

PLEASURES OF PANAMA

Cloud Forest - Interoceanic Train - Canal Transit

10 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Panama City

Arrival at Tocumen International Airport, Panama City.

The most cosmopolitan capital in Central America, Panama City is both vibrant metropolis and gateway to tropical escapes. Welcoming both east and west, Panama is a regional hub of trade and immigration. The resulting cultural cocktail mix leads to a refreshing attitude that's dynamic and fluid.

Overnight in Panama City.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Partial Canal Transit

We have an early morning pick-up at the hotel for the 15 minute drive to the port of Balboa where we board the passenger ferry that will take us on the world famous journey through the Panama Canal ("partial" transit; one-way). For many, this tour is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. At the MiraFlores Locks we experience how ships are raised 16 m / 54 feet in a two step process. This activity is achieved by sending water from Pedro Miguel's lake by gravity to fill the chambers where the ship is locked. Once the first set of locks is transited, the vessel arrives at the Pedro Miguel locks to be raised up to 26 m / 85 feet. Again no water pumps are used; they take advantage of gravity to transfer water from Gatun Lake, filling the last Chamber of the Pacific site. We cross the Continental divide and narrowest part of the Panama Canal arriving at the town of Gamboa, home to the dredging division, an important part in the functioning of the canal.

The tour includes breakfast and lunch and a specialist guide. Light clothes, insect repellent, hat, sunscreen and very comfortable shoes, are suggested. Do not forget your camera!

Overnight in Panama City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 3 Panama City: Portobelo & Agua Clara Locks

Today we travel by bus to Portobelo, once the main port of entry and exit for all of South America. The exchange of merchandise took place annually at Portobelo in the form of a "fair," which lasted from 30 to 60 days. During this time, this sleepy little place was a beehive of activity; indeed transactions frequently totaled from 10 to 12 million gold pesos! These fairs took place once each year until 1738 when, as a result of continual attacks by pirates, Spain was forced to abandon the Isthmian route for the longer but more secure one around Cape Horn. The frequent pirate attacks forced the Spaniards to adopt a convoy system; each year two fleets of 40 to 70 ships sailed from Spain, one bound for Veracruz, the other for Portobelo. Portobelo is a shadow of it's former glory but is still quite quaint and charming.

Our visit begins with San Filipe Church, the Church of the Black Christ, named for a wooden statue of Jesus Christ found on the shores of the town's harbour. Life-size, it's adorned with a robe that is changed twice a year, once during the Festival of the Black Christ and also during Holy Week. There are many legends about how the image came to rest in Panama: a shipwreck, a miracle, a saviour from the black death. This was the first church of mainland America.

We then walk to the Customs House, passing by the stone inlay sundial and gold measures. This is where the majority of the gold was stored before being sent to Spain. Next to the Customs House is Fort San Geronimo. A ten-minute walk through town takes us to Fort Santiago -- across the road from the fort, there are steps that lead up to ruins of old battlements. The view from up here is stupendous!

Our last stop is Agua Clara Locks and Visitor Centre, the third set of locks that opened in 2016. Of particular interest are the locks' fascinating overflow tanks that allow for 60% of the water to be recycled as the ships go through the locks. Hopefully our visit will coincide with a ship in the canal!

Canada/USA
1-800-665-3998

Email
sales@adventures-abroad.com

Overnight in Panama City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Parque Metropolitano & Amerindian Village

Today we head north of downtown to Parque Metropolitano, which protects vast expanses of tropical semi-deciduous forest within the city limits and serves as an incredible wilderness escape from the trappings of the capital. Our walking route takes us to 150m-high mirador (lookout) with panoramic views of Panama City, the bay and the canal all the way to the Miraflores Locks.

This afternoon we visit an Embera / Choco Amerindian village. We take a boat along the route commonly used by the Indians for their daily transport along the river. A short walk through a forest follows, with a local guide to explain botanical novelties and the culture of this authentic village. We return to Panama City.

Overnight in Panama City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Panama City Touring - Fly to David, Chiriqui Highlands

This morning, still in Panama City, we include a visit to the ruins of Old Panama and Casco Viejo (the old city compound) dating back to the late 1600's.* We will learn of the events in history leading up to the eventual movement of the capital city to its present location. Casco Viejo is home to monuments to Ferdinand de Lesseps and others who were instrumental in the ill-fated French attempt to construct a canal through Panama. Here we visit the Altar de Oro at the San Jose church. As it's name would suggest this large baroque altar is made of pure gold. The church was built soon after the first Spanish settlement was established on the Pacific Coast in 1519. In the 17th Century this settlement was abandoned and moved to it's present location on the small peninsula that that contains the San Felipe district of the city. When the church itself was moved so was it's most famous possession. Our tour ends with a visit to the Panama Canal Museum.

Later today we'll transfer to Panama City's Albrook domestic airport where we board the scheduled flight to David in the province of Chiriqui.**

This enchanted land is the Chiriqui Highlands, the part of the Cordillera Central that defines the northern border of the province of Chiriqui. Primeval rainforests bedecked with clouds, noisy, chattering birds flash brilliant iridescent colours as they dart about their daily chores, flowering epiphytes bloom en masse high above the forest floor while gurgling streams glisten and tumble hurriedly over great boulders in their dance towards the sea. It is a beautiful landscape of cloud forests, volcanic peaks, coffee plantations and home to most of Panama's Guaymi Indians.

* Flight schedules may have us flying to David this morning in which case the above listed Panama City sightseeing will be accomplished on Day 9.

** Due to 12 kilo weight restriction on this flight and on the flight from Bocas back to Panama City, we strongly recommend that you pack a smaller bag for the next few nights and leave excess baggage in storage at our Panama City hotel.

Overnight in Chiriqui Highlands.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Chiriqui Highlands

Today we will travel to Cerro Punta to explore the area with a local naturalist guide on a nature walk.

This area is good for resplendent quetzal, black and yellow silky flycatcher, prong billed barbet, and the volcano hummingbird. From here we'll travel to the area of La Amistad International Park Headquarters. La Amistad is a bi-national park that stretches from Costa Rica into Panama, a small portion of which extends into the Chiriqui province encompassing mostly cloud forests. Here the land rises in excess of 1500

m / 4,950 feet and warm air ascends the mountains where it meets with cooler air and condenses into a persistent cloud cover. Cloud forests exhibit a unique ecosystem with an astonishing diversity of flora and fauna.

We also tour Haras Cerro Punta, a thoroughbred breeding farm in a mountain valley between Cerro Punta and Guadalupe – the highest inhabited part of Panama. The 100-hectare farm is surrounded by one of the most fertile agricultural areas in the country. With an average population of 200 animals, the farm turns out racehorse champions for Panama and beyond.

NOTE: The order of our Chiriqui sightseeing may vary due to weather, accommodation availability, and other logistical considerations.

Overnight in Chiriqui Highlands.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Chiriqui Highlands - Bocas del Toro

After a leisurely morning we prepare for our drive to Almirante on the Caribbean side of the country. En route we stop to view the impressive Fortuna Dam and spectacular waterfalls along the Continental Divide. We will be crossing the Palo Seco Protected Area that serves as buffer zone to La Amistad International Park. The transition from the cloud forests to the coral reefs of Bocas del Toro is impressive. In Almirante we are met by our boat and transferred to the island.

Five hundred years ago, Christopher Columbus arrived at a tropical paradise he named Bocas del Toro. Overwhelmed by the most incredible contrasts of vivid colour and sheer unspoiled natural surroundings, Columbus decided to drop anchor and spend a bit of time in this idyllic place. Not much has changed since that pristine time with the exception of the provocative Calypso beat and the alluring accent of the Caribbean inhabitants. Bocas is the best place to sink your toes in the white sand, to explore lush tropical rainforests and coral reefs and to look for the faithful sea turtles that have come to these islands for millennia.

Overnight in Bocas del Toro.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Bocas del Toro

Ninety-two percent of this island is covered by tropical forest that helps keep a natural balance of the ecosystem. This huge national patrimony has 200 species of plants, 55 amphibious and reptiles, 57 mammals, 200 types of birds, 1500 bugs, and more than 58 species of corals.

Bocas del Toro Province is bordered by the Caribbean Sea to the north, Veraguas Province to the east, Chiriqui Province to the south and Costa Rica to the west. Most of the province is on the slopes of the Talamanca and Central mountain ranges, but the majority of its 93,000 inhabitants live in low-lying areas along the coast and on islands.

The province contains the large Archipelago de Bocas del Toro at the mouth of the Laguna de Chiriqui, beginning 35km from the Costa Rican border. The chain consists of 68 islands and numerous mangrove keys. Around them are fields of coral, a titanic variety of marine life and water so emerald in colour that Christopher Columbus named the region Veraguas, a contraction of verdes aguas (green waters).

Today we have a boat tour to the surrounding attractions of the island so you can appreciate the incredible beauty of this place. There will be time for swimming in the surf and walking along the coastline to Red Frog Beach where you will be amazed by a sort of symphony of rather non-musical chirping that sounds like it must be coming from crickets. When you look closer, however, you will be surprised to find that this strangely beautiful noise is coming from a small frog, about the size of your thumbnail.

Overnight in Bocas del Toro.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Bocas de Toro - Fly to Panama City: Panama City Touring

This morning we hope to have some leisure time in Bocas before flying back to the capital this afternoon.

Balance of the day at leisure prior to reconvening for our evening meal.

Overnight in Panama City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Departure

Today we depart from Panama City.

BUEN VIAJE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast