Tour Code
PA2

ADVENTURESABROAD

PANAMA & COSTA RICA

17 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 Panama City - San Jose, Costa Rica

We fly from Panama City to San Jose, capital of Costa Rica, set on a plateau in the Central Valley at 1,200 m/3,940 ft and ringed by green mountains.

San Jose holds close to a third of the country's population, and its downtown mixes brisk traffic with eclectic, historic architecture. The grid can feel gritty at first look, but friendly people and quirky corners soon soften that impression.

We settle in this evening, at the edge of the cool valley air that will give way, over the coming days, to cloud forest, volcanoes and coast, a very different Costa Rica from the one most guidebooks photograph.

Overnight in San Jose.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 San Jose - Boat to Tortuguero

This morning we drive from San Jose through Braulio Carrillo National Park, dropping from the cool Central Valley into the Caribbean lowlands on a highway that cuts straight through the forest.

If the season allows, we stop at a working banana plantation, still one of Costa Rica's biggest exports, and pass through cacao country, where trees grown in the shade of taller ones supply the beans behind the country's chocolate.

At the coast we board a riverboat for the crossing into Tortuguero, travelling a 160 km/100 mi network of rivers, lagoons and canals that is the only route in or out of this stretch of coastline.

We pass settlements that still get around by dugout canoe, watch for toucans and monkeys in the canopy, and keep an eye out for a sloth or two hanging motionless overhead. Coatis forage along banks lined with red mangrove roots, and past the boat engine, howler monkeys and birdsong are about the only sound.

NOTE: pack a smaller overnight bag for Tortuguero; boat space and portering are limited, and main luggage stays securely stored until we

depart.

Overnight in Tortuguero.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 12 Tortuguero: Forest Walk & Village

An early boat ride catches the coastal rainforest waking up, when birds and wildlife are at their most active. Around us the forest builds itself in layers, from waterline roots to a canopy tangled with vines.

After lunch we visit Tortuguero village, reachable only by boat, where turtle hunting and logging once drove the local economy before conservation and tourism took over.

We walk the beach where green turtles nest from July to October, one of the most important nesting sites for the species anywhere in the Western Hemisphere. Hawksbill turtles share that same window, and leatherbacks, the largest of all sea turtles, nest between February and April.

The Tortuguero Museum tells the rest of the story: research here goes back to 1955, when Dr. Archie Carr founded what became the Caribbean Conservation Corporation. The population recovery since is one of the better conservation comebacks in the region, and today's rangers still walk these same beaches counting nests each season.

NOTE: the order of today's activities may shift with weather and tides.

Overnight in Tortuguero.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 13 Tortuguero - Ecotermales Hot Springs - Arenal/La Fortuna Area

An early breakfast and a boat ride reunite us with our land transport, and we continue by road through sugar cane country, a crop grown here since colonial times, toward La Fortuna and Arenal.

We stop at Ecotermales Hot Springs, just outside Arenal's designated risk zones, where a geothermally heated river feeds a series of pools at different temperatures, each one a reminder of what is happening underground nearby.

Arenal itself rises 1,633 m/5,360 ft in a near-perfect cone, a shape that comes from being geologically young, only about 7,000 years old.

From 1968 to 2010 it was one of the most active volcanoes on Earth, throwing regular lava flows and explosions that reshaped the surrounding farmland more than once. Since December 2010 it has been quiet, still venting gas but producing no lava.

It is our first close look at Costa Rica's volcanic spine, not dead, just resting. Weather permitting, we get a clear view of it this evening from La Fortuna, the small town that grew up in its shadow.

Overnight at Arenal/La Fortuna.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Arenal - Monteverde Cloud Forest

Today's drive to Monteverde runs about four hours, the last stretch on unpaved roads that climb into the mountains, rough enough that they have done as much as any park boundary to keep this area undeveloped.

Monteverde's cloud forest exists because trade winds carrying Caribbean moisture hit the continental divide here and are forced upward,

cooling into the mist that keeps this side of the mountains wet even in the dry season.

That constant damp supports an unusual amount of life growing on other life: over 420 orchid species and 200 types of fern live as epiphytes, drawing what they need from rain and air rather than soil.

Established in 1972 by a small community of Quaker settlers and local conservationists, the reserve now protects more than 10,000 hectares and over 400 bird species, including the resplendent quetzal, whose iridescent tail feathers make it one of the most sought-after sightings in Central America.

Howler monkeys, capuchins and coatis are common; pumas and jaguars exist here too, though rarely seen.

This afternoon we visit the Butterfly Garden, a research facility raising native species to study pollination and how sensitive they are to a changing climate.

Overnight in Monteverde.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Monteverde Cloud Forest

A local naturalist guide leads this morning's walk through the reserve, adjusting the route to the weather and the group.

Beyond the quetzal and hummingbirds, listen for the three-wattled bellbird, whose call carries well beyond where the bird itself is visible, and watch for any of the roughly 500 butterfly species that call Monteverde home.

This afternoon is free, or you may choose an optional canopy walk: suspension bridges up to 170 m/560 ft long and 40 m/130 ft above the forest floor.

Optional: at an easy pace the full canopy walk takes about 90 minutes and gives a rare look at the forest from the inside rather than below it; your Tour Leader can help arrange it and confirm current pricing.

NOTE: cloud forests earn their name; expect wind, mist and rain even in the dry season, so waterproof layers are essential.

Overnight at Monteverde.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Monteverde - San Jose

We return by road to San Jose today.*

If time allows before dinner, the Gold Museum downtown is worth the stop, generally regarded as the country's best, with thousands of pieces of pre-Columbian gold work on display (last entry 16:30).

* Today's transfer will not be accompanied by your Tour Leader, who continues on with travellers who chose the longer routing. You will be dropped off at the hotel by your local driver/guide in time for an included evening meal at the hotel.

Overnight in San Jose.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Depart

We depart from San Jose, from a country where nearly everything we saw traced back to the ground itself -- a cone still cooling at Arenal, a

cloud forest fed by the mountains that made it and a canal system that has carried people and cargo since long before any of us arrived. Buen viaje!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast