Tour Code
PA3

ADVENTURESABROAD

PANAMA, COSTA RICA & NICARAGUA

23 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 - Crocodile Safari - Quepos

Today we leave the mountains for the Pacific, heading south toward Quepos, gateway to Manuel Antonio National Park. We break the drive with a boat excursion on the Tarcoles River, the Jungle River & Crocodile Adventure, home to one of Central America's largest crocodile populations.

These American crocodiles, some reaching 4-5 m/13-16 ft, split off from alligators millions of years ago and are equally at home in fresh and salt water. Expect to see several sunning on the mudbanks.

Scarlet macaws, which mate for life, are among the more than 50 bird species along the river, a population that nearly disappeared here before conservation work brought it back.

NOTE: high tides occasionally affect this excursion.

Continuing south, we find a coast that runs drier and more developed than the Caribbean side, with more than ten national parks along its length. Quepos began as a banana port in the 1930s under the United Fruit Company. When disease ended that trade, African oil palm took its place, and today it is tourism that keeps the town running, set on a narrow strip between ocean and forested hills.

Overnight near Quepos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Manuel Antonio National Park

This morning we walk Manuel Antonio National Park, one of Costa Rica's smallest parks at just 683 hectares but among its richest, protecting one of the last stretches of primary forest on this coast that still runs right down to the sand.

We are likely to see all three of the park's resident monkeys: howlers, capuchins and the endangered Central American squirrel monkey, found nowhere else in the country. Iguanas over 1 m/3 ft long sun themselves on branches overhead, unbothered by the trail beneath them.

The park holds four distinct beaches, from Espadilla Sur, shaded by forest to the high-tide line, to Puerto Escondido, the most remote, reachable only over a rocky point.

Offshore, modest coral formations draw parrotfish and angelfish for anyone who wants to snorkel, while pelicans dive through the surf and frigate birds circle above on wingspans over 2 m/6.5 ft. After the guided portion, you are welcome to keep exploring on your own and take a taxi back when ready.

Overnight near Quepos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 18 Quepos - Rincon de la Vieja

We head north on the Pan-American Highway toward Rincon de la Vieja, with our river excursion already behind us.

We continue inland to Rincon de la Vieja National Park, established in 1973 around a cluster of six volcanic peaks and the 32 rivers they feed. This is where the ground starts talking again: fumaroles, boiling mud pots and hot springs across the park have drawn comparisons to Yellowstone.

NOTE: this is one of the longer driving days of the tour.

Overnight near Rincon de la Vieja.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 19 Rincon de la Vieja National Park

This morning's hike follows the Las Pailas Trail directly into the volcanic activity we glimpsed yesterday, through cloud forest and out onto open slopes where fumaroles hiss and mud pots bubble in shades of grey, some hot enough to scald.

The mechanism is straightforward: rainwater sinks underground, heats near the magma below and rises back to the surface here as steam and mud, a cycle that has run continuously since long before anyone was here to name it.

NOTE: the trail has moderate to challenging sections, with roots and uneven, sometimes steep ground; talk to your Tour Leader about your fitness level beforehand.

Wildlife along the way includes coatis, agoutis, armadillos and, less predictably, capuchins and howler monkeys, while the birdlife around the lodge grounds is equally rewarding.

This afternoon is free for optional river tubing, horseback riding, or simply soaking in a natural hot spring warmed by the same system we just walked over.

Rincon de la Vieja closes out Costa Rica's run of volcanoes, from Arenal's cone to these steaming vents, a reminder of how much of this small

country still sits on active ground.

Overnight near Rincon de la Vieja National Park.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 20 Rincon de la Vieja, Costa Rica - Granada, Nicaragua

We cross into Nicaragua today and continue to Granada. The country takes its name from the Nicarao people who once lived along these lakeshores, combined with the Spanish word for water, a fitting name for a nation built around its two great lakes.

Granada, founded in 1524, is among the oldest European-founded cities still standing in the Americas, set on Lake Nicaragua's shore where colonial-era traders once moved goods overland to the Pacific after crossing from the Caribbean by river and lake.

That wealth made Granada worth destroying. In 1856, American adventurer William Walker, briefly self-declared president of Nicaragua, ordered the city burned rather than surrender it to his rivals; a plaque near the ruins still reads Aqui fue Granada, here was Granada.

The Cathedral we see this afternoon was rebuilt after that fire, its yellow dome now the city's defining silhouette, while La Merced's bell tower, spared the worst of the damage, still gives the best rooftop view over the lake.

NOTE: please have your passport ready for the border crossing.

Overnight in Granada.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 21 Granada: Ometepe Island Excursion

Today we visit Ometepe, an island whose name means two hills in Nahuatl, an accurate description of two volcanoes joined by a narrow isthmus into one hourglass-shaped island in the middle of Lake Nicaragua.

Concepcion, the larger and still active of the pair, rises 1,610 m/5,280 ft and last produced ash in December 2007. Maderas, its dormant twin, reaches 1,394 m/4,570 ft and carries its own small crater lake at the summit, a quieter echo of what Concepcion is still doing.

The ferry crossing takes about 90 minutes, over water that is, improbably, home to bull sharks, the only large freshwater lake in the world where they are found, a population that once swam up from the Caribbean before damming largely closed that route.

On the island we see petroglyphs carved into boulders long before the Spanish arrived, their spirals and figures still debated by researchers, and stop for lunch at Santo Domingo Beach, right on the isthmus between the two volcanoes, before exploring the port town of Moyogalpa.

NOTE: this is a genuine full-day outing; talk to your Tour Leader about the alternative of a day at leisure in Granada.

Overnight in Granada.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 22 Granada - Masaya Volcano National Park - Managua: City Tour

On the way to Managua we stop at Masaya Volcano National Park, where the Santiago crater has erupted often enough through recorded history that Spanish colonists once took its glowing lava lake for a mouth of hell and planted a cross at the rim to try to seal it.

The volcano still vents sulphur dioxide today, and conditions permitting, we can look straight into the crater, which sometimes glows red after dark.

From there we visit Laguna de Apoyo, proof that not every crater stays angry: this one, blown out some 23,000 years ago, simply filled with water, reaching depths of 200 m/660 ft and staying a geothermally warm 26 degrees C/79 degrees F year-round, with its own microclimate and endemic fish.

In Managua, the Old Cathedral stands deliberately unrepaired, a memorial to the 1972 earthquake that killed an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 people and levelled much of the city centre.

We also see the Presidential House, the National Palace of Culture and the newer Metropolitan Cathedral, completed in 1993 with a dome that breaks sharply from traditional design.

Overnight in Managua.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 23 Departure

We depart from Managua, having followed the same underground fire from Arenal's cooling cone to Rincon de la Vieja's steaming vents, through Ometepe's twin peaks to Masaya's glowing crater and Laguna de Apoyo's quiet lake, one country's volcanoes telling four very different stories. Buen viaje!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast