

PANAMA & COSTA RICA

17 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Panama City

Welcome to Panama City, Central America's most cosmopolitan capital, where skyscrapers pierce tropical skies and two great oceans meet through human ingenuity. This vibrant metropolis serves as both a dynamic regional hub and gateway to extraordinary tropical adventures.

Panama's unique position welcoming both east and west has created a cultural cocktail that's refreshingly fluid and dynamic. Centuries of trade, immigration, and interoceanic commerce have shaped a city where colonial Spanish heritage blends with Caribbean rhythms, while gleaming modern towers reflect Panama's role as a contemporary financial centre.

Tonight, we gather fellow travellers for dinner, sharing anticipation for our journey through one of the world's most strategically important and naturally diverse countries.

Overnight in Panama City.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Partial Canal Transit

The world's most famous waterway beckons as we embark on a once-in-a-lifetime journey through the Panama Canal, one of humanity's greatest engineering achievements.

Our adventure begins with a 15-minute drive to Balboa port, where we board the passenger ferry for our partial canal transit. At Miraflores Locks, we witness the extraordinary process as ships rise 16 metres (54 feet) through ingenious two-step chambers. This marvel operates entirely by gravity—no pumps required—as water flows from Pedro Miguel Lake to fill the chambers where vessels await passage.

We then observe the Pedro Miguel Locks, where ships ascend to 26 metres (85 feet) above sea level. Again, gravity alone transfers water from Gatún Lake, demonstrating the canal's elegant hydraulic engineering. Crossing the Continental Divide at the canal's narrowest point, we arrive in Gamboa, home to the dredging division that maintains this vital maritime highway.

The experience includes breakfast, lunch, and specialist guide commentary revealing the canal's fascinating operational complexities. Each transit requires precise coordination, with vessels guided through narrow chambers by powerful locomotives called "mules" ensuring safe passage.

Light clothing, insect repellent, hat, sunscreen, and comfortable shoes enhance your comfort during this unforgettable journey through one of the world's most important transportation corridors.

Overnight in Panama City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 3 Panama City: Portobelo & Agua Clara Locks

We journey to Portobelo, once the beating heart of Spain's New World empire, where treasure fleets loaded Peruvian silver and Mexican gold for the perilous Atlantic crossing.

During colonial times, Portobelo hosted annual trade fairs lasting 30 to 60 days, transforming this sleepy Caribbean port into a bustling commercial centre where transactions frequently totalled 10 to 12 million gold pesos. These extraordinary gatherings continued until 1738, when relentless pirate attacks forced Spain to abandon the Isthmian route for the longer but safer passage around Cape Horn.

The constant pirate threat necessitated convoy systems—each year, two fleets of 40 to 70 ships sailed from Spain, one bound for Veracruz, the other for Portobelo. Though diminished from its golden age glory, Portobelo retains considerable charm and historical significance.

We begin at San Felipe Church, home to the Black Christ—a life-sized wooden statue of Jesus discovered on the harbour shores. Adorned with robes changed twice yearly during the Festival of the Black Christ and Holy Week, numerous legends surround its miraculous arrival: shipwreck, divine intervention, or salvation from plague.

We then visit the Customs House, passing stone sundials and gold measures where Spanish treasure was weighed before shipment. Fort San Gerónimo and Fort Santiago reveal defensive strategies, while panoramic views from ancient battlements showcase this strategic harbour's commanding position.

Our final stop at Agua Clara Locks reveals modern canal expansion, featuring fascinating overflow tanks allowing 60% water recycling as vessels transit.

* PLEASE NOTE that, due to ongoing renovations some of the monuments listed above may not be accessible during our visit.

Overnight in Panama City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Parque Metropolitano & Amerindian Village

Urban wilderness awaits at Parque Metropolitano, where vast expanses of tropical semi-deciduous forest create an incredible escape within Panama City's boundaries.

Our walking route ascends to a 150-metre-high mirador offering panoramic vistas across Panama City, the bay, and canal stretching toward Miraflores Locks. This protected forest demonstrates how tropical ecosystems survive within urban environments, providing habitat for countless bird species, mammals, and insects while offering residents and visitors a taste of Panama's remarkable biodiversity.

This afternoon brings cultural immersion as we visit an authentic Emberá/Chocó Amerindian village. Our journey begins with a boat ride along routes commonly used by indigenous peoples for daily river transport, providing insights into traditional lifestyles that continue largely unchanged despite modern Panama's development.

A short forest walk follows, guided by local experts who explain botanical novelties and cultural traditions maintaining deep connections to ancestral ways. The Emberá and Chocó peoples have inhabited these riverine environments for centuries, developing sophisticated knowledge of forest resources, traditional crafts, and sustainable living practices.

We witness traditional handicrafts including intricate basket weaving using natural fibres, while learning about medicinal plants, hunting techniques, and social customs that preserve indigenous identity. The village visit provides respectful cultural exchange, supporting community tourism initiatives that benefit local families while sharing their remarkable heritage.

Overnight in Panama City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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

Panama City's layered history unfolds as we explore ruins spanning from colonial foundations to modern canal construction. We begin at Old Panama ruins and Casco Viejo, the historic compound dating to the late 1600s, learning about events that led to the capital's eventual relocation. Casco Viejo houses monuments to Ferdinand de Lesseps and others instrumental in France's ill-fated canal attempt, revealing early engineering ambitions that preceded American success.

At San José Church, we discover the famous Altar de Oro—a magnificent baroque altarpiece crafted from pure gold. Built soon after the first Spanish Pacific Coast settlement in 1519, this church relocated to the present peninsula during the 17th-century capital movement, carrying its most precious possession. Our exploration concludes at the Panama Canal Museum, chronicling the waterway's complete construction saga.

Later, we transfer to Albrook domestic airport for our scheduled flight to David in Chiriquí Province.*

The enchanted Chiriquí Highlands await—part of the Cordillera Central defining northern Chiriquí Province. Primeval rainforests bedecked with clouds shelter chattering birds flashing brilliant iridescent colours, while flowering epiphytes bloom high above forest floors. Gurgling streams tumble over great boulders toward the sea through landscapes of cloud forests, volcanic peaks, coffee plantations, and traditional Guaymí Indian communities.

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* 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.

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Overnight in Chiriquí Highlands.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Chiriquí Highlands

Cerro Punta beckons as we explore Panama's highland wilderness with expert naturalist guides seeking the region's spectacular avian treasures.

These elevated forests provide excellent opportunities for spotting resplendent quetzals—Central America's most magnificent bird—alongside black and yellow silky flycatchers, prong-billed barbets, and volcano hummingbirds. Each species has adapted to specific altitude ranges and forest conditions, creating diverse ecological niches within relatively small geographic areas.

We continue to La Amistad International Park Headquarters, where this binational reserve stretches from Costa Rica into Panama. Small portions extend into Chiriquí Province, encompassing primarily cloud forests where land rises above 1,500 metres (4,950 feet). Here, warm air ascends mountains, meeting cooler temperatures and condensing into persistent cloud cover that creates unique ecosystems supporting astonishing flora and fauna diversity.

Cloud forests exhibit characteristics found nowhere else, with epiphytes, bromeliads, and orchids creating vertical gardens on tree trunks and branches. The constant moisture supports amphibians, insects, and specialized plant communities adapted to these misty conditions.

We also tour Haras Cerro Punta, a thoroughbred breeding farm nestled in a mountain valley between Cerro Punta and Guadalupe—Panama's highest inhabited region. This 100-hectare operation, surrounded by fertile agricultural areas, maintains an average population of 200 animals while producing racehorse champions for Panama and beyond.

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

Overnight in Chiriquí Highlands.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Chiriquí Highlands - Bocas del Toro

After a leisurely morning, we prepare for our scenic drive to Almirante on Panama's Caribbean coast, witnessing dramatic landscape transitions from highland cloud forests to tropical coral reefs.

En route, we pause at the impressive Fortuna Dam and spectacular waterfalls along the Continental Divide, where Pacific and Caribbean watersheds separate through geological forces that shaped Central America's mountainous spine. We cross the Palo Seco Protected Area, serving as a buffer zone for La Amistad International Park while demonstrating conservation strategies protecting biodiversity corridors.

The transformation from cloud forests to coral reefs proves remarkable as elevation decreases and Caribbean influences strengthen. Tropical vegetation changes dramatically, while architecture reflects Afro-Caribbean cultural influences that distinguish this region from Pacific Panama.

In Almirante, boats await to transfer us across emerald waters to our island destination.

Five centuries ago, Christopher Columbus arrived at this tropical paradise he named Bocas del Toro. Overwhelmed by incredible contrasts of vivid colours and pristine natural surroundings, Columbus dropped anchor to explore this idyllic archipelago. Little has changed since that

pristine era, except for the provocative calypso rhythms and alluring Caribbean accents of local inhabitants.

Bocas remains the perfect place to sink toes into white sand, explore lush rainforests and coral reefs, and observe faithful sea turtles that have visited these islands for millennia.

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Overnight in Bocas del Toro.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Bocas del Toro

Paradise reveals its secrets as we explore an archipelago where 92% of land remains covered by tropical forest, maintaining natural ecosystem balance that supports extraordinary biodiversity.

This immense national patrimony harbours 200 plant species, 55 amphibians and reptiles, 57 mammals, 200 bird types, 1,500 insects, and more than 58 coral species. Bocas del Toro Province borders the Caribbean Sea northward, with Veraguas Province eastward, Chiriquí southward, and Costa Rica westward. While most territory occupies Talamanca and Central mountain slopes, the majority of 93,000 inhabitants live in coastal lowlands and on islands.

The province contains the large Archipiélago de Bocas del Toro at Laguna de Chiriquí's mouth, beginning 35 kilometres from Costa Rica's border. This chain consists of 68 islands and numerous mangrove keys surrounded by coral fields, titanic marine life variety, and water so emerald that Christopher Columbus named the region Veraguas—contracting "verdes aguas" (green waters).

Our boat tour explores surrounding attractions revealing this destination's incredible beauty. Swimming opportunities await in pristine surf, while coastal walks lead to Red Frog Beach, where visitors discover an enchanting acoustic surprise. Initially, the symphony of non-musical chirping seems to come from crickets, but closer inspection reveals the source: tiny frogs about thumbnail size creating strangely beautiful sounds. These diminutive amphibians represent just one example of Bocas's remarkable endemic species, many found nowhere else on Earth.

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Overnight in Bocas del Toro.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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

Leisure time in tropical paradise allows final appreciation of Bocas's extraordinary natural beauty before our afternoon departure to Panama City.

Morning hours offer opportunities for independent exploration—perhaps revisiting favourite beaches, seeking additional wildlife sightings, or simply relaxing in hammocks while Caribbean breezes carry calypso rhythms and seabird calls.

The flight back to Panama City provides aerial perspectives of the landscape diversity we've experienced: from Caribbean archipelagos through highland cloud forests to the urban sophistication of Central America's most important capital. If Panama City sightseeing was postponed from Day 5 due to flight schedules, we accomplish those activities today upon arrival.

We reconvene this evening for our farewell dinner, sharing memories of canal transits, cloud forest adventures, cultural encounters, and Caribbean island magic that define Panama's remarkable diversity.

Overnight in Panama City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Panama City - San Jose, Costa Rica

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

San Jose, the capital of Costa Rica, is on a plateau in the Central Valley at 1200m (3,700 ft), ringed by lush green mountains and valleys. The population of this city is probably half of the whole country! The main downtown area is a bustling collection of well-laid-out streets filled with bustling traffic and lined with eclectic, historic architecture. On the surface, it is a gritty downtown area, but you'll also find friendly people, quirky spots, and the historic side of San Jose which might just change your initial impression.

Overnight in San Jose.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 San Jose - Boat to Tortuguero

This morning we travel by bus from San Jose through Braulio Carrillo National Park, one of Costa Rica's largest protected areas, covering 47,600 hectares (117,600 acres). The park protects five distinct life zones, from lowland rainforest to cloud forest, with elevations ranging from 50 to 2,906 metres (164 to 9,534 feet). The main highway through the park descends dramatically from the Central Valley to the Caribbean lowlands, passing through dense forest.

If season and harvest schedules permit, we visit a working banana plantation to learn about Costa Rica's most important agricultural export. We then pass through a region known for cocoa production — cacao trees grow in the shade of taller forest trees, and Costa Rican chocolate has gained international recognition for quality.

We board our riverboat and spend the afternoon journeying through interconnecting rivers and canals to the Caribbean coast and Tortuguero Park. This water thoroughfare extends 160 kilometres (100 miles), comprising natural rivers, lagoons, estuaries, and connecting waterways that run nearly to the Nicaraguan border. The canal serves as the main transportation route for the northern coastal region, complete with directional signs and branches from the main trunk route.

As we travel, we watch for toucans with their distinctive large beaks, several species of monkeys moving through the canopy, and possibly a sloth hanging motionless from a branch. Coatis — members of the raccoon family with long snouts and ringed tails — sometimes forage along the banks. Stands of red mangroves, their roots visible above water, line sections of the canal, while water hyacinth floats in quieter areas. We pass occasional settlements where residents rely on dugout canoes and small boats for transport, much as people have done for centuries. The sounds of howler monkeys and birdsong dominate over human activity.

NOTE: We strongly recommend travellers bring a smaller overnight bag to Tortuguero due to limited space on the boat and minimal portering assistance. Main luggage will be securely stored until we depart from Tortuguero.

Overnight in Tortuguero.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 12 Tortuguero: Forest Walk & Village

An early morning boat ride offers an opportunity to observe the coastal rainforest as it awakens. Bird activity peaks in the early morning hours, and wildlife is most active before the heat of the day. The canals wind through dense vegetation where five-fingered leaves, aerial roots, and hanging vines create layers of forest structure from water level to canopy.

After lunch we visit Tortuguero village, accessible only by boat. The settlement's economy traditionally depended on turtle hunting and logging, but conservation efforts and tourism have shifted local livelihoods. We may walk on the Caribbean beach where several turtle species nest annually. Green sea turtles nest from July to October with peak activity in August, while hawksbill turtles share this season. Leatherback turtles, the largest sea turtle species, nest from February to April. Individual turtles may be encountered throughout the year, though nesting activity concentrates in these seasons.

We visit the Tortuguero Museum, which documents the area's ecology and the conservation efforts that have made this one of the Caribbean's most important turtle nesting sites. Displays cover the life cycles of different turtle species, threats they face, and the research conducted here since Dr. Archie Carr established the Caribbean Conservation Corporation's research station in 1955. Video presentations explain the decades-long conservation work that has helped recover turtle populations from near-extinction.

NOTE: The exact order of activities in Tortuguero may vary depending on weather and tidal conditions.

Overnight in Tortuguero.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 13 Tortuguero - Baldi Hotsprings - Arenal/La Fortuna Area

After an early breakfast we travel by boat 1.5 hours to reunite with our land transport, then continue by road to the La Fortuna/Arenal area. The route passes through rolling hills covered with sugar cane fields — sugar has been cultivated in Costa Rica since colonial times and remains an important crop.

We stop at Baldi Hotsprings near Arenal Volcano (located outside the risk zones established by the National Prevention of Risks and Emergency Commission). Here a geothermally heated river flows through landscaped grounds featuring native plant species and attracting diverse birdlife. We have time to relax in various pools fed by individual springs at different temperatures. The thermal water emerges from underground heated by the volcanic system beneath Arenal.

Arenal Volcano, which rises 1,633 metres (5,358 feet) above sea level, was one of the world's most active volcanoes from 1968 to 2010, producing regular lava flows and explosive eruptions. In December 2010, the volcano entered a resting phase, with no lava or explosive activity since then, though it continues to emit gases. The volcano's perfect cone shape results from its youth — geologically, Arenal is only about 7,000 years old.

Weather and visibility permitting, we can view the volcano this evening.

Overnight at Arenal/La Fortuna.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Arenal - Monteverde Cloud Forest

Today we travel through rural countryside to the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve area, approximately four hours by road. The final section of the journey follows unpaved roads that climb into the mountains — the rough conditions have helped preserve the area's ecological integrity by limiting development.

Monteverde's cloud forest exists because of specific conditions: trade winds carrying moisture from the Caribbean meet mountains along the continental divide, forcing air upward where it cools and condenses into clouds. During the dry season (December through April), when lowland forests receive little rain, the cloud forest remains enveloped in mist that nourishes the ecosystem.

This constant moisture supports an extraordinary diversity of epiphytes — plants that grow on other plants without parasitizing them. Trees are covered with orchids, bromeliads, mosses, and ferns that obtain nutrients directly from rain, mist, and organic debris rather than from soil. More than 420 orchid species have been identified in Monteverde, along with over 200 fern species. The forest canopy filters sunlight, creating dim conditions on the forest floor where shade-tolerant plants like philodendrons, heliconias, and begonias thrive.

The reserve, established in 1972, now protects over 10,500 hectares (26,000 acres) and hosts over 400 bird species, including 30 species of hummingbirds. The resplendent quetzal, with its iridescent green plumage and long tail feathers, lives here year-round. Mammal species include howler monkeys, white-faced capuchins, spider monkeys, coatis, and, more rarely, pumas, ocelots, and jaguars.

This afternoon we visit the Butterfly Garden, where native butterfly species and other insects are raised in controlled environments. The facility contributes to research on butterfly ecology, their role in pollination, and their sensitivity to environmental changes including pollution and climate shifts.

Overnight in Monteverde.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Monteverde Cloud Forest

This morning we explore the cloud forest reserve with a local naturalist guide. The trails range from relatively easy walks to more challenging terrain, and we adjust our route based on weather conditions and group preferences. Our guide helps identify species and explains the ecological relationships that sustain cloud forest biodiversity.

Beyond the quetzal and hummingbirds, the reserve hosts six trogon species, numerous tanagers, and the three-wattled bellbird, whose distinctive call carries through the forest. Approximately 500 butterfly species inhabit the reserve. Mammal diversity includes over 100 species, though many are nocturnal and rarely observed – agoutis and coatis are among the more commonly seen during daylight hours.

This afternoon you may choose an optional canopy walk excursion. Suspension footbridges strung across gorges provide perspective on the forest from above, revealing the dense epiphyte growth and allowing observation of canopy-dwelling species. The bridges vary in length up to 170 metres (558 feet) and rise as high as 40 metres (131 feet) above the ground. At a leisurely pace, the walk takes approximately 90 minutes. Your Tour Leader can help arrange this activity and advise on current pricing.

Cloud forests by definition experience frequent cloud cover and wind, along with rain even during the "dry" season. Waterproof clothing and layers are essential.

Overnight at Monteverde.

Included Meal(s): 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).

* Today's road transfer to San Jose will not be accompanied by your tour leader, who will be continuing with travellers who have chosen a longer tour option. Your evening meal and departure will be managed by a local guide in San Jose. If you'd like to consider an upgrade to the longer version, which also includes Nicaragua, please refer to tours CR2 and PA3 on our website.

Overnight in San Jose.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Depart

Departure from San Jose.

BUEN VIAJE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast