestrian world — plan your day before you step off.

Cash & Currency

Panama uses the US dollar as its paper money. Balboa coins circulate alongside US coins at par, so change looks unfamiliar but is normal. No exchange needed; carry small bills.

Getting Around

Taxis are not metered — use the official rank inside the gate and agree the fare first. Panama never changes its clocks, so check the gap with ship time.

GOOD

Inside the Gate

Best for: Short stops, easy days, minimal logistics

- ✓ Duty-free, craft stalls and restaurants
- ✓ Everything secure and a few steps from the ship
- ✓ Back aboard whenever you want

Low effort, high reward.

BETTER

The Locks from Land

Best for: First timers, engineers at heart, photographers

- ✓ Agua Clara, twenty minutes from the pier
- ✓ Watch a ship rise eighty-five feet
- ✓ A rainforest trail and Gatún Lake beyond

Arrange your return ride before you go.

BEST

Forts & Rainforest

Best for: History lovers, nature lovers, explorers

- ✓ San Lorenzo above the mouth of the Chagres
- ✓ Portobelo's batteries and its Black Christ
- ✓ A wildlife boat out on Gatún Lake

Timing management required. Plan around all aboard.

Top Experiences to Consider

GOOD

The Terminal

Colón 2000 is a fenced village of duty-free shops, craft stalls, restaurants and a casino. It is a comfortable place to wait rather than a destination in itself — treat it as the fallback, not the plan.

BETTER

Agua Clara Locks

The Canal Authority's own Atlantic visitor center, twenty to thirty minutes out, and the best short outing from this port. An observation deck over the locks, a film on the construction, and a rainforest trail. Open daily. Note these are the 2016 locks, so tugboats rather than the famous mules.

BEST

Portobelo & San Lorenzo

Two Spanish fortresses sharing one UNESCO listing. San Lorenzo stands on a cliff above the Chagres river mouth about an hour west; Portobelo lies an hour east, cannon still pointing across the bay. Either is a half day. Both is the whole one.

Where Staff & Travelers Recommend

A Gatún Lake Wildlife Boat

Jungle channels and drowned islands, with howler monkeys, sloths and toucans from the water. Book the observation-only version — we steer clients away from anything advertising monkeys fed by hand or climbing aboard.

The Canal Railway

The 1855 line that crossed the isthmus sixty years before the Canal did, running beside the water and across Gatún Lake. The public timetable does not suit a ship day, so take it as a shore excursion or not at all.



The Colón 2000 terminal village, seen from the ship



A cruise ship in the Agua Clara Locks, Atlantic Bridge beyond

Key Considerations

This is a booked-excursion port, and it is worth being plain about why. Nothing outside the gate is walkable, and Colón has a long-standing reputation for street crime — Canada's travel advice singles out Colón Province and Britain's names the city. None of that makes this a port to skip. It makes it a port to plan. Use a ship tour or the licensed rank inside the gate, agree the fare before you ride, and decline anyone who approaches you outside it.

Everything close is on the Atlantic side. Agua Clara is twenty to thirty minutes; San Lorenzo and Portobelo are about an hour each, in opposite directions. Panama City and Casco Viejo are an hour or more each way and only sensible on a long call, booked through the ship. Watch the excursion names too — the "Monkey Island" trips sound local but run to Gamboa, ninety minutes each way, most of the day on a bus.

One more thing to read carefully. If your itinerary also lists a day called "Panama Canal" or "Gatún Lake", that is a separate call from this one: the ship goes into the locks and anchors, and you come ashore by tender if at all. It is a different day with a different set of excursions, so plan the two apart.



A Spanish battery at Portobelo, still pointing across the bay



Fuerte San Lorenzo above the mouth of the Chagres



Gatún Lake and its rainforest shoreline

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Port Orientation

FROM THE PORT (COLÓN 2000)

● Terminal shops, crafts & taxi rank	At the pier — and that is all
~ 20–30 min by taxi or tour	
● Agua Clara Locks	Visitor center, open daily
~ 1 hour west	
● Fuerte San Lorenzo	UNESCO; book ahead or take a tour
~ 1 hour east	
● Portobelo	UNESCO forts and the Black Christ
~ 1 hr 30 by tour	
● Gamboa & the rainforest	Toward the Pacific side
~ 1 hour or more each way	
● Panama City & Casco Viejo	Long calls only

DON'T FORGET

Confirm your all aboard time before you leave the ship.
Set a phone alarm. The ship will not wait for you.

Key Takeaway

Colón rewards a plan and punishes improvisation — but the plan is easy, and what it buys you is the Canal itself, two Spanish fortresses and a rainforest.

Book one thing before you sail. Then enjoy one of the genuinely great port days.

ETA will help you choose the right experience based on your travel style.

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Did You Know?

A Town Built by a Railroad. Colón was founded in 1850 as the Atlantic end of the Panama Railroad, built to carry California Gold Rush traffic across the isthmus. When it opened in 1855 it was the first railway to link the Atlantic and the Pacific — sixty years before the Canal did the same with water.

Money Without Banknotes. Panama's currency is the balboa, but you will never be handed a balboa note. The country issued paper money exactly once, for about a week in 1941, then recalled and burned it. The US dollar has been its paper money ever since.

Drake's Lead Coffin. Francis Drake died of fever aboard his ship off Portobelo in January 1596 and was buried at sea in a lead-lined coffin. Divers found two of his scuttled ships in 2011. The coffin has never been found.

The Panama Hat Is Ecuadorian. They are woven in Ecuador from toquilla straw and picked up the wrong name in the 1800s because they were shipped and sold through Panama. A photograph of Theodore Roosevelt wearing one at the Canal works in 1906 made the misnomer permanent.

The Black Christ. Portobelo's church holds a life-size dark wooden Christ that draws pilgrims from across Panama every October, many walking the last miles on foot. It can be seen year-round, not just in festival week.