

Squiz the World goes to... Panama

Each fortnight, we give the world globe a spin, and see where we land. Then we take the kids of Australia, and The World, on an audio excursion to visit that country and its people.

I'm Christie Kijurina, and today on Squiz the World we're visiting a country where a skinny strip of land joins two enormous continents... gigantic ships climb a watery staircase through the jungle...and brilliant golden frogs wave to get each other's attention...

Can you guess? ... Strap yourselves into the Squiz Kids Super Fast Supersonic Jetliner as we take off and take a squiz at Panama.

JUST THE FACTS

"Panama is a long, skinny, kinda 'S'-shaped country in Central America, connecting North America to South America. Costa Rica sits on one side, Colombia on the other, with the Caribbean Sea and Atlantic Ocean to the north and the Pacific Ocean to the south.

Panamanians sometimes describe their country as "Bridge of the World, Heart of the Universe".

And it really is narrow. At its skinniest point, Panama is only about 60 kilometres wide. The whole country covers about 75,000 square kilometres, making it just a little bigger than Tasmania. But don't let its small size fool you. Panama has around four and a half million people, about 1,500 islands and tiny islets scattered around its coastline, and more than 1,000 different species of birds.

"The capital is Panama City, and it is packed with shiny skyscrapers, busy roads and massive apartment buildings. But you don't have to travel far to see tropical rainforest, mangroves and sparkling ocean.

Panama's official language is Spanish, but you'll also hear English and Indigenous languages including Guna [GOO-nah], Ngäbere [ngoh-BEH-reh], Emberá [em-beh-RAH] and Wounaan [woh-NAHN]. Panama's population reflects its long history as a meeting place, bringing together Indigenous, European, African, Caribbean, Asian and many other influences. The country is home to seven officially recognised Indigenous peoples, and some of these communities govern their own protected regions, called comarcas [koh-MAR-kahs], and continue to practise traditions handed down through generations."

If you're planning to spend your pocket money in Panama, things get a little interesting. Panama's official currency is the balboa, named after the Spanish explorer Vasco Núñez

de Balboa [VAHS-koh NOON-yes deh bal-BOH-ah]. But, one balboa is always worth exactly the same as one US dollar, and both currencies are used. Panama makes balboa coins, but for banknotes, people generally use US dollars.

Most of the country is hot and tropical, with a wet season and a dry season rather than four distinct seasons. Mountains run along its middle, including Volcán Barú [vol-KAHN bah-ROO], the country's highest point. On a particularly clear day, people at the top might be able to see the Pacific Ocean on one side and the Caribbean Sea on the other.

"But Panama's most famous feature is the enormous waterway cutting across it... the Panama Canal. Stretching for about 80 kilometres, it allows ships to travel between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans without sailing all the way around South America.

Thousands of cargo ships, cruise liners and other vessels pass through each year, paying tolls based on things like their size, type and the cargo they have onboard. Those tolls bring a significant amount of money into Panama. And running roughly beside the canal is the Panama Canal Railway. It actually came first, carrying people and goods across Panama since 1855, nearly 60 years before the canal opened."

But how did Panama become such an important crossroads and how did anyone manage to carve a passage through all that rock and rainforest? Let's set the clock for several million years ago and do some...

TIME TRAVEL

Panama's story begins millions of years before the first people arrived, when North and South America were separated by ocean. Deep beneath the water, pieces of Earth's crust pushed against each other, causing volcanic eruptions, and eventually, islands formed. Over millions of years, rock, sand and mud filled the gaps until a narrow strip of land rose above the waves. The Isthmus of Panama had formed, joining North and South America and separating the Pacific from the Atlantic. An isthmus is just that...a narrow strip of land, surrounded by water, that connects two larger land masses... And this one changed the world.

Animals that had been separated for millions of years could suddenly cross between the continents. Armadillos, opossums and giant ground sloths travelled north from South America, while ancestors of bears, cats, horses and deer moved south.

As humans arrived, Panama became an important meeting and trading place. Indigenous communities lived across the isthmus for thousands of years, farming, fishing and exchanging goods with neighbours to the north and south. Fast forward to 1513, and Spanish explorer Vasco Núñez de Balboa crossed Panama and became the first European to see the Pacific Ocean from the Americas.

Spain quickly realised how useful this narrow strip of land could be. Gold, silver and other goods from its Pacific colonies were carried across Panama to ships waiting in the

Caribbean. But crossing by foot or mule was hot, muddy and slow. Surely, people thought, there must be an easier way.

Other countries wanted a piece of the action too. In 1698, Scotland gave it a go, but disease, food shortages and poor planning saw that fail. France tried digging a canal in 1881, but its engineers badly underestimated Panama's mountains, flooding rivers and tropical diseases.

In 1903, Panama was part of Colombia, but with US support, Panama gained its independence and days later, signed a treaty letting the US build and control the canal.

"The Americans restarted construction in 1904. Instead of one deep channel at sea level, they built enormous locks to lift ships 26 metres up to Gatún Lake [gah-TOON], carry them across Panama, then lower them back down. I've stuck a link to video of the amazing lock system in the episode notes. Tens of thousands of workers came from around the world to work on constructing the canal, especially the Caribbean. They did the exhausting, dangerous work, but Black Caribbean workers were paid less and given poorer conditions than white American workers.

On August 15, 1914, the Panama Canal finally opened"

"The US kept control for most of the 20th century, while generations of Panamanians demanded their canal back. That finally happened on December 31, 1999, when Panama took full control.

Today, it's one of the world's busiest shipping shortcuts and one of Panama's proudest national symbols."

Well, that was quite the history lesson. Speaking of lessons, the uniforms are ironed, the backpacks are packed and the bell is about to ring—which means it must be...

TIME FOR SCHOOL

If you're a kid in Panama, your long summer holiday falls over Christmas and the beginning of the year. Classes usually start back in late February or early March and run through until December, with the year divided into three terms or trimesters.

School uniforms are pretty common, especially in public schools. Lots of primary students wear a white shirt with navy-blue trousers or a skirt, black shoes and white socks, but the exact uniform varies from school to school. With Panama's hot and humid weather, keeping that white shirt looking crisp and clean all day must be a massive challenge.

Once the bell rings, a lot of the subjects will sound familiar: Maths, science, social studies, English, art, technology, physical education and of course Spanish. But not every student spends the whole day at school. Because in many schools there are more children than the classrooms can hold at once Panamanian schools might operate in

two shifts. One group arrives early in the morning and finishes around lunchtime, then a second group uses the same classrooms during the afternoon.

That might sound like a wonderfully short school day, but kids are still expected to squeeze their lessons into those hours, and might have to do homework when they get home.

"Where you live can also make a big difference to your school experience. A student in Panama City might travel by car or bus to a big school filled with computers and other tech, while in a remote rural or Indigenous community, getting to class might involve walking along unsealed tracks or travelling by boat.

Some small schools struggle with limited internet access, learning materials or even electricity. There are also not always enough teachers willing or able to work in isolated communities."

In break times both soccer and baseball are super popular in Panama

But when school's out, Panama still has plenty of strange and surprising stories. Lets see whether you...

BELIEVE IT OR NOT

"For a relatively small country, Panama has a ridiculous amount of wildlife. There are jaguars, tapirs, anteaters, capybaras, crocodiles, sea turtles, monkeys, sloths and more than 1,000 species of birds. Panama's national bird is the harpy eagle, one of the world's largest and most powerful eagles. Its legs can be as thick as a person's wrist and its enormous curved talons are strong enough to snatch monkeys and sloths from the rainforest canopy.

But Panama's most unusual animal communicator is much smaller... and much more polite."

"The Panamanian golden frog lives around fast-flowing, noisy forest streams. Calling out over all that rushing water isn't always easy, so the frogs use their bodies to communicate. They twitch their heads and legs, stamp their feet and wave their front limbs at one another.

Hello! Over here! Lovely weather we're having! I've stuck a video of another great communicator, David Attenborough, with these little guys in the episode notes.

Despite its name, the golden frog is actually a type of toad. Its bright yellow skin warns predators that it is poisonous, and it has become a beloved national symbol of good fortune."

And now for something else difficult to believe... a Panamanian icon that isn't Panamanian at all.... The lightweight straw hat known around the world as a Panama hat is traditionally made in ____Ecuador.

The hats were woven from toquilla [toh-KEE-yah] straw by Ecuadorian craftspeople and shipped overseas through Panama, an important centre of international trade. Travellers bought and wore them there, and the name "Panama hat" stuck. The confusion grew when US President Theodore Roosevelt was photographed wearing one while visiting the Panama Canal construction site in 1906.

Panama actually does have its own traditional hat, called the sombrero pintao [som-BREH-roh peen-TAH-oh]. It is woven from plant fibres and decorated with distinctive dark patterns, and unlike the so-called Panama hat, it really is Panamanian.

All these waving frogs, enormous eagles, and mixed-up hats have made me surprisingly hungry, which means it must be...

DINNER TIME

Panama's food is a delicious mixture of Indigenous, Spanish, African and Caribbean influences, with plenty of rice, beans, plantains, cassava, chicken and seafood. One of the country's best-loved dishes is sancocho de gallina [san-KOH-choh deh gah-YEE-nah]... a warm, comforting chicken soup made with chunks of ñame [NYAH-meh], which is a starchy root vegetable, and plenty of culantro [koo-LAHN-troh], a strongly flavoured herb related to coriander. Every family has its own version, but Panamanian sancocho is usually served with white rice. It is the sort of meal people turn to when they're tired, feeling unwell or maybe recovering from a very big celebration. Basically, Panama's answer to almost every problem is: have some chicken soup.

On the side, there might be patacones [pah-tah-KOH-ness]. These are pieces of green plantain that are fried, squashed into flat discs and then fried again until they're golden and crunchy. Yes, fried twice. That is commitment to crunch. Another popular snack is a carimañola [kah-ree-mah-NYOH-lah]... cassava dough shaped around a filling of seasoned meat or cheese and fried until crisp on the outside.

And for dessert, especially on a hot Panamanian day, there's raspao [rahs-PAH-oh]. A street vendor called a raspairo [rahs-pah-EH-roh] scrapes ice from a large block, piles it into a cup and pours brightly coloured fruit syrup over the top. Some versions also come with condensed milk or malt powder. Cold, sweet, sticky and almost guaranteed to turn your tongue a ridiculous colour.

Well, our bowls are empty, our raspao has melted and it's nearly time to fly home. But first, let's find out how closely you've been listening...

THE S'QUIZ

This is the part of the podcast where you get to test how well you've been listening.

"Which two continents are connected by the Isthmus of Panama?

North and South America"

"How do Panamanian golden frogs communicate beside noisy forest streams?

By twitching, stamping and waving to each other"

"In which country are the hats known as Panama hats traditionally made?

Ecuador"

That's all we have time for today. Thanks for staying curious about the world, and joining me on this incredible trip to Panama

Now get out there, and have a most excellent day. Over and out.