

Panama: Bridge of the Americas A Cultural and Natural Discovery Tour

March 17- 29, 2015

with Extension to Cartagena, Colombia March 29- April 2, 2015

Day 01: Flight to Panama City (D)

Arriving in Panama we will greet our guide and good friend Philippe and transfer to our hotel in Casco Viejo, the heart of Panama's historic old town. This will be the perfect location to explore and enjoy the historic atmosphere. Welcome dinner tonight.

First of three nights at Casa Nuratti in Casco Viejo- old town of Panama City.

Day 02: Private full day city & canal tour (B,L)



Panoramic drive through Panama la Vieja, first Spanish settlement of the city, which was destroyed in 1671 by the infamous pirate Henry Morgan. Drive to Ancon Hill for a short hike through tropical vegetation to discover a superb point of view over the city.

Stroll through one of the most interesting places of the city, the Casco Viejo, founded in 1673 as we learn about the colorful history of Panama City. Points of interest are the famed flat arch or Santo Domingo Church, the beautiful gold- plated altar of the San Jose Church, the Panama Canal Museum, the National Theater, the Cathedral Square, the Presidential Palace and other mansions and monuments. The monument to the French entrepreneurs who began the Panama Canal stands at the bayside end of the Casco Viejo. A local lunch will fortify us for our fabulous afternoon and evening at the Miraflores Locks. The Visitors Center, nuseum and viewing platforms allow us to appreciate this "8th wonder of the modern world". Watvhing close-up as ships pass through the lock loaded 15 containers tall is unforgettable.

Second night at Casa Nuratti in Casco Viejo

Day 03: Morning walk in the Soberania National Park and Discovery Center (B,picnic Lunch)



An early morning drive of about 1/2 hour brings us to Soberania National Park. We continue our way to the Pipeline road, a graveled and easy path that goes through the forest of the park. Here we monkeys such as white-faced capuchins, howler monkeys and the diminutive Geoffroys' tamarins are very frequently sighted. The area is also home to three-toed sloths, agoutis and anteaters. But of most interest will be the park's impressive list of 525 species of birds. We will lunch at the Rainforest Discovery Center, where we will have the opportunity to climb the canopy tower and get a tree-top perspective on the surrounding rainforest. Let's take time to walk one of several trails and a platform with hummingbird feeders-- great photo opp. Return to the hotel in the afternoon
Third night at Casa Nuratti in Casco Viejo

Day 04: Visit of the Embera Village (B,L)



Driving north this morning from Panama City we reach the shores of the lake Alajuela (also called Madden Lake). From here, dugout canoes will be our transportation across the lake then on the Chagres River to an Embera village. The The Embera people, proudly adorned with their best body paintings will show us some of the elements of their graceful culture, the beauty of their dances and their remarkable handicrafts. They will also invite you to share their traditional meal of fish with plantain in a banana leaf. An Optional hike into the nearby rainforest will help you discover some of the plants used by the Emberas for their traditional medicine. Return to Panama City and overnight at Radisson Summit Hotel on the very edge of Soberania National Park.



Day 05: Jungle Boat: Discovery of the Canal & Rainforest by boat

(B,L)

Today's adventure provides a unique way to explore the canal and truly appreciate the 8th wonder of the world. Fast motor launches carry us across the waters of the world's most famous manmade lake, Lago Gatun, situated in the heart of the Isthmus of Panama. It was constructed between 1906- 1914 to make the Panama Canal possible.



On this voyage of discovery we will navigate above ancient routes that crossed the isthmus long before the lakes creation. Huge ocean going Panamax ships can be seen transiting across this water bridge that links the Caribbean Sea with the Pacific Ocean. See history in the making with the on-going work to expand the canal.

Second overnight at Radisson Summit

Day 06: Panama – El Valle- Cerro Gaital , Butterfly farm & Petroglyphs(B,L)

El Valle, approximately 1.5 hour drive west is a picturesque, verdant mountain town, and a great escape from the tropical climate of the canal. El Valle de Anton has a geologically unique setting. It is nestled in the second largest volcano crater in the world: the five by three mile crater was created when a volcano blew its top off five million years ago.

Our next spectacular birding experience will be at Cerro Gaital. The Gaital National Park is a 335-hectare (827-acre) nature reserve at the north edge of El Valle de Anton. The protected area of the national park includes Cerro Gaital, Cerro Pajita, and Cerro Caracoral. The peak of Cerro Gaital rises more than 1,200m (3,500 feet) above sea level. On a clear day, one can see both oceans, the Pacific and The Caribbean.

Wildlife abounds amid this lush wilderness that covers it is home to more than 300 bird species, including such spectacular creatures as the red-legged honeycreeper, bay-headed tanager, and



blue-crowned motmot. The bird-watching is best along the edges of that protected area, since its dense foliage allow the birds to hide easily. Gaital also protects the habitat of the rare golden frog, which has been decimated by a fungal disease during the past decade.

We will then visit the pre-Columbian Petroglyphs (more a rock face) which have not yet been deciphered. Some locals think that it was a map for traders, other feel that it is a map of caves beneath the mountain range. Later, at the Butterfly Farm, experience the wonder and tranquility of being immersed in hundreds of living, jewel colored butterflies in a tropical rain forest setting.

Overnight at Hotel Campestre in El Valle.

Day 07: Visit to the Vaquilla Community (B,L)



Today, we visit the rural village of Vaquilla. We will drive in a local Chicken bus to the village and upon arrival visit the town school, the hospital and spend some time with the villagers. Then we split into small groups and are adopted by families who share lunch with us in their homes. After lunch, time to visit the Waterfall of Tavida.

Overnight at Cubita Lodge



Day 08: Visit to El Caño – Transfer to Cerro Punta(B,L)

Early departure to Cerro Punta approximately 5 hours away. On the road a stop at el Caño will be done to visit it. Enroute, located 27 kilometers (17 miles) west of Penonomé, the small town of El Caño is home to the best archaeological site in Panama. In fact, National Geographic is currently conducting a dig at the site. The site has a small museum with some stone tools and figures and nice posters explaining what is known of the history of the site. There are about a

dozen burial mounds found around the site and one has been unearthed and covered with a pavilion for visitors to view some of the skeletons that were dug up. It is believed that various classes were buried here as some bodies were found in mass graves while others were neatly laid out. However, archaeologists do not believe that royalty was buried at the site. Jewelry and pottery also have been found at the site and some artifacts are on display in the museum. Stop for lunch in David.

Overnight in Los Quetzales Lodge

Day 09: Walk in Cerro Punta & Visit to Finca Dracula (B)



On the west side of Volcan Baru lies a group of small towns collectively referred to as Cerro Punta. Among them are Volcan, Cerro Punta, Guadalupe, and Bajo Grande; of these, Volcan is the largest but is still much smaller than Boquete.

The people and the atmosphere give these towns a wonderful small mountain village feel, one that invites you to experience the magic of nature and a slower way of life. The cool winds coming down off the mountain peaks get lost in the translucent clouds that hover over a landscape dotted with many tiny local farms. Finca Dracula is named in the honor of the rare genus of orchids -Dracula - which is very well represented in the collection. Nestled at the edge of La Amistad, a World Biosphere Reserve and UNESCO world heritage site, Finca Dracula boasts of more than 2200 different orchid species from Central and South America. This collection of rare orchids is the largest in Latin America and one of the largest in the world. The Finca offers visitors a great opportunity to see a vast multitude of orchids bloom in their natural setting. After the visit we will have time to enjoy the our scenic lodge independently.

Overnight in Los Quetzales

Day 10: Hiking the Quetzal Trail (B,L)



Our nature hike today on the Quetzal Trail in Cerro Punta is

considered among the most gorgeous paths in Central America, is without doubt the most stunning hike in Panama's western highlands. Located within the Volcan Baru National Park, the "Sendero de los Quetzales" links the towns of Guadalupe, which is near Cerro Punta on the west side of the Volcano, with the town of Boquete which is on its east. The trail skirts the Baru Volcano on its north face and can be hiked in any direction. We will hike starting in Cerro Punta and ending in Boquete. Hiking the 9.6 kms (total distance of 6 miles) of this path may take from 4 to 7 hours. Fluctuations in timing come from differences in hiking speeds, direction chosen to complete the hike (uphill or downhill), time spent contemplating the scenery and time invested seeking one of the splendid birds that gives its name to this path: the Resplendent Quetzal. Those not interested in doing the walk, will enjoy the scenery on the bus ride to Boquete and explore the pretty village until the rest of the group arrives.
Overnight in Boquete at Finca Lerida.

Day 11: Morning Hike & Birding (B)

Our early morning nature walk today will be through the finca's private nature preserve. We will identify the colorful tanager feasting on an abundance of fruit trees and maybe spot the elusive but glamorous quetzal amongst other species. Freshly roasted coffee from the family farm will await our return.

This afternoon, transfer to David in order to catch our afternoon flight back to Panama City.

Overnight in Panama City Trypp Hotel Panama Centro



Day 12: 1 Day in San Blas (B,L,D)

Between 5:30 to 6:00 am. Pick up at the hotel for a 2 ½ hour group transfer to the Caribbean Port of Carti. Transfers to San Blas are made by the Kuna people in shared 4x4 cars. These cars can carry up to 7 passengers and can be a little tight sometimes, but this is the only available transportation to arrive to San Blas.

The path traverses the mountain ridge towards the Caribbean Sea, through beautiful scenery of mountain rainforest. We arrive at the end of the road in Carti and are guests of the Kuna Yala people in their autonomous comarca.

After about 40 min by boat through a lagoon, past islands with white sand beaches and in transparent waters, we arrive at Kuanidup Lodge, a very simple little lodge that is run by the Kuna people.

Accommodation consists of small cabanas, shared toilettes cold showers(water is brought from the mainland) and dining area.

The lodge offers 3 daily meals, consisting of rice, and the catch of the day and some beans and/or salad. Drinks like beer, wine and sodas can be bought directly at the lodge.

We will enjoy group excursions to neighboring villages and islands for swimming and snorkeling. These excursions are also organized and conducted by the local Kunas so you will gain an insight into their lives and traditions.

There will be opportunities to buy beautiful handicrafts such as the famous Molas. Most women in the village dedicate many hours a day to creating these colorful designs. After visiting the village you will be then go to one of the many islands in San Blas for a relaxing time at the beach. Many of these islands are deserted with only a small family that takes care of the island and collects the entry tax. Some islands have great sandy beaches, others are ideal for snorkeling, and all of them have stunning views.

Day 13: Return to Panama City (B,L)

The last activity today will finish around midafternoon. We will then go by boat back to Carti where we meet the 4x4 transport back to Panama City, modern civilization including a hot shower and a great last night on the town.

Overnight in Panama City Trypp Hotel Panama Centro

Day 14 Departure Panama for the USA or Cartagena, Colombia for the extension

Breakfast this morning depends on the time of your departure. Hotel starts serving breakfast at 6:30 am

*** dates subject to minor modification**

Included:

- 3OVN at Casa Nuratti in the colonial quarter
- 2 OVN at Radisson Summit
- 1 OVN in Hotel Campestre in El Valle
- 1 OVN in Cubita Lodge in Chitre
- 2 OVN in Los Quetzales Spa & Lodge
- 1 OVN in Finca Lerida
- 2 OVN in Tryp Hotel Panama Centro
- 1 ONV in Kuanidup lodge in San Blas. Rustic cabanas w/ 3 meals and activities
- Bilingual naturalist guide
- All private transfers in modern buses with a/c and microphone
- Meals as per description
- All related entrance fees as per description
- OW flight from David to Panama City. Allowed luggage is 30lb per person