

# Panama

## PRE-DEPARTURE INFORMATION



Panama has more varied and more accessible rain forest than anywhere else in Latin America. It has all the components of a JOURNEYS destination, offering excellent experiences of indigenous cultures and varied, natural environments. Because Panama is the narrowest part of the continent, there is both a physical and biological focus for observable natural phenomena. In places you can see both oceans. It is literally possible to walk coast-to-coast in a bit more than a week or drive in a little more than an hour.

Panama is bordered in the west by Costa Rica and in the east by Colombia. There are over 1600 islands off of Panama's coast, most of which are in the Pacific Ocean. The two largest groups, the San Blas, home to the Kuna Indians and the Bocas del Toro are located in the Caribbean. Isla Barro Colorado which is situated in Lago Gatun in the Panama Canal Zone is home to the Smithsonian Institute's tropical rain forest research station. The dormant Volcan Baru, Panama's only volcano, is also the highest point in the country. It is part of the western mountain chain which is one of two chains in the country, the other being in the east.

Most American tourists only see Panama from the deck of a cruise ship crossing the canal. You will see it from jungle paths, ocean-going dugout canoes, 4WD jeeps, planes and outboard powered skiffs. While very limited facilities exist for the nature or culture oriented tourist in remote areas, with the help and the knowledge of the guides, and the vehicles and equipment provided, you experience the southernmost environments of Central America in the best available standard of accommodations consistent with an ecologically sensitive approach to travel.

## GETTING READY FOR YOUR TRIP

### Passports

- ❖ Passports are required of U.S. Citizens to enter
- ❖ Must be valid for at least 6 months after your trip – if not, apply or renew immediately
- ❖ Keep a copy of the picture page of your passport in a separate place while traveling
- ❖ Carry an extra passport photo in case you need to apply for a quick replacement

### Visas

- ❖ No visas required for US citizens
- ❖ Nationalities of other countries please inquire regarding visas

### Health, Immunizations

- ❖ Some immunizations are highly recommended for Panama, but none are required for entry.
- ❖ Recommended standard immunizations include: tetanus, typhoid, MMR, hepatitis A & B
- ❖ Malaria prophylactic may be recommended if traveling to the San Blas and Bocas Del Toro Provinces.
- ❖ Yellow fever vaccine may be recommended depending on where you visit.
- ❖ SEEK INDEPENDENT MEDICAL ADVICE from your physician or local travelers health service
- ❖ For the latest recommendations for immunizations or malaria prevention contact the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia: 800-311-3435, or visit their website: <http://www.cdc.gov/travel>
- ❖ Many universities have immunization clinics that can assist you
- ❖ More info on traveler's health is available from the World Health Organization at <http://www.who.int/ith>

### Time Difference

- ❖ Panama is on Eastern Standard Time (-5 GMT). Daylight saving time is not observed.

### Electricity

- ❖ 220 volts; you will not need an adaptor/converter for American appliances.
- ❖ Some plugs may be similar to those used in the US, the 2-pronged flat blade plug or the flat blades with round grounding pins.



## ARRIVAL

### Entry

- ❖ You will be met upon arrival at the Tocumen Airport in Panama City by our local representative
- ❖ Contact information is sent with your Last Minute Reminders from JOURNEYS
- ❖ Airport departure tax is \$20; tourist card is \$5 and is purchased from the airlines when you leave the US

### Customs

- ❖ Anything you are bringing into the country for personal use - camera gear, snorkeling equipment, binoculars, etc. - will be readily allowed

## GETTING ALONG AS A VISITOR

### Food & Restaurants

- ❖ Tap water in Panama City is considered safe to drink and bottled water is readily available.
- ❖ In the countryside, the water is not safe. Drink only bottled drinks, and avoid tap water, fountain drinks and ice cubes



- ❖ Don't buy food from street vendors or stalls
- ❖ Where the water safety is questionable, eat only raw fruits and vegetables that you have peeled yourself
- ❖ Avoid fresh salads unless the vegetables are washed with purified water, and avoid dairy products that are un-pasteurized or may not have been refrigerated properly
- ❖ Meat and seafood are safe if they are thoroughly cooked but you should avoid pork
- ❖ There are restaurants to accommodate all tastes – European, Oriental and Western
- ❖ The corvine, a delicious white-meat fish, can only be found in this area of the Pacific and is considered one of the local specialties
- ❖ Look for a restaurant where lots of locals are eating - chances are the food will be delicious and reasonable

## Money and Currency Exchange

- ❖ Panama's currency is in US Dollars; they also have Balboas – it is in the form of coinage
- ❖ It is a good idea to bring newer dated currency that has no rips, marks, folds, or holes
- ❖ Major credit cards are also accepted in the major cities – you may need to show your passport when using credit cards
- ❖ We suggest bringing \$300-\$500 for items not included in the cost of the trip, emergency money, and for shopping
- ❖ Be sure to have small bills, both in local and US currency. \$1 US bills can also be very useful.
- ❖ Also, credit card companies are now charging a 3%+ surcharge on all foreign currency purchases (purchases of goods made outside of the US). Check with your credit card company before you travel as the charges change frequently without notice and vary with card and destination.

## Tipping

- ❖ Tipping is entirely at your discretion, according to your estimation of the level of service received
- ❖ Recommended tipping for a naturalist guide would be about \$10 per person/per day, and if you also have a local guide you could tip them about \$5 per person/per day
- ❖ Appropriate tips for a driver or tour boatmen would be about \$5 per person/per day
- ❖ Expect to tip anywhere from 15-20% of your bill at restaurants in larger cities; 10% tip is more appropriate in less touristy areas
- ❖ Taxi drivers do not expect a tip but you should negotiate a price before starting off to your destination
- ❖ Hotel services should be the same as restaurants
- ❖ Be sure to carry enough small bills for tips

## Emergency Services

- ❖ Prevention of injury is always the best policy.
- ❖ Emergency services and care for major medical illnesses may be limited
- ❖ Your guide will advise you in the case of urgent medical need during your tour

## Shopping

- ❖ Panama is considered a shopping mecca because of its location
- ❖ Panama City is a duty free zone
- ❖ Bartering is the norm at street markets. The actual price you can expect to pay may be anywhere from 50-80% of the original price. But don't push too hard - remember that what is only a few dollars to you may mean a great deal to the average seller or artisan. Never barter unless you intend to buy.
- ❖ Items made from materials that are protected under the endangered species act (such as sea turtle shells) will not be allowed into the US, and should never be purchased
- ❖ Shopping list: mola, chaquiras, books, posters and colorful t-shirts

## Language

- ❖ The official language is Spanish
- ❖ English is widely spoken and is considered the second language
- ❖ Indigenous Indian groups still speak their own languages



# SPECIAL REMARKS

## Climate & Weather

- ❖ Wet season runs from April to December
- ❖ Dry season runs from January to March
- ❖ Rain can be heavy at times, but usually is brief
- ❖ It is best to visit Panama during our winter and spring

## People

- ❖ Most of the population are mestizos - people of mixed indigenous and Spanish descent
- ❖ Indian groups that remain today are the Chocoos of the Darien, the Kunas of the San Blas Islands and the Guaymies of the western provinces
- ❖ Panamanians go out of their way to make their guests feel comfortable
- ❖ People in most Latin countries greet family and friends with a hug or by brushing cheeks (both males and females). When introduced to a newcomer one shakes the other person's hand always.
- ❖ Traditional attitude that men are men (macho) and women are feminine is still the accepted norm
- ❖ It is best to ask permission before entering houses, or before taking portrait photos, for like you, they could resent intrusion of privacy. If in doubt ask, the tour leader or guide.

## Time

- ❖ Relax and enjoy the easy-going rhythm of Latin America
- ❖ Do not expect everything to happen on time; remember that in Latin America time is not as important as it is back home, and there is often little concern for punctuality
- ❖ Despite best efforts, departures and arrivals could be a little before or after the time given. This applies particularly to aircraft movements. Operating requirements, weather and terrain sometimes present problems, and on these occasions, to ensure your safety, flight times may vary.

## Safety

- ❖ Observe the same precautions taken at home
- ❖ Do not flaunt a bulging wallet, always lock unattended vehicles, do not leave baggage unattended in public
- ❖ Make use of security facilities provided for valuables in your accommodation
- ❖ The best place to carry your passport and money is in a pouch worn around the neck inside of the shirt or in a money belt around the waist
- ❖ It is highly recommended that you buy travel insurance that covers your baggage before you leave
- ❖ Don't take anything you can't afford to lose or can't replace.

## Equipment & Packing

- ❖ A good goal is to fit everything into a single piece of checked luggage and a carry-on daypack
- ❖ We recommend a durable, water-resistant, soft duffel bag or lightweight soft-sided suitcase as your checked luggage. Hard suitcases are not practical due to space limitations.
- ❖ A small backpack or hip-pack is ideal for carrying bottled water, camera, extra sunblock, etc, while on excursions where the terrain requires your hands to be free.
- ❖ Choose a distinctive, easily identified bag, and use a JOURNEYS luggage tag for bag identification by staff, and your name and address should be also indelibly affixed inside the luggage.
- ❖ Lightweight & light colored clothes will help keep you cooler. Also keep in mind that synthetic fabrics dry faster than natural fibers like cotton, especially in humid areas, so you can pack less if you are able to wash and dry your clothes easily.
- ❖ Casual clothing is appropriate at all times
- ❖ Some hotels may have laundry services, but you will probably need to wash out some clothes en route
- ❖ You may want to bring an extra smaller, collapsible (lockable) duffel, to leave items in a city hotel while you are on an excursion or to use on your return for souvenirs



# CLOTHING & EQUIPMENT SUGGESTIONS CHECKLIST

## Pre-Departure Tasks

- Obtain or renew passport
- Buy travelers checks in low denominations
- Evaluate and obtain trip cancellation, baggage and medical insurance
- Consult with physician for immunizations and prescription medicine recommendations
- Break-in primary footwear
- Make final payment to JOURNEYS at least 60 days before trip departure

## Clothing

- Lightweight hiking boots or comfortable athletic or walking shoes
- "Teva" style sport sandals with Velcro strap
- Extra shoes, flip-flops or sandals
- Shorts
- Comfortable, lightweight pants
- Nicer pants or skirt (optional)
- Lightweight long-sleeve shirt, for protection from sun or mosquitoes
- T-shirts, short sleeve shirts and/or tank tops
- Sweater/Jacket and/or windbreaker
- Rain gear - poncho or jacket and pants
- Sun hat or cap with wide brim
- Bandana
- Swim suits
- Socks
- Sleepwear
- Under clothes

## Personal Items

- Sunblock (waterproof, high SPF)
- Lipbalm with SPF
- Insect repellent with DEET content
- 2 spare passport photos (in case of lost passport)
- Wrist watch and/or travel clock
- Sunglasses (with strap, case)
- Extra eyeglasses/contacts
- Money belt or pouch for valuables
- Small flashlight with extra batteries
- Copies of all important documents
- Day pack (can also serve as an airline carry-on bag)
- Camera, memory cards, film, batteries, charger
- Underwater camera (disposable kind is very handy)
- Lead bag/containers to protect film in X-ray machines
- Lightweight binoculars
- Plug adapter (if needed)
- Soft duffel with shoulder strap or durable suitcase
- Luggage tags
- Ziploc-type bags for packing shampoo or other liquids
- Stuff sacks or plastic bags for organizing inside luggage (also useful for dirty laundry)
- Thread, needles, safety pins for minor repairs
- Small packable umbrella



## Personal First Aid Kit

- Aspirin or other pain killer
- Cold relief tablets, antihistamine, cough drops
- Band-aids, gauze pads
- Antibiotics
- Prescription medicines
- Aloe gel or lotion in case of sunburn
- Anti-diarrhea medicine
- Antibiotic cream/ointment
- Supply of feminine hygiene items
- Motion sickness tablets
- Earplugs

## Essential Items For Your Carry-On Bag

- Passport
- Domestic and international air tickets
- Travelers checks, money and credit cards
- Insurance certificates
- Address and telephone number of emergency contact
- Prescription medicines
- Extra set of underclothes
- Toiletries in small leak-proof bottles
- Camera gear, film and other valuables

## Optional Items

- Binoculars
- Address book, writing paper, or journal, pen/pencil
- Small washcloth
- Wet wipes/moist towelettes and Kleenex
- Favorite snack foods (pre-packaged)
- Pictures of your house and family
- Mask, snorkel, fins, wetsuit (if applicable)
- Map
- Silica bags for moisture (protect camera equipment)
- Video camera
- Phrase book

