Tour Code
PA1

ADVENTURESABROAD

PLEASURES OF PANAMA

Cloud Forest - Interoceanic Train - Canal Transit

10 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Panama City

Panama City rises where two oceans nearly meet, barely 80 km/50 mi apart at the isthmus's narrowest point.

Skyscrapers line the Pacific bay in a skyline built on shipping and finance, while Casco Viejo's colonial streets, a short walk inland, recall the centuries when this same ground carried Spanish silver instead of container traffic.

The city has always made its living from being in between: between oceans, between continents, between empires seeking a shortcut. Nearly five million people live along this narrow strip of land, and much of the country's economy moves through, or because of, the canal we cross tomorrow.

We gather this evening for a welcome dinner among fellow travellers.

Overnight in Panama City.

Included Meal(s): Dinner

Day 2 Partial Canal Transit

Today delivers the experience this tour is named for: a partial transit of the Panama Canal. A short drive to Balboa port puts us aboard a ferry and into the canal itself.

At Miraflores Locks, our ship rises 16 m/52 ft through two gravity-fed chambers, no pumps, just water finding its own level, the same principle that has moved ships here since 1914. Pedro Miguel Locks lift us a further 26 m/85 ft, drawing on Gatun Lake's own reserves to do the work.

The original locks, opened in 1914, measure 33.5 m/110 ft wide, a limit that defined the maximum size of oceangoing ships for nearly a century until a wider set opened alongside them in 2016. Small, powerful locomotives called mules guide the ship through the narrow chambers, holding it steady while gravity handles the heavy lifting.

Beyond the locks we cross the Continental Divide and reach Gamboa, headquarters of the canal's dredging division, still clearing the same landslide-prone cut that defeated the original French effort in the 1880s.

Every drop of water raising us through these chambers fell as rain somewhere in the watershed we cross later this trip, proof that this entire system runs, quite literally, downhill.

Overnight in Panama City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 3 Panama City: Portobelo & Agua Clara Locks

We trace two very different ways of moving wealth across this isthmus, three centuries apart.

A bus first takes us to Portobelo, once the Caribbean terminus for Spain's entire Pacific trade. An annual fair here ran thirty to sixty days, moving ten to twelve million gold pesos at a stretch, before pirate raids grew persistent enough that Spain abandoned the route in 1738.

Fort San Geronimo and Fort Santiago still stand guard over a harbour long since gone quiet, though it once anchored more treasure than any other port in the Spanish Americas. Inside San Felipe Church, the Black Christ, a life-sized wooden Jesus found on the shore under circumstances nobody fully agrees on, draws pilgrims from across Central America each October.

NOTE: some monuments may be inaccessible due to ongoing renovations.

From Portobelo we continue to Agua Clara Locks, part of the canal's modern expansion, where overflow tanks recycle 60 per cent of the fresh water each transit uses, gravity doing now what it did for Spanish galleons then, just with better bookkeeping.

We finish the day boarding the Interoceanic Train at Colon for the run back to the capital. Completed in 1855, it was the world's first transcontinental railway, just 80 km/50 mi long, and it carried Gold Rush prospectors long before it carried canal freight.

Overnight in Panama City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Parque Metropolitano & Amerindian Village

A short drive from the skyscrapers, Parque Metropolitano protects a wedge of tropical forest inside the city limits. A trail climbs to a 150 m/490 ft mirador with views across the city, the bay and the canal reaching toward Miraflores.

In the afternoon we travel by boat to an Embera village on the Chagres watershed, one of the river systems the canal depends on for its water. The Chagres was dammed in 1935 to create Gatun Lake, flooding an entire river valley to build the canal's summit level.

The Embera and Choco peoples have adapted to this changed landscape while keeping much of their traditional life intact, still building homes on stilts above the seasonal floodline.

Guides walk us through basket weaving using natural fibres and explain the medicinal uses of local plants, knowledge passed down rather than written. Jagua dye, pressed from a local fruit, still marks ceremonial occasions, and dugout canoes tied along the riverbank are carved much as they would have been before Spanish ships first appeared offshore.

It is a useful corrective: the canal moves the world's cargo through this watershed, but people have been reading this same forest, on its own terms, for far longer than ships have needed it to cooperate.

Overnight in Panama City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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

Panama City's morning belongs to its own layered history. Casco Viejo, the colonial quarter dating to the late 1600s, replaced the original settlement at Panama Viejo after Henry Morgan's pirates burned it to the ground.

Its streets mix Spanish colonial, French and early Republican architecture, layer on layer. Monuments here honour Ferdinand de Lesseps and the French canal attempt that failed a generation before the Americans succeeded where he could not.

Inside San Jose Church, the Altar de Oro survives from the city's first Pacific-coast settlement in 1519, reportedly saved from Morgan's raiders by nuns who painted it black to disguise its gold.

The Panama Canal Museum closes out the morning inside de Lesseps's own former canal company headquarters, an ironic address for the story of how his project failed and America's succeeded.

By afternoon we fly to David in Chiriqui Province, trading sea level for the cloud-wrapped highlands of the Cordillera Central: volcanic peaks, coffee estates and Guaymi communities living at an elevation the canal's engineers never needed to reach.

NOTE: a 12 kg/26 lb weight restriction applies to this flight; excess baggage can be stored in Panama City.

Overnight in Chiriqui Highlands.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Chiriqui Highlands

At Cerro Punta, above 2,000 m/6,560 ft, the air turns cool and thin, our first real sense of how much vertical relief this small country contains.

Quetzals and volcano hummingbirds work the cloud forest canopy, each species keyed to its own narrow band of altitude. Some of the world's most sought-after geisha coffee grows on these same slopes, its price shaped as much by altitude and cloud cover as by flavour, and we stop to taste a cup at the source.

We continue to La Amistad International Park, a binational reserve straddling the Costa Rican border and covering more protected forest, over 400,000 hectares in total, than any other site in Central America. We walk the El Retono Trail, a 3 km/1.9 mi loop through cloud forest thick with epiphytes and orchids.

NOTE: trails are steep, uneven and often muddy; sturdy waterproof footwear is essential.

We end at Haras Cerro Punta, a thoroughbred farm raising some 200 horses in a mountain valley that could pass for bluegrass country, if bluegrass country sat on the Continental Divide.

Overnight in Chiriqui Highlands.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Chiriqui Highlands - Bocas del Toro

Today we descend from cloud forest to coral reef in a single afternoon. The drive to Almirante, on Panama's Caribbean coast, passes Fortuna Dam at the Continental Divide, the exact ridgeline where rainfall decides whether it reaches the Pacific or the Caribbean.

We cross the Palo Seco Protected Area, a buffer zone for La Amistad park, watching the vegetation thicken and the architecture trade its Spanish colonial lines for Afro-Caribbean colour as the elevation drops.

Villages along the last stretch trade zinc roofs for wooden stilt houses raised above tidal creeks, the clearest sign yet that we have left the Pacific slope behind. By the time we reach the coast for our boat transfer, the transformation is complete.

Columbus anchored here five centuries ago and named the wider region Veraguas, a contraction of verdes aguas, green waters, and it is not hard to see why once the boat pushes off into water this clear.

Overnight in Bocas del Toro.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Bocas del Toro

The Bocas del Toro archipelago is still 92 per cent forest, and today we go looking for what lives in it. The chain runs to 68 islands and countless mangrove keys, home to roughly 93,000 people scattered along the coasts, surrounded by coral fields and marine life that punches well above the region's modest land area.

Hawksbill turtles still nest on several of these beaches between March and October, drawn back to the same stretches of sand where they hatched decades earlier.

A boat tour threads between islands, past Bastimentos and its protected marine park, before putting us ashore for swimming and a walk to Red Frog Beach, named for the tiny, thumbnail-sized poison dart frogs that turn up underfoot with startling regularity.

Their calls, a chirping chorus easy to mistake for insects, are one small example of a species found nowhere else on Earth.

It is easy, on an island this quiet, to forget that this same narrow country holds one of the busiest shipping corridors on the planet. That contrast, more than any single sight, is the point of Panama.

Overnight in Bocas del Toro.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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

A final morning in Bocas del Toro is ours to spend as we like, one more swim or a walk along a favourite beach before our afternoon flight back to the capital.

That flight is its own kind of highlight: in under an hour we retrace, from the air, almost everything Panama has shown us, the Caribbean archipelago falling away below, the cloud forest ridgeline where the watershed splits, and finally the canal itself, ships queued at anchor waiting their turn through the locks.

From the window we can pick out Barro Colorado Island in Gatun Lake, a research station older than most of the countries whose flags we have seen on ships this week.

This evening's farewell dinner gives us a chance to compare notes on a country that turned out to be far less about a canal than we expected, and far more about everything that canal made possible.

Overnight in Panama City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Departure

We depart from a country defined, in the end, by the width of ground between two oceans -- narrow enough to cross in an hour by rail, wide enough to hold cloud forest, coral reef, colonial gold and the busiest lock system on Earth.

¡Buen viaje!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast