TOUR CODE

PA2

ADVENTURESABROAD

PANAMA & COSTA RICA

17 days

Updated 21/08/2013

Day 1 *Arrival in Panama City*

Arrival at Tocumen International Airport, Panama City.

Overnight in Panama City. Meal plan: 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. 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 use; 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. Meal plan: Breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Day 3 *Panama City - Soberania National Park - Panama City*

Soberania is home to more than 400 species of birds and 1,000 species of plants. Located within the park, Pipeline Road is where the Panama Audobon Society established a world record Christmas bird count in 1985 by identifying 385 species of birds in a 24-hour period. The cultural and historic aspect of this park can be seen on the Camino de Cruces Trail and at the Chagres River which in the colonial days were used as a way to transport the gold and silver from Peru to the many and famous fairs that took place in Portobelo (near Colon). On our easy nature walk, we may see Mantled Howler and White Faced Capuchin Monkeys, Central American Coati, Three Toed Sloth, and many others.

This afternoon we visit an Embera / Choco Amerindian village. We take a "piragua" (a native 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. Meal plan: Breakfast and lunch.

Day 4 *Panama City - Interoceanic Train - Panama City*

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. 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. Our visit / tour also includes the Maria Chiquita coastal area.

For our return to Panama City, we proceed to Colon where we board the Interoceanic Train for a scenic one hour journey back to the capital. The Panama Railroad became the first transcontinental railway when it was completed in 1855 -- of course, a "transcontinental" line is a lot easier to make when you've only got 50 miles to cross! The California Gold Rush brought the new railway lots of business; eventually it was sold to first the French, and then the Americans, in conjunction with the efforts to build the Panama Canal, and it eventually passed to Panama in 1979 under the terms of the Panama Canal treaty. Now it's a private venture, completely rebuilt, with elegantly refurbished passenger coaches. The passenger trade is just a sideline, though. The real business of the railway is freight, moving containers between the Atlantic and the Pacific in less time and at lower cost than a canal passage. The train follows the canal and runs across narrow artificial causeways in Lake Gatun that are indeed spectacular, and the ambiance of the train is very pleasant.

Overnight in Panama City. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 5 *Panama City - David, Chiriqui Highlands*

Today we are picked up at our Panama City hotel and transferred 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.

This is a very scenic travel day with stops for photos and at various points of interest.

* 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 4 nights and leave excess baggage in storage at our Panama City hotel.

Overnight in Chirqui Highlands. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 6 *Chiriqui Highlands*

Today we will travel to Cerro Punta to explore the area of Finca Fernandez and El Respingo with a local naturalist guide. 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.

On the the eastern side of the dormant Baru Volcano is the quaint town of Boquete with its countryside dotted with flowers, fruit and vegetable farms, coffee plantations and lush tropical cloud forests. We also visit Finca Dracula, an orchid farm with one of the largest orchid collections worldwide.

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

Overnight in Chiriqui Highlands. Meal plan: 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. Meal plan: 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 Archipielago 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. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 9 *Bocas del Toro - Panama City*

This morning we should have time (air schedules permitting) to partake in some optional activities -- kayaking, visiting a beach, hiking or merely relaxing in a hammock -- before flying back to the capital.

On arrival in Panama City, we embark immediately on a city tour. Our tour includes a visit to the ruins of Old Panama and Casco Viejo (the old city compound) which dates from 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 barouque 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.

Overnight in Panama City. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 10 *Panama City - San Jose, Costa Rica*

Today we fly from Panama City to San Jose, Costa Rica.

Overnight in San Jose. Hotel Balmoral or similar. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 11 *San Jose - Tortuguero*

This morning we travel by bus from San Jose through Braulio Carillo National Park, one of Costa Rica's largest. Later we visit a working banana plantation and pass through a region known for its cocoa production. We then board our riverboat and spend the afternoon journeying through myriad interconnecting rivers and canals that take us finally to the Caribbean coast and Tortuguero Park.

The park is a water thoroughfare which is a 160 km (100 mile) stretch of natural rivers, lagoons and estuaries, and connecting man-made waterways that run almost to the Nicaraguan border. The canal is the main "highway" of the northern coastal region, complete with directional signs and branches from the main trunk route.

As we go along the canal, keep a keen lookout for views of pastel-coloured toucans and monkeys of various type; if we're lucky, a lazy sloth hanging from a branch, and maybe a coati or two roaming the forest. Stands of mangroves and water hyacinth appear here and there. Scattered along the way are people, too -- fishers and farmers whose dugouts serve all the purposes of pickup trucks elsewhere. Mostly the banks remain wild, and the calls of monkeys and whistles of birds predominate over the noises of humans.

Overnight in Tortuguero. Meal plan: Breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Day 12 *Tortuguero: Forest Walk & Village*

Tortuguero Park is a fascinating place to explore. An early morning boat ride offers an opportunity to observe an awakening coastal rain forest full of lush vegetation and unique bird life.

After lunch we visit the village of Tortuguero accessible only by river boat; you may choose to walk on the Caribbean beach where several turtle species lay their eggs each year. We will visit the Tortuguero Museum with its excellent displays pertaining to the ecology of the area and an informative video presentation specific to turtle conservation in Tortuguero and the entire Caribbean region.

NOTE: The exact order of our activities in Tortuguero may vary depending on weather and other variables.

Overnight in Tortuguero. Meal plan: Breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Day 13 *Tortuguero - Baldi Hotsprings - Arenal Volcano*

After an early breakfast we travel by boat 1½-hour from Tortuguero to the Cano Blanco dock. From there we continue by road (+/- 5 hours) to the La Fortuna / Arenal area.

We travel through rolling hills covered with sugar cane fields to overnight near Arenal Volcano. We make a stop at the Baldi Hotsprings (located near Arenal and outside the Risk Zones established by the National Prevention of Risks and Emergency Commission). Here a geothermally-heated river flows through beautifully landscaped grounds featuring many plant and tree species and great birdlife. We will have time to relax in or around the various pools (bring a towel). The springs feature several hot pools with different temperatures fed by individual springs and three swim-up bars.

This evening (weather & volcanic activity permitting) we can view the volcano.

Overnight at Arenal / La Fortuna. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 14 *Arenal - Monteverde Cloud Forest*

Today we travel through a rustic rural countryside to the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve area (+/- 4 hours).

Covered in a mantle of moss, ferns and orchids, this private reserve is home to over 400 species of birds and a great number of animals. The forest is created by the winds, particular temperature and moisture conditions, and mountainous topography which combine during the dry season to hold a steady cloud cover along the continental divide. The rains and the moisture in the air nourish trees and plants rooted in the ground, as well as many plants that live at the upper levels of the forest, and take their nutrients directly from the mist and dust that pass through the air. The result is an enchanted fairy-tale environment where trees are laden with orchids, bromeliads, mosses and ferns that obscure their branches, where the moisture and mild temperatures and sunlight filtered by the forest canopy encourage the exuberance of begonias, heliconias, philodendron and many other tropical plants in every available space on the ground.

This afternoon we have a guided tour of the "Butterfly Garden" where butterflies and other endemic insects are raised and protected in a controlled environment allowing scientists to study them -- their place in the food chain and their response to things like increased pollution and climate change.

Overnight at Monteverde. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 15 *Monteverde Cloud Forest*

We have a full morning exploring the cloud forest reserve with the help of a local naturalist guide. There is more to the forest than the trees and lesser plants. Of over 320 bird species, the most notable is the quetzal with its long arc of tail feathers. Assorted trogons in addition to the quetzal inhabit the reserve, along with more than 50 varieties of hummingbird. About 500 kinds of butterfly are found at Monteverde. Among the more than 100 mammalian species are howler, white-faced and spider monkeys, coatis and their cousins, raccoons; as well as the rarely observed pumas, ocelots, jaguars, tapirs, and kinkajous.

This afternoon you may choose to go on an optional "Canopy Walk" excursion, located within the cloud forest. Suspension foot-bridges are strung across deep gorges allowing one to get a bird's eye view of the forest from a totally different perspective than we experienced this morning. At a leisurely pace, one can complete this easy and fascinating walk in about 90 minutes. Your Tour Leader can help you plan this activity (optional cost approx $25-40, subject to change).

REMEMBER: This can be a wet and windy place by definition. You should be prepared for varied conditions.

Overnight at Monteverde. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 16 *Monteverde - San Jose*

Today we return by road to San Jose.

Time permitting, we recommend a visit to the Gold Museum in downtown San Jose (optional), easily the country's best with thousands of different examples of Pre-Columbian gold artifacts (the museum closes at 16:30).

Overnight in San Jose. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 17 *Departure*

Departure from San Jose.

BUEN VIAJE! Meal plan: Breakfast.