

# Panama

*A wildlife, canal and insect bite tour of a small tropical country in Central America - during the wet season*



**2<sup>nd</sup> June to 1<sup>st</sup> July 2018**

Nigel\* Miller and Steve Anyon-Smith

\*a.k.a. Michael, Roger or Sebastian. Latin Americans cannot get their heads or tongues around the word "Nigel".

## **Short Summary**

Panama is most likely the safest and simplest of the Central American countries to visit as independent tourists. The roads are good, the locals are not loco and there are sizeable forests crawling with all manner of wonderful stuff.

It seems that in Panama a culture of hunting birds and mammals is absent. One thing that is hard to reconcile is the likelihood of spotting LPG tankers and container ships whilst walking through rainforests – in the middle of the country.

During our stay the wet season wasn't too scary.

## The Plan

The plan, in its original form, was to ignore Panama entirely and travel to neighbouring Costa Rica. Wise folk counselled against this, suggesting that Panama was safer and less expensive, with better roads, fewer tourists and just as many birds and mammals.

Flights from Sydney to Costa Rica presented a logistical nightmare, with multiple stopovers and ludicrous layover times.

We toyed with the idea of travelling to Colombia. We decided otherwise on the basis that Pablo Escobar's family probably knew that we'd enjoyed the mini-series "Narcos" and would meet us at Bogota (or Medellin or Cali....).



We planned to fly to Los Angeles on a United Airlines 787 and after a reasonable layover to allow time to deal with the nervous officialdom there, continue with a direct 737-800 flight to Panama City with Copa, Panama's excellent national carrier.

Naturally the idea was to seek out birds, mammals and other wildlife, along with some targeted canal viewing. We were also keen to experience whatever cultural wonders came our way.

It was a no-brainer to hire a car for the duration.

## Itinerary

- Canal area, Radisson Summit Resort and Golf Panama, three nights
- Canal area, Gamboa Rainforest Resort, three nights
- El Valle de Anton, Cabanas Potosi, three nights
- Volcan / Cerra Punta area, Los Quetzales Ecolodge and Spa, four nights
- Caribbean Coast, Chiriqui Grande, Hotel Atlantic Suite, one night
- Caribbean Coast, Isla Bastimentos (Bocas del Toro), Palmar Beach Lodge, three nights
- Boquete, Boquete Garden Inn, three nights
- Pacific Coast, Isla Boca Brava, Hotel Boca Brava, two nights, and

- Canal area again, Radisson Summit Resort and Golf Panama, five nights



## Notes on Accommodation

*Radisson Summit Resort and Golf Panama*

<https://www.radisson.com/panama-city-hotel-pa-0844-2014/panagolf>

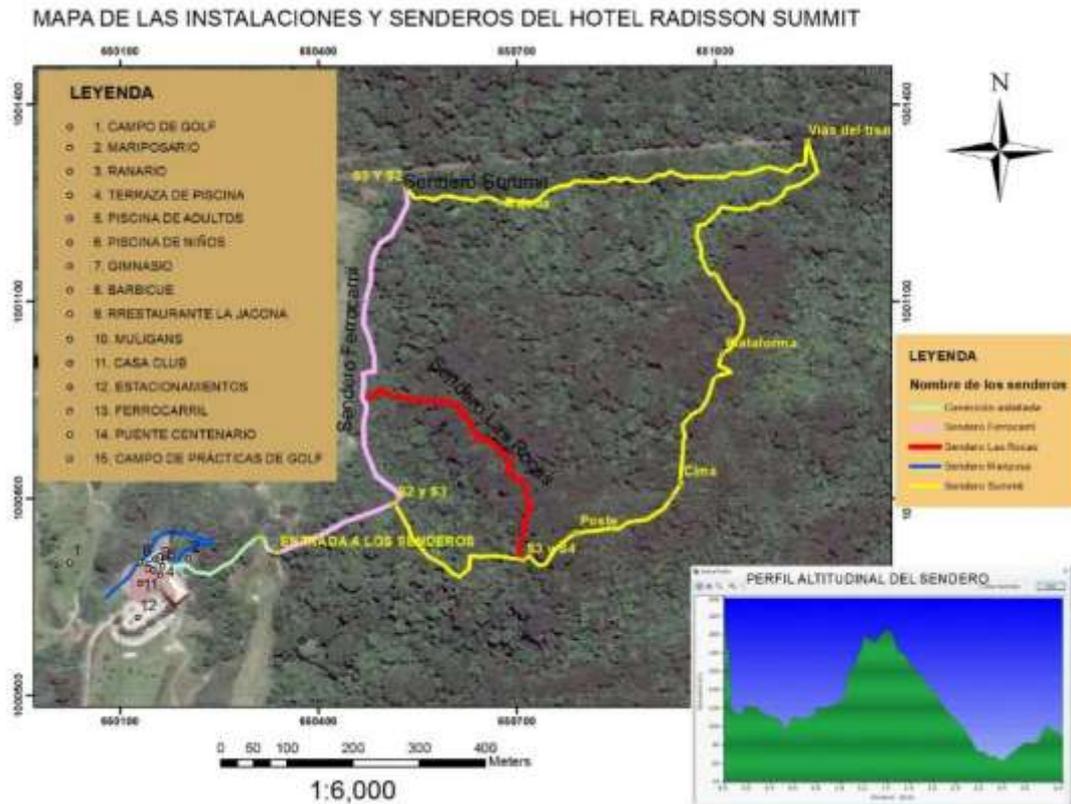
Somewhat surprisingly this was an excellent base near Panama City. It is very close to all the local birding sites, has its own trail network, views over adjacent rainforest, first class facilities, friendly English-speaking staff, and aside from weekends it is largely deserted. In the Panamanian scheme of things the luxurious rooms are not expensive at around \$US80 for a “twin with rainforest view” and buffet breakfast.



Many mammals and birds could be seen from our room’s balcony, the swimming pool or on the golf course – with relatively tame sloths, tamarins, coatis, capybaras, agoutis, squirrels and opossums. Myriad birds and other mammals could also be observed at close quarters from the extensive and adjacent trail network. Pretty clearly wildlife watchers are not the reason for the Radisson’s existence. However they are well catered for and understood. Assuming they can ever be understood.....

The Radisson can't be compared to our cabin at Los Quetzales as the accommodation type and delivery are entirely different; nevertheless it presented the best value for money of any place we stayed.

Highly recommended.



### Gamboa Rainforest Resort

<http://www.gamboaresort.com/default-en.html>

Gamboa is geared for visitors who wish to do a range of “fun things”. There are countless attractions and activities at Gamboa, many of which can be accessed on foot at no cost for guests. Other fun stuff need boats, cable cars or possibly, medical teams. There are a range of forest trails, swimming pools, pampering points, orchid gardens, sloth sanctuaries and more. Views across the Chagres River are inspiring.

The army of staff are helpful and generally delightful.

The rooms at the resort are large and quite well appointed, though a tad faded. The air-conditioning was noisy and erratic. Erratic also described the room’s servicing.

For our purposes and at a walk-in rate of \$US175 per night, Gamboa does not compare well with the Radisson, just ten minutes or so away by road. The “go by leg” and “look out of the window” wildlife seen was better at the Radisson.

Recommended for what it is but wildlife enthusiasts would be better off at the Radisson.



### *Cabanas Potosi*

We booked our cabin via AirBNB. Dennis, the ex-US owner is intelligent, friendly and obliging and knows the Anton Valley region extremely well. Potosi’s gardens are a feature and have a few birds in them. The rooms are good for the price and have a fridge, electric jug and comfortable beds. There are no TVs – presenting no problems for me. A light breakfast is “complimentary”, although the timing meant that we were usually out birding before it was available.

There are negatives. It is necessary to drive to town, a few kilometres, for meals. A gate, often locked, has to be negotiated, which is a nuisance when it is bucketing with rain. There are no forest trails within walking distance but many within a few kilometres in any direction with a car.

Recommended.

### *Los Quetzales Ecolodge and Spa*

<https://www.losquetzales.com/>

The Lonely Planet Guide has this to say about the cabanas at Los Quetzales – “Have we died and gone to heaven?” Fair comment.

The lodge has a number of accommodation options within its hotel at Guadalupe and scattered inside the nearby cloud forest. The differences in amenity and experience cannot be understood by looking at a website. If you are going to stay at Los Quetzales, then Cabana #8 is the standout choice.

The cabin sleeps six comfortably. The cost at \$US240 per night was a little steep shared between just the two of us. Given the logistical issues with building, servicing, maintaining and accessing the cabins, the cost of accommodation is quite reasonable. Simply put – Cabana #8 was the highlight of our stay in Panama. I could live there. In fact it is probably the best site for birds and the general feeling of excitement that I have ever visited.

Our “off-season” visit meant that we had to do our own cooking. Initially I figured this was a nuisance but it turned into a blessing. We could buy food in the village easily and inexpensively and the cabin provided more cooking and eating equipment than we have at home. The cabin’s design and inclusions are exceptional. A ginormous gas stove, ice chest, slow combustion fireplace, hot showers, Wi-Fi and extra comfortable beds are a credit to lodge owner and environmental campaigner Carlos Alfaro and his team.

The views from the cabin are breathtaking (okay, no majestic herds of wildebeest), with pristine cloud forest, the constant movement of birds, and epiphytes galore. More than fifty birds were seen and photographed from the cabin. Pretty much all of them were “lifers”.

Numbers of resplendent quetzals were seen daily in a tree five metres from our beer garden. The birds and visiting mammals were quite tame – they are used to being fed.

The only drawback was the twenty minute, less than 2km drive to and from the hotel and village in a kick-arse 4WD in first gear. Do the maths. The hotel is 300m lower than the cabin and has different birds.

If you couldn’t book Cabana #8, then #9 would be nearly as good. The others less so.

The lodge’s staff were very kind to us although their focus was on off-season maintenance. Occasionally they would need reminding of things that they had offered to do, although these were hardly significant.

Very highly recommended.



### *Hotel Atlantic Suite*

I can't find this new Chiriqui Grande hotel on the internet; although you can't miss it on the left hand side of the main road in the centre of town.

The rooms are very good and relatively inexpensive at \$US48 per twin. There is a noisy bar downstairs and a good restaurant a few hundred metres away.

The receptionist gave the appearance of someone who hates visitors; particularly those that didn't speak fluent Spanish. She was so bad she was good!

There are a few nearby birding sites with the best being so-called "Two Tanks Road", a road leading to some oil storage tanks a few kilometres out of town and heading up the hillside. There are wetlands and flooded fields on the main road leading into town. Plenty of birds about – no mammals that we could see.

Recommended if you find yourself lost in Chiriqui Grande.



### *Palmar Beach Lodge*

<https://www.palmarbocas.com/>

We didn't pre-book this \$US100 per night lodge on Isla Bastimentos on the Caribbean Coast. We were lucky to get a place to stay as the lodge was quite full of European backpackers.

Ours was an elevated cabin with fan and one king-sized bed. I slept on the floor with a bed made from the flat cushions of a settee. Otherwise the lodge's room was very good, the food excellent – probably the best we found in the country. Palmar has exceptionally friendly and helpful staff. There were a range of other cheaper accommodation options at the lodge but these were fully booked – and we probably wouldn't have wanted them anyway. After all, who wants to share a dormitory with horny young European women?

The area is riddled with quiet roads that service the massive Red Frog accommodation conglomerate that seems to extend beyond the boundaries of where you could possibly walk in one morning. Nobody seems to care whose property you meander onto. There are enough birds on the island to offer opportunities to find new things, as well as a few mammals, many reptiles and the odd red dart frog.

The gig at Palmar Beach is about three things: being semi-nocturnal, determining how much flesh you can flash whilst contemplating, but never entering, the nearby waves, and playing with your phone.

We enjoyed our stay and honed our people-watching skills..... Some, for example Miss Espana, were quite decorative.

Recommended for a couple of nights I guess. Something a bit different.



### *Boquete Garden Inn*

<http://www.boquetegardeninn.com/>

Everything regarding this hotel is about professionalism and quality. The rooms, the grounds and the staff are first class. The location is okay and near enough to town and some excellent birding sites.



The tariff is not high and the included breakfast is excellent. Good boxed breakfasts are offered for early birding getaways. Morning bird feeders are filled. These attract a variety of colourful local birds and variegated squirrels.

The inn does not offer lunches or evening meals.

Highly recommended.

### *Hotel Boca Brava*

<http://hotelbocabrava.com/>

The hotel is located at the easternmost end of Isla Boca Brava. It survives on account of a killer view to the south that encompasses several other islands and the distant Pacific

Ocean. It is not expensive by Panamanian standards. The manager speaks conversational English.

Everything about the hotel is tired. The rooms, the décor, the facilities and the staff. It might all fall into the sea sometime soon. Our cabin, the best they had, an oceanview with no ocean to view, had excellent and very necessary air-conditioning. Most of the cabin did not leak when it rained. The double beds are bunk style and adequate. There was no hot water in the shower but this is not a big deal given the altitude or lack thereof. Pretty much no other facilities.



The food and bar are not expensive, although every corner is cut to save money. The coke came out of a large bottle, the wine out of a cask, etc.

The nearest beach is about one kilometre away. The water is murky and long before you get back to the hotel you need another swim.

There are trails through the forest, quite a few birds

and lots of mantled howler monkeys.

There probably isn't a need to go to Isla Boca Brava for the purposes of looking at wildlife. Offshore fishing or snorkelling excursions might be worthwhile.

Recommended without too much enthusiasm.

### **Panamanian People**

Not once did we hear a Panamanian raise his or her voice, act in an aggressive manner or do a windmill impression. At no time was anyone disrespectful to us, even when we threatened to have sex with their cat, offered to burn down their homes or anything else we may have said in an often fruitless attempt to speak their language. All were pleasant and helpful.

The culture, customs, and language of Panama are predominantly Caribbean Spanish. The 4.2 million population is 65% Mestizo (mixed white, Native American), 9.2% black, 6.8% mulattoes, 13% white and 6% Native Americans\*.

\*this paragraph from Dr Google

A highlight of our holiday was to visit a village of Embera Indians.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ember%C3%A1>

These incredibly beautiful and talented folk number about 33,000 in Panama and a few more than that in neighbouring Colombia. We also met a few Ngäbe indigenes in the area around Los Quetzales. Although their numbers are upwards of 200,000, to me they seemed poorer and more marginalised than the Embera; but seriously, what would I know?

I enjoyed every Panamanian I met – even the receptionist at the Hotel Atlantic Suite, although I'm fairly certain she wouldn't understand why.

A few **Faces of Panama** – from top left –

Lady at Discovery Centre, guide Mario and Maria, Indian lady at Chiriqui Grande, guide Abel, mum and bub on boat to Bocas, Michelle at the Radisson, Embera lasses, Cindy at the Radisson, Panamanian family, Embera lad, Embera mum, our Embera hostess and guide Juan Antonio







## Weather

The wet season in Panama is locally known as the “green season”. This is probably a clever marketing ploy from the Panamanian Tourist Bureau. At all other times of the year the country is just as green although possibly, but not necessarily, as wet. I am likely to never know whether our trip’s weather was typical. It presented few problems for us. There were one or two days without a thunderstorm and it rained almost every day at some point – normally from the mid-afternoon. Often the rain was a mercy as it stopped us plodding around endlessly in forests. It did kind of screw up a few spotlighting opportunities.

We didn’t get a huge percentage of sunshine and although this made the conditions slightly less steamy it also meant the birds were less chirpy.

A couple of the deluges were truly epic. Think about the heaviest rain you’ve ever experienced. Well, it was much heavier than that. You needed to be able to swim to your beer even though it was in your hand at the time.

Temperatures were around the high twenties or thirty mark. Yeah, sweaty but bearable.

## Safety and Security

At no time did we feel unsafe. Except for a general warning regarding the city of Colon, nobody suggested we needed to be careful with travel or belongings. We met residents of several other Central American countries who were visiting Panama. They explained that some of their homelands –



dot-winged antwren (photo: Nigel Miller)

particularly Honduras – were quite dodgy indeed.

## Food

Panama is not a foodies' paradise. The tucker is rather unexciting. If there is a national dish it eluded us. Hotels and restaurants offered the usual fare of burgers, pizza, and beef, chicken and fish dishes. Servings were generous, sometimes ridiculously so.

The cost of food varied enormously – with restaurants that the locals patronised a fraction of the price of some of the others. The food quality was much the same. Importantly none of it made us sick.

Water can be drunk straight from the tap in Panama.

## Beer and wine

The beer is inexpensive; \$US0.75 for a small bottle in the supermarkets and up to \$US2.75 in better hotels. We discovered three rather boring local beers – Balboa, Panama and Atlas. I couldn't much tell the difference between them.

Panamanians don't drink much wine methinks. The couple of glasses that I sampled came from Argentina.

## Driving in Panama

We hired a car, a Kia Optima, from Thrifty Car Rental. It was a bigger car than the one we booked. It made lots of strange noises. It died on steep hills. I wouldn't buy one.

The roads in Panama are generally very good. A few have the occasional mine shaft or landslip-induced rapid change in altitude. There are around five things to consider when driving in Panama:

1. You will see few road signs of any use, particularly in Panama City,
2. There are confusing and inconsistent speed limit signs – except where someone has stolen them,
3. Roadside shoulders are rare – it would not be a good idea to fall off the road,
4. Live policemen are everywhere with handheld radars, and
5. Dead policemen are everywhere too. In Australia we call them speed humps. They are rarely signposted. Hitting one at speed isn't much fun. Any vehicle with less



clearance than a blitz truck will leave interesting drag marks on the said policeman if approached at a speed higher than that of the average sloth. This included our Kia (I think Kia stands for “killed in action”).

Panamanian drivers are quite benign in the world scheme of things. A few drive stupidly, like anywhere else. We were never concerned about driving about, even in the sign-challenged Panama City. It was rare to hear a car’s horn. For ease of driving I’d rate Panama as 8 out of 10. It would get a 9 if it had road signs.

Public transport options abound. These are quicker than driving a hire car because the drivers pay their bribes to the police in instalments and can therefore ignore the speed limit signs, assuming there are any.

### **Insects - annoying**

Big ticket life-threatening diseases are rare in Panama. That is not to say that the delivery agents, mostly mosquitoes, are absent. We found one site at Gamboa that had us galloping out of the forest. At most sites they were missing or merely irritating.

Other things that bite were easy to locate, with variously plumed “march flies” being my personal favourite. As Michael\* reminded me they give you six seconds after landing before they bite. So you have time to slap yourself violently.

Ants are a feature of Panama. Some are useful. Army ants are good news indeed if you wish to see many birds in one place. The ants often remind you where they are going by trying to deconstruct your feet. Other ants appear to have no upside. One species of very small ant can cross vast distances to naked feet and only bite when all of them have gathered in position.

Curiously Panama appears to be free of leeches. Maybe they are in the Darien? Don’t know – didn’t go there.

\*Nigel



### **Insects – not annoying**

Back to army ants. There are several species. They all have the ability to cause chaos on the forest floor and any nearby vegetation. Fleeing spiders, insects, reptiles and even other ants provide feeding opportunities for a host of birds and sometimes even small mammals. An ant swarm can be

the highlight of your day! Just don't forget where you have left your feet.

Leafcutter ants have signed a non-aggression pact with their military cousins. We watched as their paths crossed with no carnage on either side. Bugger.

Panama is well served by large and colourful butterflies and moths. How they avoid being eaten at every stage of their life is anybody's guess. One type of grasshopper (pictured above) was so big all the local birds went into alarm and flew away from it.

## The Environment

If I hadn't asked questions of wise folk I would have concluded that the environment in Panama is in very good shape indeed. Informed sources told me that the somewhat corrupt government (no real surprises here) is allowing deforestation within Panama's national –



and international – parks. Not at an incredible rate; worrying all the same.

Hunting of wildlife is banned in Panama. We spied one sneaky guy with a slingshot and that's it. There appears to be no current culture of killing things.

Vast forests cover much of the country – if there isn't a road nearby there will be forest.

The Panama Canal is a double-edged sword for wildlife. It effectively separates two continents if you happen to be an animal not too excited about swimming. On the plus side the Panama Canal Authority has a vested interest in maintaining water quality for its shipping. More trees – less silt.

Panama is the only country I've visited where you can drink water straight from the tap. Hygiene standards are very high.

There is one negative – the enormous quantity of rubbish, much of it plastic, that is strewn everywhere. Apparently there are procedural issues with municipal rubbish collection.

## Wildlife

**Birds** – see also table and notes for rarer species

We managed 348 of Panama’s estimated 978 species. Given the length of time we were in the country we might have seen more. There were a few things that counted against us. The wet season wouldn’t have helped. This is a time where a hundred or so migratory birds are having a holiday elsewhere. We found that using tapes had limited effect. We usually didn’t know what was calling anyway! The Caribbean slope was not birded as the weather there was crap, we failed to find accommodation that was open in the off-season and we struggled to find access points to any decent forest. We decided against visiting the eastern half of the country, including the Darien, during the wet season.

We weren’t unhappy with the birds we saw. Resplendent quetzal was seen in numbers and daily at Los Quetzales. I can’t be sad with over 200 lifers!

We engaged guides a couple of times. The affable, competent and obliging Mario Bernal Greco in El Valle de Anton spent two mornings with us. He is highly recommended and can be contacted at [mariobernalg@gmail.com](mailto:mariobernalg@gmail.com). We spent a few hours with Abel, one of Los Quetzales’ guides. Great guy; probably not necessary to have a guide at Los Quetzales unless your time is severely limited.

We used Angehr and Dean’s *Birds of Panama, a Field Guide* as well as Angehr’s *A Bird Finding Guide to Panama*. The field guide is excellent in terms of the illustrations. The range maps seem a little tight. Some of the birds we spotted hadn’t read the book and were found out of range in terms of elevation and geographic location. The bird finding guide has seen a lot of work go into its production. It is becoming less relevant as access points and road conditions change. It was of limited use to us.



Notes on some of the more desirable seen birds – see also table and diary notes

The birds listed here are either those marked “uncommon” or rarer in the field guide, are particularly interesting, or named resplendent quetzal.

Black Guan	Seen at Los Quetzales cabin and Waterfall Trail, Boquete
Spotted Wood-Rail	One family on Waterfall Trail, Boquete
Wood Stork	A few overflying in the Canal area
Green Ibis	A few in the swamp on Two Tanks Road, Chiriqui Grande
King Vulture	One overflying at Boca Chica, near David
Pearl Kite	One at the Caldera petroglyph site
Double-toothed Kite	One near accommodation on Isla Bastimentos
Plumbeous Kite	Seen at El Valle de Anton, Chiriqui Grande and Isla Bastimentos
Snail Kite	Two at Discovery Centre, Canal area

Crane Hawk	One from Canopy Tower, Discovery Centre, Canal area
Plumbeous Hawk	One on the La Iguana Trail, El Valle de Anton
Barred Hawk	One on the Boquete Zip-line Road
Semiplumbeous Hawk	Two seen hunting west of El Valle de Anton
Gray Hawk	One seen at Ammo Dump Ponds, Canal area
Ornate Hawk-Eagle	One seen from our cabin at Los Quetzales
Barred Forest-Falcon	Seen more than once at Radisson Hotel, Canal area
American Kestrel	One seen on power pole near Gualaca, Boquete area
Pheasant Cuckoo	One seen displaying on Palm Summit Trail, Radisson Hotel, Canal area
Black-and-White Owl	One seen well on Isla Bastimentos near Palmar Beach Lodge
Spectacled Owl	A pair plus an adult and chick at El Valle de Anton
Band-tailed Barbthroat	One near Boquete Gardens Inn
Green-fronted Lancebill	Several seen near to our cabin at Los Quetzales
Fiery-throated Hummingbird	A few on Las Minas Trail, Los Quetzales and at cabin
Blue-throated Goldentail	A few at Boquete and Isla Boca Brava
Stripe-tailed Hummingbird	A few at cabin, Los Quetzales
White-tailed Emerald	One on Boquete Zip-line Road
Green-crowned Brilliant	A couple at Los Quetzales Hotel
Talamanca Hummingbird	A couple at Los Quetzales Hotel
Resplendent Quetzal	Seen daily in numbers at cabin at Los Quetzales; also La Amistad NP
American Pygmy Kingfisher	One seen on pond near Palmar Beach Lodge, Isla Bastimentos
Red-headed Barbet	Three seen on Waterfall Trail, Boquete
Fiery-billed Aracari	A pair seen on roadside near Gualaca, Boquete area
Olivaceous Piculet	A few seen on Radisson Palm Summit Trail
Pale-billed Woodpecker	A pair on Two Tanks Road, Chiriqui Grande and a pair on Isla Bastimentos
Slaty Spinetail	Two at Two Tanks Road, Chiriqui Grande in the swamp
Ruddy Treerunner	A few in La Amistad on the Return Trail
Streak-breasted Treehunter	A couple from our cabin at Los Quetzales
Scaly-throated Foliage-gleaner	Fairly common at Los Quetzales
Buff-fronted Foliage-gleaner	One at our cabin at Los Quetzales
Buffy Tuftedcheek	Fairly common at Los Quetzales and La Amistad
Long-tailed Woodcreeper	One at El Valle de Anton near Cabanis Potosi
Northern Barred-Woodcreeper	A few at an ant swarm at Gamboa Rainforest Resort
Jet Antbird	A pair on Pipeline Road, Canal area
Zeledon's Antbird	One on Las Minas Trail, Los Quetzales
Greenish Elaenia	One on Boquete Zip-line Road
Northern Scrub-Flycatcher	One on Isla Boca Brava
Eye-ringed Flatbill	A few on Waterfall Trail, Boquete
Ochraceous Pewee	A few seen and photographed at Los Quetzales
Rufous Mourner	One seen and heard at the highest point of the Radisson Palm Summit Trail
Rufous Piha	One seen and heard on Two Tanks Road, Chiriqui Grande
Speckled Mourner	A pair nest building at Discovery Centre, Canal area
Barred Becard	Three seen at cabin at Los Quetzales
Black-and-White Becard	A pair; female seen with nesting material, Waterfall Trail, Boquete
Black-crowned Tityra	One seen in swampy area on Two Tanks Road, Chiriqui Grande
Three-wattled Bellbird	A few females seen at Los Quetzales

Brown Jay	Common on Two Tanks Road, Chiriqui Grande
Azure-hooded Jay	One seen on Palo Seco Road, Fortuna Forest
Black-and-Yellow Silky-Flycatcher	Regular at Los Quetzales
Golden-crowned Warbler	One seen on Palo Seco Road, Fortuna Forest
Wrenthrush	One at cabin at Los Quetzales
Spangle-cheeked Tanager	A few at cabin at Los Quetzales and at La Amistad
Black-headed Saltator	One on Las Minas Road El Valle de Anton
Blue Seedeater	A few seen above Boquete and opposite Boquete Garden Inn
Spot-crowned Euphonia	A pair on Boquete Zip-line Road
Golden-browed Chlorophonia	Regular at Los Quetzales

## List of Birds Seen

*Note that the numbers in the table in the third and subsequent columns correspond to the Day Number of the trip that each bird was first seen at each site. The diary section adds further comment to what happened on these days.....*

Birds that were “heard only” are not recorded.

Page	Bird	Canal	El V	Los Q	Ch Gr	Bas	Boqu	B Br
2	<b>Little Tinamou</b>	1						
4	<b>Black-bellied Whistling-Duck</b>	1			13			
4	<b>Muscovy Duck</b>	4						
10	<b>Gray-headed Chachalaca</b>	1	7		13		18	20
10	<b>Black Guan</b>			10			19	
12	<b>Spotted Wood-Quail</b>						19	
14	<b>Crested Bobwhite</b>		9*					
14	<b>Least Grebe</b>							20
22	<b>Brown Pelican</b>					14		20
24	<b>Magnificent Frigatebird</b>	4			14	14		20
24	<b>Neotropic Cormorant</b>	1	7					20
24	<b>Anhinga</b>	1						
26	<b>Rufescent Tiger-Heron</b>	3			13			
28	<b>Great Egret</b>				13			20
28	<b>Snowy Egret</b>	2						
30	<b>Tricolored Heron</b>					14		
30	<b>Cattle Egret</b>			9				20
30	<b>Green Heron</b>	4	6				18	
30	<b>Striated Heron</b>	3						
32	<b>Wood Stork</b>	1						
34	<b>White Ibis</b>							20
34	<b>Green Ibis</b>				14			
36	<b>Black Vulture</b>	1	6	9	13	14	18	20
36	<b>Turkey Vulture</b>	1	6	9	13	15		20
36	<b>King Vulture</b>							20*^
38	<b>Osprey</b>	5						
38	<b>Pearl Kite</b>				13^			

Page	Bird	Canal	El V	Los Q	Ch Gr	Bas	Boqu	B Br
40	<b>White-tailed Kite</b>							22*
40	<b>Swallow-tailed Kite</b>		7				18	
40	<b>Double-toothed Kite</b>					16		
40	<b>Plumbeous Kite</b>			14	14			
42	<b>Snail Kite</b>	4						
44	<b>Crane Hawk</b>	4						
46	<b>Plumbeous Hawk</b>		6					
46	<b>Barred Hawk</b>						19	
46	<b>White Hawk</b>	2						
46	<b>Semiplumbeous Hawk</b>		8					
48	<b>Common Black Hawk</b>					14		20
50	<b>Roadside Hawk</b>		6	9	13	14		
50	<b>Gray Hawk</b>	4						
54	<b>Ornate Hawk-Eagle</b>			12				
56	<b>Barred Forest-Falcon</b>	1						
58	<b>Crested Caracara</b>							20^^
58	<b>Yellow-headed Caracara</b>	1	6	9				21
58	<b>American Kestrel</b>							20^^
60	<b>Bat Falcon</b>	1						
62	<b>White-throated Crake</b>					15		
62	<b>Gray-cowled Wood-Rail</b>		7			15		
66	<b>Purple Gallinule</b>	3						
66	<b>Common Gallinule</b>	3			14			
68	<b>Limpkin</b>					15		
68	<b>Southern Lapwing</b>	1						
70	<b>American Oystercatcher</b>							20
72	<b>Wattled Jacana</b>	3			13			
86	<b>Laughing Gull</b>	23				17		
90	<b>Gull-billed Tern</b>							20
98	<b>Parasitic Jaeger</b>					17		
100	<b>Rock Pigeon</b>	2			14			
102	<b>Pale-vented Pigeon</b>	1						
102	<b>Scaled Pigeon</b>	4	8					
102	<b>Band-tailed Pigeon</b>			9			17	
102	<b>Mourning Dove</b>			11				
104	<b>Ruddy Ground-Dove</b>	1	6		13		18	
104	<b>Blue Ground-Dove</b>							22*^
106	<b>White-tipped Dove</b>	2	6			14	18	
106	<b>Gray-chested Dove</b>	1						
108	<b>Ruddy Quail-Dove</b>	1						
110	<b>Brown-throated Parakeet</b>			11	13^			
110	<b>Crimson-fronted Parakeet</b>					16		
114	<b>Orange-chinned Parakeet</b>	1	7					
116	<b>Blue-headed Parrot</b>	1	6		13			
116	<b>Red-lored Parrot</b>	1				14		

Page	Bird	Canal	El V	Los Q	Ch Gr	Bas	Boqu	B Br
116	<b>Yellow-crowned Parrot</b>		7					
116	<b>Mealy Parrot</b>	2					17	
120	<b>Pheasant Cuckoo</b>	26						
120	<b>Squirrel Cuckoo</b>	1	6		13		18	
122	<b>Greater Ani</b>	3						
122	<b>Smooth-billed Ani</b>	4	7					
122	<b>Groove-billed Ani</b>				13	14		
124	<b>Spectacled Owl</b>		8					
124	<b>Black-and-white Owl</b>					15		
128	<b>Lesser Nighthawk</b>	3						
128	<b>Common Pauraque</b>	1						
130	<b>Rufous Nightjar</b>	1						
134	<b>White-collared Swift</b>			12				
134	<b>Chimney Swift</b>		8					
134	<b>Vaux's Swift</b>	3					18	
136	<b>Short-tailed Swift</b>	26						
136	<b>Band-rumped Swift</b>	26						
138	<b>Long-billed Hermit</b>	5						
140	<b>Bronzy Hermit</b>					16		
140	<b>Band-tailed Barbthroat</b>						17	
140	<b>Stripe-throated Hermit</b>	3				15		
142	<b>White-necked Jacobin</b>	3						
142	<b>Green-fronted Lancebill</b>			9				
142	<b>Lesser Violetear</b>			11			18	
142	<b>Violet Sabrewing</b>			9			18	
144	<b>Garden Emerald</b>			7			19	
146	<b>Violet-headed Hummingbird</b>		8					
146	<b>Crowned Woodnymph</b>		8	10		15		
148	<b>Fiery-throated Hummingbird</b>			10				
148	<b>Violet-bellied Hummingbird</b>	2						
148	<b>Blue-throated Goldentail</b>						17	20
150	<b>Blue-chested Hummingbird</b>	4						
150	<b>Snowy-bellied Hummingbird</b>		7				18	
150	<b>Rufous-tailed Hummingbird</b>	2	7		13	15	17	20
152	<b>White-vented Plumeleteer</b>	1	7					
152	<b>Stripe-tailed Hummingbird</b>			10				
152	<b>White-tailed Emerald</b>						18	
154	<b>Green-crowned Brilliant</b>			10				
154	<b>Talamanca Hummingbird</b>			11				
154	<b>Purple-throated Mountain-gem</b>			10			18	
154	<b>White-throated Mountain-gem</b>			9			19	
156	<b>Purple-crowned Fairy</b>				14			
158	<b>Volcano Hummingbird</b>			10				
158	<b>Scintillant Hummingbird</b>			12				
160	<b>White-tailed Trogon</b>	3						



Page	Bird	Canal	El V	Los Q	Ch Gr	Bas	Boqu	B Br
200	<b>Spot-crowned Woodcreeper</b>			9			19	
202	<b>Fasciated Antshrike</b>	2	6					
202	<b>Barred Antshrike</b>	1	8					21
204	<b>Black-crowned Antshrike</b>	4				15		
204	<b>Black-hooded Antshrike</b>							20
204	<b>Russet Antshrike</b>	24						
206	<b>Checker-throated Antwren</b>	2						
208	<b>White-flanked Antwren</b>	1						
208	<b>Dot-winged Antwren</b>	2						
210	<b>Dusky Antbird</b>	1						
210	<b>Jet Antbird</b>	2						
212	<b>Chestnut-backed Antbird</b>	23	7			15		
212	<b>Zeledon's Antbird</b>			10				
214	<b>Bicolored Antbird</b>	3						
214	<b>Spotted Antbird</b>	1						
216	<b>Black-faced Antthrush</b>	1						
222	<b>Brown-capped Tyrannulet</b>	24						
222	<b>Southern Beardless-Tyrannulet</b>	3	8					
224	<b>Yellow Tyrannulet</b>	5						
224	<b>Yellow-crowned Tyrannulet</b>	3						
224	<b>Greenish Elaenia</b>						19	
226	<b>Yellow-bellied Elaenia</b>	5	7				18	
226	<b>Lesser Elaenia</b>		6					
226	<b>Mountain Elaenia</b>		7	10			18	
228	<b>Torrent Tyrannulet</b>						19	
228	<b>Yellow-green Tyrannulet</b>	1						
230	<b>Paltry Tyrannulet</b>	3	7					
230	<b>Black-capped Pygmy-Tyrant</b>	5						
230	<b>Pale-eyed Pygmy-Tyrant</b>		8					
232	<b>Northern Scrub-Flycatcher</b>							20
232	<b>Slate-headed Tody-Flycatcher</b>	2						
232	<b>Common Tody-Flycatcher</b>	2	7		13		18	
234	<b>Eye-ringed Flatbill</b>						19	
234	<b>Olivaceous Flatbill</b>	2						
236	<b>Yellow-margined Flycatcher</b>		8					
236	<b>Ruddy-tailed Flycatcher</b>	4						
238	<b>Tufted Flycatcher</b>			9			19	
238	<b>Ochraceous Pewee</b>			10				
240	<b>Dark Pewee</b>			11			17	
240	<b>Tropical Pewee</b>	4						21
244	<b>Yellowish Flycatcher</b>			9				
246	<b>Bright-rumped Attila</b>	4						
246	<b>Rufous Mourner</b>	1						
248	<b>Panama Flycatcher</b>	2	8					
248	<b>Lesser Kiskadee</b>	1	7					

Page	Bird	Canal	El V	Los Q	Ch Gr	Bas	Boqu	B Br
248	<b>Great Kiskadee</b>	1	6		13	15	19	
250	<b>Rusty-margined Flycatcher</b>	4						
250	<b>Social Flycatcher</b>	3	6				18	
250	<b>Gray-capped Flycatcher</b>					15		
252	<b>Boat-billed Flycatcher</b>	4						
252	<b>Golden-bellied Flycatcher</b>			13				
252	<b>Streaked Flycatcher</b>	2	8					
254	<b>Piratic Flycatcher</b>		8					
254	<b>Tropical Kingbird</b>	1	6	11	13		18	
256	<b>Southern Bentbill</b>	25						
256	<b>Fork-tailed Flycatcher</b>	4						
258	<b>Rufous Piha</b>				14			
258	<b>Speckled Mourner</b>	4						
260	<b>Barred Becard</b>			12				
260	<b>Cinnamon Becard</b>	3						
260	<b>White-winged Becard</b>	22	8					
260	<b>Black-and-white Becard</b>						19	
262	<b>Black-crowned Tityra</b>				14			
262	<b>Masked Tityra</b>	1	6		14			
264	<b>Purple-throated Fruitcrow</b>	5						
264	<b>Three-wattled Bellbird</b>			10				
268	<b>Golden-collared Manakin</b>	4	8			14		
270	<b>Lance-tailed Manakin</b>							20
270	<b>Blue-crowned Manakin</b>	25						
270	<b>Red-capped Manakin</b>	3						
272	<b>Yellow-winged Vireo</b>			9			19	
274	<b>Brown-capped Vireo</b>			9			18	
274	<b>Red-eyed Vireo</b>		7					
274	<b>Yellow-green Vireo</b>		8					
276	<b>Lesser Greenlet</b>	3	6			15		
276	<b>Golden-fronted Greenlet</b>	5						
278	<b>Rufous-browed Peppershrike</b>			10				
280	<b>Azure-hooded Jay</b>						17**	
280	<b>Brown Jay</b>				13			
280	<b>Black-chested Jay</b>		6		14			
282	<b>Blue-and-white Swallow</b>			11			18	
282	<b>Mangrove Swallow</b>	25						20
284	<b>Southern Rough-winged Swallow</b>	1	6		13	14		
286	<b>Gray-breasted Martin</b>	4						
290	<b>Bay Wren</b>		7		14	15		
292	<b>Rufous-breasted Wren</b>	2	6					
292	<b>Rufous-and-white Wren</b>	1					17	20
292	<b>Isthmian Wren</b>						17	
292	<b>Buff-breasted Wren</b>	5						
294	<b>House Wren</b>	1	7		13	14	18	20

Page	Bird	Canal	El V	Los Q	Ch Gr	Bas	Boqu	B Br
294	<b>Ochraceous Wren</b>			9				
294	<b>White-breasted Wood-Wren</b>	1						
294	<b>Gray-breasted Wood-Wren</b>		7	10			18	
296	<b>Song Wren</b>	3						
298	<b>Long-billed Gnatwren</b>	1						20
298	<b>Tropical Gnatcatcher</b>	1				15		
300	<b>Black-faced Solitaire</b>			9			18	
300	<b>Black-billed Nightingale-Thrush</b>			10				
300	<b>Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush</b>						18	
300	<b>Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush</b>			10			19	
304	<b>Mountain Thrush</b>			9				
304	<b>Clay-colored Thrush</b>	1	6		13			
304	<b>White-throated Thrush</b>						17	
306	<b>Tropical Mockingbird</b>	2		10				
308	<b>Black-and-yellow Silky-flycatcher</b>			10				
308	<b>Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher</b>			9				
312	<b>Flame-throated Warbler</b>			10				
322	<b>Slate-throated Redstart</b>			10			18	
322	<b>Collared Redstart</b>			9			19	
326	<b>Olive-crowned Yellowthroat</b>				14	15		
328	<b>Rufous-capped Warbler</b>	26	6					
328	<b>Golden-crowned Warbler</b>						17	
330	<b>Black-cheeked Warbler</b>			10			19	
330	<b>Wrenthrush</b>			9				
332	<b>Sooty-capped Chlorospingus</b>			9				
332	<b>Common Chlorospingus</b>						17	
336	<b>Gray-headed Tanager</b>	2						
336	<b>Dusky-faced Tanager</b>		7					
338	<b>White-shouldered Tanager</b>	3						
338	<b>Tawny-crested Tanager</b>		7			14		
340	<b>Flame-rumped Tanager</b>	3	7					
340	<b>Passerini's Tanager</b>				13	14		
340	<b>Cherrie's Tanager</b>			9				
340	<b>Crimson-backed Tanager</b>	1	6					
342	<b>Blue-gray Tanager</b>	1	6	11	13	15	18	20
342	<b>Palm Tanager</b>	1	7	11	13	14	17	
342	<b>Plain-colored Tanager</b>	1	7			15		
344	<b>Bay-headed Tanager</b>		7					
344	<b>Silver-throated Tanager</b>			11			17	
346	<b>Golden-hooded Tanager</b>		7					
346	<b>Spangle-cheeked Tanager</b>			12				
346	<b>Scarlet-thighed Dacnis</b>					-	17	
346	<b>Blue Dacnis</b>	4	7			-		
348	<b>Red-legged Honeycreeper</b>	1	6				18	

Page	Bird	Canal	El V	Los Q	Ch Gr	Bas	Boqu	B Br
348	<b>Green Honeycreeper</b>	3	7					
350	<b>Bananaquit</b>		7					
350	<b>Buff-throated Saltator</b>	1	7			15		
350	<b>Black-headed Saltator</b>		7		13		18	
350	<b>Streaked Saltator</b>		6					
352	<b>Blue-black Grassquit</b>						18	
352	<b>Slate-colored Seedeater</b>	2			13	15		
352	<b>Slate-colored Grosbeak</b>	23						
354	<b>Ruddy-breasted Seedeater</b>	4						
354	<b>Variable Seedeater</b>	1	6					
354	<b>Yellow-bellied Seedeater</b>	1	7	13				
356	<b>Thick-billed Seed-Finch</b>				13	15		
356	<b>Yellow-faced Grassquit</b>		7	11			17	
358	<b>Slaty Flowerpiercer</b>			9				
358	<b>Saffron Finch</b>	1						
358	<b>Yellow-thighed Finch</b>			9				
360	<b>Orange-billed Sparrow</b>	23						
360	<b>Chestnut-capped Brushfinch</b>			10				
360	<b>Large-footed Finch</b>			10				
360	<b>White-naped Brushfinch</b>						18	
362	<b>Black-striped Sparrow</b>		7		14			
362	<b>Rufous-collared Sparrow</b>			9				
366	<b>Flame-colored Tanager</b>			9				
366	<b>White-winged Tanager</b>			13				
366	<b>Red-throated Ant-Tanager</b>	1	7					
368	<b>Carmioli's Tanager</b>				13			
370	<b>Blue Seedeater</b>						18	
370	<b>Blue-black Grosbeak</b>	1						
372	<b>House Sparrow</b>				14			
374	<b>Eastern Meadowlark</b>				13 <sup>^</sup>			
374	<b>Red-breasted Meadowlark</b>				13			
376	<b>Shiny Cowbird</b>		7					
376	<b>Bronzed Cowbird</b>	2				14	19	
376	<b>Giant Cowbird</b>	3	6		13			
376	<b>Great-tailed Grackle</b>	1	6		13	15	18	
378	<b>Yellow-backed Oriole</b>	4						
380	<b>Yellow-billed Cacique</b>	4	7					
380	<b>Scarlet-rumped Cacique</b>	2			14			
380	<b>Yellow-rumped Cacique</b>	25	7					
382	<b>Crested Oropendola</b>		6					
382	<b>Chestnut-headed Oropendola</b>	2	6					
382	<b>Montezuma Oropendola</b>		8		13	15		
384	<b>Yellow-crowned Euphonia</b>		7					
384	<b>Thick-billed Euphonia</b>	1	6					
384	<b>Elegant Euphonia</b>						18	

Page	Bird	Canal	El V	Los Q	Ch Gr	Bas	Boqu	B Br
386	<b>Spot-crowned Euphonia</b>						17	
386	<b>Olive-backed Euphonia</b>				13			
386	<b>Tawny-capped Euphonia</b>		7					
388	<b>Golden-browed Chlorophonia</b>			9			18	
388	<b>Lesser Goldfinch</b>						18	
388	<b>Yellow-bellied Siskin</b>			13				

## NOTES

Page - page number in The Birds of Panama field guide

Birds in red - new for Steve

Canal - Soberiana NP and environs

El V - El Valle de Anton and environs

Los Q - Los Quetzales and La Amistad Park and environs

Ch Gr - Chiriqui Grande

Bas - Isla Basimentos

Boqu - Boquete and environs

B Br - Isla Boca Brava

\*Panamerican Highway

^ Caldera

^^ Near Gualaca

\*^ Boca Chica

\*\* Palo Seco Road

## Mammals

Panama has ~220 mammal species. Many of these are rats and bats. Some are cats and others that don't much like being seen. Most are nocturnal. Our list is not particularly long. We didn't see anything that is considered rare. Our sightings, with a couple of exceptions, were of animals that were seen multiple times. Had we travelled at a time when evening rain was less prevalent we might have had more luck with spotlighting.

Many species of bat and a rodent or two were not able to be positively identified. We had a laminated fold-out guide "*Panama Mammals and Tracks*" by Rainforest Publications which was very useful except for bats and rats. It also lacked range / habitat maps. The best site for



mammals proved to be the grounds and surrounding forest at the Radisson, near Panama City. This list is in no particular order (a.k.a. laziness on my part).

Mammal		Seen
Central American Agouti	<i>Dasyprocta punctata</i>	Very common in the Canal area; less so in lowlands elsewhere
Red-tailed Squirrel	<i>Sciuris granatensis</i>	Common around Radisson; less so elsewhere in Canal area
White-nosed Coati	<i>Nasua narica</i>	Common around Radisson; less so elsewhere in Canal area
Geoffroy's Tamarin	<i>Sanguinus geoffroyi</i>	Common around Radisson; less so elsewhere in Canal area
Brown-throated Three-toed Sloth	<i>Bradypus variegatus</i>	Common in lowlands and foothills
Hoffman's Two-toed Sloth	<i>Choloepus hoffmani</i>	A pair seen at El Valle; also seen Isla Bastimentos
Jamaican Fruit Bat	<i>Artibeus jamaicensis</i>	Common at the Radisson (presumed to be this species)
Mantled Howler Monkey	<i>Alouatta palliata</i>	Common in Canal area and very common on Isla Boca Brava
White-throated Capuchin Monkey	<i>Cebus capuchinus</i>	Common in Canal area. Also seen on Isla Bastimentos
Variegated Squirrel	<i>Sciurus variegatoides</i>	Both forms common, particularly near people
Tayra	<i>Eira barbara</i>	One seen crossing Pipeline Road, Canal area. Another possibly glimpsed at Summit Palm Trail, Radisson Hotel
Capybara	<i>Hydrochaeris hydrochaeris</i>	Fairly common in Canal area – even in the Panama Canal Miraflores Locks car park
Central American Dwarf Squirrel	<i>Microsciurus alfari</i>	Common at Los Quetzales cabins

Cacomistle	<i>Bassariscus sumichrasi</i>	One came for bananas at Cabanas #8, Los Quetzales
Common Grey Four-eyed Opossum	<i>Philander opossum</i>	One seen spotlighting on Isla Bastimentos
Tent-making Bat	<i>Uroderma bilobatum</i>	A colony in a palm tree in the restaurant at Palmar Beach Lodge, Isla Bastimentos
Brown four-eyed opossum	<i>Metachirus nudicaudatus</i>	Two seen well while spotlighting on Isla Bastimentos
Common Opossum	<i>Didelphis marsupialis</i>	Common on the Radisson's golf course at night
White-tailed Deer	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>	One seen fleetingly on Summit Palm Trail, Radisson; spoor common elsewhere
Eastern Cottontail	<i>Sylvilagus floridanus</i>	Seen at Gamboa Rainforest Resort and Radisson Hotel in Canal area
Alston's Singing Mouse?	<i>Scotinomus teguina</i>	A couple, presumed to be this species, came to feeding tray at Cabanas #8, Los Quetzales



## Reptiles and amphibians

We didn't keep a list. Suffice to say that some of the larger reptiles – green iguanas, basilisk lizards and the like were quite common in the lowlands although quite skittish, unless they were up in the trees. Smaller reptiles and frogs abounded. Only two of the latter were sought and seen – the red dart frog and green and black dart frog. Only one snake was identified, a two metre long fer-de-lance.



## Diary

### Day 0 – 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2018

Once more my lead-in to the holiday wasn't too flash. My head was occupied by space aliens. I had a vague feeling that something was going to go seriously askew.

The check-in for the United Airlines 787 flight to Los Angeles was odd indeed. Almost everyone was taken to a self-check-in point. I was ushered, first by a Filipina, then by an Iraqi lass to a neutral point where I was asked "20 questions". These included why I wished to travel on United's plane (are they really that bad?), where I was staying in the USA (that one was easy – nowhere, I hoped) and how did I maintain such a neutral composure when surely the questions were pretty stupid. I asked the questioners a few questions of my own. I guess the fact that I was wearing a jacket with "Donald Trump is a disappointing chap" emblazoned on it probably didn't count in my favour.

Airports hold some fascination. Many people dress for their destination. So on a freezing cold winter's morning with showers and a howling southerly gale there were dudes with singlets and thongs ("slippers", not g-strings, thankfully) heading for Australia's most northerly city – Denpasar.

At the United gate I was “randomly” selected for special screening. Whilst facing Mecca I had a variety of electronic and / or industrial-strength instruments applied to my person and meagre belongings. An enquiry into the definition of the word “randomly” elicited a shocked response from a gentleman of sub-continental extraction who looked like he would have been more at home in a mortuary. “Oh no, sir, it’s the computer”. I don’t think so. I think my unwilling intersection with a minor brawl in Sydney Airport’s arrivals hall some years ago might have been counting against me.

Once on board the excellent new “Dreamliner” aircraft the captain announced that it was to be his birthday on Monday. Who cares? Are we taking up a collection for a cake? As it happened he was turning 65 and this was to be his last flight as captain. USA regulations say that 65 year olds are too old to fly aeroplanes.

The 13 hours of our airborne incarceration drifted by. The food was abominable, the worst I’ve had on an international flight. This was hardly unexpected on a US airline.

My travelling buddy, Jake, from Oatley, a conditioner for the local football team, the Cronulla Sharks, was travelling to Las Vegas for a buck’s night. When I was attending buck’s nights we thought going to Sydney City was exotic.

The plane landed 25 minutes early. This wasn’t a mercy as we had to wait on the tarmac for the airport staff and immigration dudes to arrive for work at 0600. The exit arrangements were slick. The airport processing folk in the USA obviously hadn’t heard that I was supposed to be randomly selected for stuff.

I met the retiring captain of our flight in the exit hall where we shook hands and chatted about retirement. As I’d earlier cut my finger and it was bleeding somewhat, we are now blood brothers. Our pleasant conversation was terminated when a border control numbnuts came to us and told us to move on. Welcome to retirement!

We located the largely deserted Terminal 3 for our onward Copa Airlines flight to Panama City. My watch indicated it was midnight. Meanwhile, outside, the sun was up and the clock on the wall read 0700. Uuurrgh. I wanted to die.

Now here’s something new. A lady of African descent, a security guard, with one arm. Really? Meanwhile a hairy guy paces to and fro chattering to himself whilst writing indecipherable code on a foolscap binder and constantly spitting at the nearby drinking fountain.

Eventually we checked in to our fully booked 737-800 flight. I had bought a bottle of duty free single malt in the Los Angeles duty free shop. The lass at the shop insisted that I could not carry it with me and could pick it up at the gate. Maybe she thought I wanted to drink it immediately? Maybe she was right. No such luck. So I’m on the plane and hear an announcement – entirely in Spanish – except for the words “duty free”. My whisky! I asked a Copa staffer to get it for me as I was blocked in by a large smelly gentleman from a prominent north American country who was sneezing all over me and wiping snot on his seat.

The almost six hour flight to Panama City was incredibly scenic, with the Gulf of California, amazing Mexican gorges, Mexico City, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and Costa Rica all being seen.

We soon found ourselves in Panama City's Tocumen International Airport. Then to the Thrifty Car Rental agency where Monica, whose lower half was dressed in a grey sock, had my eyes watering. She took virtual money from us for some fairly odd reasons. One of these was for compulsory roadside assistance should Thrifty's car break. This was before we learnt about dead police.....

Tired, smelly and pretty much over life, we exited the airport at 2000 with our destination being the Radisson Summit Resort. Nigel at the wheel. This couldn't be too difficult, surely. Within a few hundred meters we were hopelessly lost. All my maps counted for nought when there are no road signs, it is dark and everyone else on the roads knows what they are doing.

It was to get worse. After asking directions several times we eventually found our way onto a road heading in approximately the right direction. Then we made a fateful turn – onto a tollway to the northern city of Colon. This ranked as one of the 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries worst ever decisions. Not quite as bad as Australia's ex-cricket captain Steve Smith's ball tampering one, but pretty bad nevertheless. Once entered there are no exits on the Colon Tollway. Fifty kilometres later we managed to turn around on the unlit and un-line marked



motorway. Just what we needed – a 100 kilometre round trip in the middle of the night that we had to pay for. Twice. We were to make one more stuff-up – by crossing the Panama Canal, before we arrived at our hotel. I wept with joy. Well, I would have if I hadn't been so dehydrated. The gate to the hotel was locked at 11pm. That didn't stop us.

Our room was magnificent with views over a rainforest. Reception

explained that there were no rules – we could wander anywhere we wished and if we got belted by golf balls then “problem belong us”. Dos cervezas were procured to wash down our sleeping pills. So ended the longest day of my time on this earth.

### **Day 1 – 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2018**

Sunrise saw us peering off our 5<sup>th</sup> floor balcony into the treetops. There were no kookaburras or magpies. Instead we had toucans, tanagers, honeycreepers and hummingbirds. The view was awesome. Aside from forest we could see some of the tall

buildings of Panama City, the Bridge of the Americas over the Panama Canal, and, well, a golf course.

The Radisson has a sumptuous breakfast included in the room rate. It is available starting at a sensible 0630.

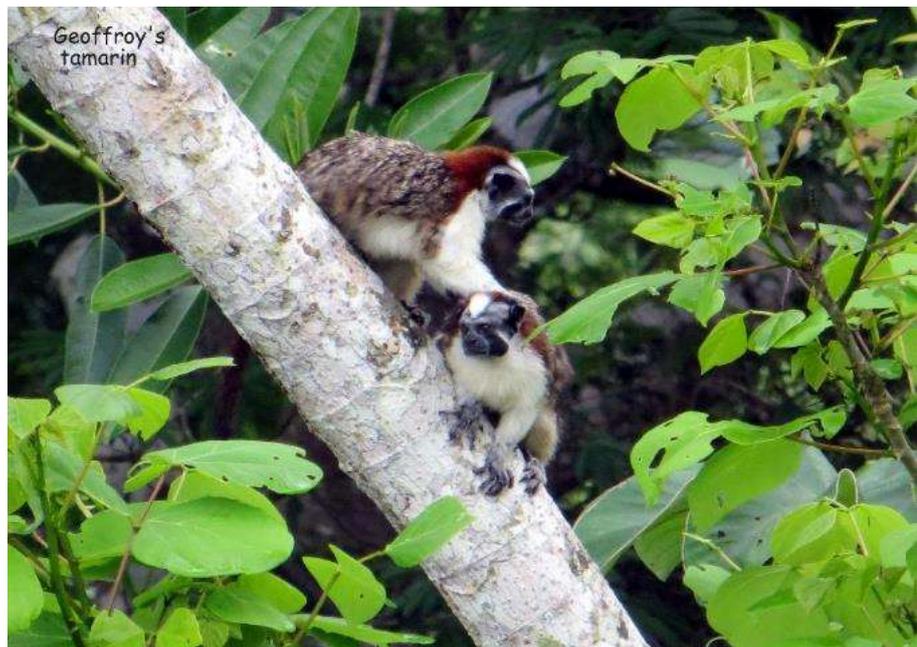
We soon found ourselves on the Radisson's Summit Palm Trail which leads directly off the golf course. The trail winds through several kilometres of delightful forest. A mixed flock at an unseen ant swarm within the first hundred metres saw us stationary for the best part of an hour. Woodcreepers, antbirds, ant-thrushes, wrens, other birds and us. We all refused to budge.

Mammals were plentiful on the trail with Central American agoutis, four groups of white-nosed coatis, a red-tailed squirrel and a probable tayra. Mantled howlers were heard.

Lunch was enjoyed back at the hotel and by the pool. Light rain started so we decamped to a nearby gazebo. There a troupe of Geoffroy's tamarins entertained us. This is one of the most attractive primates I've seen. They proved to be very common around the Radisson.

We chatted with local tourists. A young girl was amazed that her handling of a giant millipede didn't prove fatal. She was so excited.

A swim in the pool and then back to our room where Roger\* spotted a three-toed sloth just off our balcony. Could the day get any better? Answer, no. I had a developing sore throat. Bloody swimming pool.



By day's end we had 65 birds on our list.

After dinner: spotlighting on the golf course. It was fairly lame. Lots of rufous nightjars and common pauraques and one common opossum in a tree. No terrestrial mammals. A few caimans in the golf course's ponds probably means that errant golf balls are not collected by the local kids....

\*Nigel

## Day 2 – 4<sup>th</sup> June 2018

A nightmare sleep with my throat feeling like a lava stream had taken up tenancy. After breakfast we drove to Summit Park in Soberiana National Park. This part of the park functions as the Panama City Zoo. A guy with a gun wouldn't let us in as the zoo didn't open until 0900. Pedro, the boss, waved us through. Very decent of him. We had a quick look around, returning later in the morning.

We were more interested in a nearby forest walk – the Plantation Trail. This excellent walk follows an old road through a venerable cocoa plantation. The forest has all the appearance of being unlogged. Nigel, my throat and I plodded for a few kilometres and whilst there were few birds on the forward journey the tree tops were alive with mantled howlers, white-faced capuchins and three-toed sloths. A coati and many agoutis were also seen.

As the light had improved on the return journey there was much more bird activity. Most of the birds were nest-building or feeding chicks. We had motmots, puffbirds, various antbirds,



broad-billed motmot (photo: Nigel Miller)

flycatchers, caciques, tanagers and woodpeckers to keep us amused.

Back at Summit Park we patronised a kiosk for a lunch of empanadas. My uncapped bottle of Pepsi soon filled with bees. I learnt a new use for my moustache – an effective bee strainer.

Afternoon thunderstorms rolled in, which was a pity as the park had many wild birds and reptiles. The only caged exhibit that attracted my interest was that of a harpy eagle. As far as zoos go, and I'm not normally attracted to them, this was one of the better ones as far as the layout and animal welfare is concerned. Happily, the locals we chatted with seemed quite passionate and knowledgeable regarding their fauna.

We were soon back at the Radisson for an early dinner of tasty coconut chicken.

We managed to get a technician to re-wire our air-conditioner's thermostat. This had been set on absolute zero and whilst its mission was a tough one, it was doing a sterling job trying to achieve it. The ice sheets it had created were hazardous, particularly at night.

## Day 3 – 5<sup>th</sup> June 2018

It rained until well after 0900 so we checked out of the Radisson and drove the short distance to our new digs, the Gamboa Rainforest Resort. We checked in, although we had to wait until mid-afternoon before the room was ready. As the rain had stopped we went exploring.

Don't believe the maps that Gamboa might give you – there are lots of named and marked trails that aren't on them. We found a short one that was pretty much obscured by mosquitoes. The ground was mostly ant – army ant – big ones! Bicoloured and spotted antbirds were in the company of motmots, woodcreepers red-throated ant-tanagers and others. The bounty of unfortunate insects and spiders that were trying to escape the ants were efficiently gobbled up. Ant swarms are quite absorbing. I learnt never to leave them unless a) starving, or b) happy hour.



Lunch was taken before going back to the ants. They had moved to a roadside location with the attending birds flying to and fro across it to their nests.

A spotlight before dinner was slow. We managed an eastern cottontail and several unidentified frogs.

#### **Day 4 – 6<sup>th</sup> June 2018**

We could have hired a birding guide from Panama City for a little over \$A200 for the morning, but the prospect of rain and a vague feeling that a guide would not add much value saw us by ourselves.

It didn't rain. We met some interesting folk at breakfast. They were teachers at Panama City's international school. They had a scrum of happy high school kids on an excursion. The Spanish, Honduran and American teachers offered insights into what it was like to live and work in Panama as ex-pats. Pretty good apparently. They made me happy when they said that everything is more expensive in Costa Rica, and that San Jose is a bit dodgy.

Nigel was keen to visit The Panama Rainforest Discovery Centre, a wonderful site near the Pipeline Road and managed by Fundacion Avifauna Eugene Eisenmann, a non-profit

organisation established to protect Panama's birds and their habitats. It costs \$US30 entry (\$10 for seniors!!) and the number of visitors is limited so that the hummer feeders, trails and canopy viewing tower are never crowded. The said tower is built from materials left over from the construction of the Panama Canal – it is truly awesome!

The hummer feeders were humming along whilst a male golden-collared manakin provided an impressive wing-snapping display nearby. We climbed the canopy tower and managed a few good birds including crane hawk and snail kite. Others seen were yellow-billed cacique, scaled pigeons, yellow-backed oriole and a couple of different toucans. Howlers and sloths could also be spotted.

Next was a loop trail that leads past a fabulous lake. It was quite birdy.

We had coffee at the hummer feeding place before walking along part of the Pipeline Road. A tayra sauntered across it in front of us. Then it was a snack with Carlos, the long-haired cool dude at the

Discovery Centre entry station, where we talked about the forest's wildlife. Five young friendly Spanish female tourists interrupted our chat and sent our thoughts in a different direction. Rolling thunder eventually sent us packing, although we managed a few bonus



birds at a lake next to the canal on the way back to Gamboa.

We enjoyed a couple of beers with Nadine and Brian, a Dutch couple, at Gamboa's Monkey Bar. What sort of a Dutch name is Brian?



### **Day 5 – 7<sup>th</sup> June 2018**

The famous Pipeline Road, if you read the literature, has a bird list of over 450. This suggests that walking along the road would be hazardous to your health – there would be so many birds belting into you. We arrived at 0730, walked for 4km and saw not much at all. The highlights were purple-throated fruitcrow (hardly a rarity), a male red-capped manakin and some birds that we'd already seen. An army ant swarm had surprisingly few birds to compete with. We saw more mammals than birds, with agoutis, howlers, capuchins and sloths. We decamped to some

edge forest near to the edge of the canal. It had many more birds. Most of them we'd also seen.

Despite having stolen cakes and fruit from the breakfast buffet (which was excellent, by the way), we found ourselves back at the resort at lunch-time.

After a post-lunch shower we tried searching Gamboa's La Laguna Trail. The resort staff were not happy that we were to wander this dangerous 600m long track by ourselves. Joking, surely. We found out why – mosquitoes; all of them I think. We ran away.

Two large groups of capybara were found in the resort's grounds before we sensibly slumped at the bar for a couple of well-earned cervezas.



### **Day 6 – 8<sup>th</sup> June 2018**

We departed Gamboa for the Anton Valley (El Valle de Anton). We soon found ourselves in a roadworks-inspired traffic jam on the Panamerican Highway just west of the Canal.

It was late morning when we arrived at El Valle. We tried to dump our luggage at our lodge, Cabanas Potosi. We failed to do so as the owner was elsewhere and the gate was locked. We then went in search of the La Iguana Trail but found some forest anyway..... There were some nice birds including plumbeous hawk. As a bonus we discovered the remains of the largest spider I've ever seen. It appeared to have expired by choking to death on a white-tailed deer. A two metre long fer-de-lance crossed the road in front of us. Not going near that one.

We patronised a Chinese-owned supermarket. The Chinese own most supermarkets in Panama. The groceries were generally more expensive than those in Australia – except beer @ \$A1 per bottle or can.

Dennis, Cabanas Potosi's owner was at the lodge when we returned in the afternoon. A friendly US ex-pat, he soon had me chatting with Mario Bernal Greco, a neighbour and locally famous birding guide. He offered us a discounted rate on account of a guide-bonding thingy.

After a beer or two we went hunting for a Panamanian restaurant for some dinner. It was locked and barred so our meal was at a pizza joint. The pizzas were okay.

### **Day 7 – 9<sup>th</sup> June 2018**

Mario wanted a 0630 start which suited me just fine. I woke early and washed and hung some clothes, fully expecting them to get wetter as the day progressed.

Mario was waiting for us with his scope and the rest of his gear at 0625. A fine morning meant lots of birds, nothing earth-shattering, though quite absorbing. A number of sites were visited, initially on Las Minas Road and then on La Entrada del Valle. We crossed the continental divide a couple of times.

Mario knows his birds – the sites, the calls and any detail you may wish to know. He also offered to provide maps and other useful information for our onward journey in Panama.

A local restaurant in town provided a good and inexpensive lunch. Back at the cabanas and miraculously most of my washing was dry. This was all to the good as the wet season soon gave us a taste of its capabilities.

An afternoon visit was made to a local petroglyph site. The petroglyphs are on the underside of a house-sized boulder that had rolled down the hillside.

<http://www.banderasnews.com/1506/to-piedra-pintada-anton-valley-panama.htm>

It seems that the jury's still out on the meaning of the rock carvings, although they are generally considered to be about 8,000 years old. We gave a local youth \$US6 for his enthusiastic commentary and \$US1 to a kid who had promised not to break into our car. Everyone was happy.

Back into town and after a little shopping we found ourselves at the fruit and vegetable market. The food on sale was quite surprisingly boring. Many souvenir shops and plant sales amused. The souvenir shops because there were so few tourists, and plant sales because the surrounding roadsides were swamped with many of the same local plants that were on sale.

Once more we failed to locate a recommended restaurant and ended up eating expensive rubbish.

### **Day 8 - 10<sup>th</sup> June 2018**

I woke to a windy, foggy and overcast day. Nigel woke to a windy, foggy and overcast day with a stuffed shoulder. He had somehow contrived to tear a tendon in his sleep. Wow.

Once more Mario joined us and suggested a change of our initial plan so that we could escape the inclement weather. Good call Mario – our six hour adventure was free of rain. We birded along the roadsides west of the valley.

A short walk to the Villa Tavidia Lodge and Spa was memorable. Villa Tavidia hosts an enormous and active oropendula colony, a beautiful waterfall and a vivacious and delightful owner, Maria Martin. [www.villatavida.com](http://www.villatavida.com)

The morning's highlights included a pair of Hoffman's two-toed sloths, Montezuma oropendulas, a pair of hunting semi-plumbeous hawks and several spectacled owls at two different sites.

Back in El Valle for lunch. Mario gave us the good oil on our future. However his knowledge of birds and accommodation options outside of El Valle proved to be off-kilter. His pronouncement that we wouldn't see quetzals at Los Quetzales couldn't have been less true – although this made us happy! His recommendation of a lodge at La Fortuna also caused some stress – as it was closed. He confirmed that our decision not to visit the Darien in the wet season was a good one.

Afternoon rain was enjoyed as we didn't feel like going anywhere anyway. Once more our preferred choice in dining in El Valle could not be located.



### Day 9 – 11<sup>th</sup> June 2018

Nigel reported that during the night his shoulder had delivered the most pain he'd ever experienced. An attempted explanation of this included a gruesome depiction of a scene that involved the use of baseball bats. Images of large cities and airports started forming in my mind.

We had a light breakfast with our host. He gave some useful advice on the observation of speed limits and what to do in the event of being interviewed by the local constabulary. Basically accept the speeding ticket and throw it away at leisure.

The drive from El Valle to the Panamerican Highway was pleasant. The journey along the highway to the west was simple and largely traffic-free. 300-odd kilometres later, after having ignored previous advice to drive along a complicated local road network, we turned right to Volcan and on to our destination, Los Quetzales, at Guadalupe. The trip wasn't all

beer and skittles as I had to guess the speed limit much of the time. A dozen or so motorcycle cops with hand held radars were seen hiding under trees and at other strategic spots.

Two checkpoints were crossed – one for fruit and the other to check drivers' licenses. At least now I knew that I could legally drive in Panama on my NSW license.

Lunch was enjoyed at a roadside diner near Concepcion. There was no menu – just some notes scribbled in Spanish in a notepad. We pointed at a couple of the small range of options and hoped for the best.

Arriving at Los Quetzales Hotel at 1400 we met Darlenis who explained that as it was the off-season, the hotel's restaurant (which is nowhere near the cabins in the forest) was closed. She went on to detail our options, as she put it, for meals – we could cook food in the cabin. In other words, there were no options. Whilst this initially presented as a nuisance, in reality it was a great idea. We bought some fresh and packaged food from a slightly startled Paula in a nearby shop and soon found ourselves bouncing along a rocky 4WD track up into the cloud forested mountains towards our cabin.



Darlenis @ Los Quetzales



Carlos Alfaro, owner of Los Quetzales

Our arrival at the end of the “road” was puzzling. We could see no cabin. This was eventually located out of sight after crossing a river and ascending a short steep trail. Our driver carried a large esky full of ice. Cabana #8 is delightful in the extreme. It is luxurious, has a full kitchen, several bedrooms, a wood heater, bird and mammal feeding sites and a view to die for. This was to be the best birding site that didn't require movement on my part that I've yet discovered.

After settling in I managed 22 lifers before the rain started at 1730. These included a roaming pack of resplendent quetzals. We couldn't believe our luck! Beers, dinner and a targeted sloth (not the animal this time) in front of the fire completed a full day.

### **Day 10 – 12<sup>th</sup> June 2018**

Some pre-dawn spotlighting on my part was disappointing. Some unidentified bats and nought else.

Nigel had booked Abel, the lodge's birding guide for 0700. Abel arrived on time and was full of enthusiasm. He chose the Las Minas Trail. We managed quite a few new birds of course, although we were to see all but one of them by ourselves later in our stay. Best were ochraceous pewee, Zeledon's antbird, three-wattled bellbird and volcano hummingbird. Silvery-fronted tapaculo was heard but not seen. No mammals were sighted.

I went back to town with Abel to get some bananas to feed the alleged kinkajous and cacomistles that are said to come to the cabin at night. He gave me a bunch of bananas that could scarcely be lifted and drove me back to the cabin. Abel then took Nigel to a pharmacy to get some drugs for his shoulder.

I had lunch and traipsed about the trails before correctly deciding that there were more see-able birds from the cabana. These included black guan, a number of hummingbirds, prong-billed barbet, streak-breasted treehunter, buffy tuftedcheek and black-and-yellow silky flycatcher. Alston's singing mice and Central American dwarf squirrels were joined by brush-finches as they gleefully ate our seeds and bananas.

Smoked steak and local potatoes were cooked for dinner. I'm not sure that the meat actually needed cooking, and the potatoes steadfastly refused to be boiled, but there you

are. The best day of the holiday thus far (for me anyway).



view from Los Quetzales Cabana #8



### **Day 11 – 13<sup>th</sup> June 2018**

A traipse along the Tres Cascades Trail was enjoyed prior to returning to the cabin to find Nigel in some distress regarding his shoulder. Thoughts of returning to Oz

and / or going to a hospital were discussed. He decided to spend the day at the cabana in order to rest.

I had earlier organised an 0830 pick-up from the hotel. As I had the time I decided to walk to it. Just as well – the shocked look on Darlenis' face on my arrival told me all I needed to know. Carlos Alfaro, the owner of Los Quetzales and a thorough gentleman, chatted for a while. He generously offered to send a masseuse to Nigel, gratis, and offered me all manner of fruit and other food that was lying about.

I hopped in the car and drove the short distance to the start of the Los Quetzales Trail. This trail eventually crosses a volcanic peak, Volcan Baru, and ends up in Boquete, many kilometres away.

Although the mix of forest, vegetable fields and pasture should have guaranteed plenty of birds it was strangely very quiet. I managed to see a northern emerald-toucanet and not much else. I soon gave up.

Of note was the very friendly conversations I had with local farmers and others. One middle-aged chap who was busy spraying his carrot crop stopped and almost sprinted over to say hello. He was keen to know what I thought of Panama and to wish me luck on my journey. An old largely toothless man managed to get me to agree that it



wasn't raining, Kia cars are rubbish and that green timber dries faster if you stand it upright. I have no idea what he was talking about. These folk truly were delightful, simple people who seemed to love living where they did despite the normal hardships of rural life.

I despaired for my immediate future if Nigel decided to go home. I figured I would press on regardless, for a very different holiday experience.

At a supermarket in Cerra Punta I purchased two tins that had the word “carne” written on them. I figured they had meat inside. No, it had something that looks a little like meat. This substance has yet to be identified. Suffice to say we left the second tin in our cabin when we departed.

The hotel was abandoned on my return. No worries, there were a few birds about the gardens and adjacent river that were not present at the cabins, 300m higher up. I soon picked up lesser green violetear and Talamanca hummingbird.



Back at the cabana at 1330 and spent the entire afternoon there. Nigel had decided not to go home and said that resting his shoulder had helped a little.

The afternoon was dry and the birds constant. A fruiting tree that almost hung over our cabin had quetzals feeding in it for the third day in a row.

Nigel cooked the non-meat mystery. We ate it, waited for an hour or so, decided we weren't going to die, and went to bed.

We placed a hundredweight of bananas on the feeding table for the alleged cacomistle army. They failed to show, although there were fewer bananas the next morning....

### **Day 12 – 14<sup>th</sup> June 2018**

Mariono from the hotel picked me up at 0750. The hire car and I visited La Amistad International Park. I signed the visitors' book and started on the Sendero el Retono (trail). A mixed bird flock that may have had all the park's birds in it had me crashing through the forest to keep pace. At least 100 birds of a dozen or so species had me scrambling to pick out any rarities. Three “lifers” were identified – spangle-cheeked tanager, scintillant hummingbird and ruddy treerunner. Shortly thereafter a couple of male quetzals had a spat a few metres away. Then the clouds gathered the forest became almost unearthly quiet.

Back at the hotel I gasbagged with Darlenis for a bit, birded around the grounds, picked up some hummer feeders and returned to the cabin.

The afternoon's highlight, an ornate hawk-eagle, spotted by Nigel, surely meant we could start drinking early?

Our hummer feeders were soon buzzing with activity. Four species came with the viole(n)t sabrewing the most common and easily the most spectacular.

Cabanas #8 has the advantage that you need go nowhere for meals, mammals or birds – they're all there.

It was hardly dark when Nigel spotted a cacomistle eating a banana. These are formidable animals. I wouldn't enjoy being bitten by one. My favourite "new" mammal for Panama.



### **Day 13 – 15<sup>th</sup> May 2017**

What a day. Our 0900 pick-up time gave us some last minute birding opportunities. There were plenty of birds although only one that was new – golden-bellied flycatcher.

We had a chat with Carlos at the hotel. Nigel had a complimentary massage whilst our host loaded me up with Los Quetzales cocoa, chocolate fudge and some other food, along with some Los Quetzales caps and shirts. I gave Darlenis a stuffed toy and Carlos the last of the kangaroo caps from Australia (China...). Carlos is the most relaxed businessman I've ever met. We were given a small discount on our stay – we didn't ask for it. It was 1030 by the time we "hit the road".

Our destination was the Fortuna Cabins in the Fortuna Forest Reserve near the top of the mountain range that divides western Panama.

Along the way, and after a maze of winding roads we stopped for lunch at a petroglyph site at the village of Caldera. The petroglyphs are remarkable and well worth the multiple questions that need to be asked of the locals for how to get to them. Clearly few visitors go there.



[https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Joukowsky\\_Institute/courses/underthevolcano10/files/11785322.pdf](https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Joukowsky_Institute/courses/underthevolcano10/files/11785322.pdf)

An adjacent creek had many orchids and bromeliads growing in overhanging trees. The walk back to the car delivered a few good birds with pearl kite being added to our growing raptor list. I mentioned to Nigel that everything was going too smoothly....

Rain and fog wasn't a problem, unannounced landslips on the pavement were merely curiosities (although at times the car reacted differently), no, it was the reception, or rather the lack of it, that we had at the Fortuna Cabins. They were closed rather decisively. Every other accommodation provider in the area was also closed. Several gentlemen pointed

downhill when we asked about “cabanas”. At the time we didn’t think downhill meant drowning the car in salt water.



Although it is possible that other Australians have stayed in the Hotel Atlantic Suite in the coastal town of Chiriqui Grande, we think this is unlikely. The hotel is quite new. There is no reason why any tourist would wish to visit. The town only exists to transport oil by sea.

The hotel’s receptionist had the looks, charm, wit and personality of one of the many rejected

carrots that were left lying in the fields at Guadalupe. It was difficult not to fall in love. Not. The quite decent rooms cost \$US48 – paid up front.

We had a couple of hours to search for birds along so-called “Two Tanks Road”. This is the road that goes to two large oil storage tanks on a nearby hill. It is possibly the only side road near Chiriqui Grande that provides access to any trees. It was productive. We soon had pale-billed woodpecker, brown jay, red-breasted meadowlark, olive-backed euphonia and dozens of Montezuma oropendulas.

Our hotel includes a noisy ground floor bar. The distorted music was so loud that any unoccupied tables and chairs had migrated across the floor and were making love to the poker machines. Oh, I lie, it was louder than that. The beers were cold – and cheap - \$US1.

We hadn’t had a meal cooked for us for a few days so we asked the mutant carrot for any insights she might have in this area. She described a large white building. Our skillset, limited as it was, allowed us to find it. We ordered a beer and some food. Apparently local restaurant protocols don’t allow the beer to be served before the meal. And they bought ice with it, the beer that is. No, that’s too much. The meal was delicious.

### **Day 14 – 16<sup>th</sup> June 2018**

The Chiriqui Grande local breakfast place was buzzing and super-efficient. Minutes later we were back at Two Tanks Road and the adjoining track to the local rubbish tip. As far as birds go, there were some green ibis, a rufous piha and some slaty spinetails in the mix.

It was insufferably hot and humid so we decided to leave Chiriqui Grande and drive west along the Caribbean Coast towards Costa Rica. First we had to explain to a chap at the hotel, who understood no English (not his fault...), that we were leaving a day early than we had booked. Mutant carrot was elsewhere. Oh stuff it, they didn’t have my credit card details – let’s just go.

The road along the coast is reminiscent of the Pacific Highway in New South Wales in that you don't see any water. Further, there are no places to stop. Even a signposted waterfall provided no place to park a car; not even a widened shoulder. So we kept trucking until we reached the seaside town of Almirante. Here a dude on a bicycle lurked menacingly on the roadside looking for lost tourists. He had found gold. After we determined that a local volcano was not about to erupt, such was our understanding of his language, we learnt that he was the local Mr Fixit for accessing offshore islands. "Follow me" he said, as his bicycle tore off at great speed.

Soon afterwards our car was locked behind a fence (for \$US3 per day), we were sipping young coconuts, and we'd paid \$US10 for a return passage to Isla Bocas del Toro. We tipped Bicycle Man #1, who'd arranged for Bicycle Man #2 to meet us on arrival at the island.

We shot across the sea at great speed. The main tourist town on Bocas is a congested mess of accommodation and eateries. Oddly there is no beach. Who would come to an offshore island and have to hike for a swim? Clearly, many.

Our new cycle owner rang lodges on the nearby islands of Solarte (fully booked) and Bastimentos. I spoke with a chap at Palmar Beach Lodge who explained that he had one cabin left at \$US120 per night. We'll take it. So back into another boat for us. The boatman, although fully briefed on where we wished to go, appeared to be taking us somewhere else entirely – as in the wrong side of the island. We stopped at a jetty in some mangroves. A nearby entry gate-person asked to see our booking paperwork. Well, none basically. He was there to extract \$5 off non-guests for walking across a private property... and the entire island.

The walk to Palmar was said to take five minutes. Olympic middle-distance runners could do it in fifteen on a good day, assuming they don't stop for caimans or poison dart frogs. Ordinary folk with luggage take longer than that.

Our newest best friend, Claudio, at reception, gave us a discount on the cabin. This was amazing as we hadn't asked for one and it was our only choice. We later saw other potential guests turned away. Must have been my wit, charm and personality. The receptionist was gay.

A minor issue with the cabin's furniture revealed itself – there was only one bed. When I quizzed Claudio, he offered that it was a big bed. That wasn't going to cut it. I slept on the floor.

A late lunch was delicious. Apparently the chef was a recent import from Venezuela and not too keen to go back there.

Red Frog Beach, just metres away, had dumping waves a couple of metres high. I couldn't wait to "get out the back" for my first swim in the Caribbean. There were scores of tourists, mostly Germans and other Europeans. Some, like Miss Espana, were rather distracting. They were friendly and having a good time as they sat in the sun, got their feet wet and fiddled with their phones.

An afternoon stroll through some reasonable forest that extends through the accommodation didn't reveal too much.

The 5pm Happy Hour provided two for one drinks. As Nigel was beach wandering I had no choice but to drink two beers by myself. During dinner a sloth came swinging through the restaurant on the ceiling timbers. We don't see much of that in Sydney.



Spotlighting revealed a common grey four-eyed opossum scuttling across a road.

### **Day 15 – 17<sup>th</sup> June 2018**

The nocturnal nature of Palmar's clientele sees breakfast available from 0800 onwards; or perhaps a little later if the boat carrying the chef breaks down. So I was off birding at 0600.

As far as islands go, there are a substantial number of birds and a few mammals on Bastimentos. White-throated crane and thick-billed seed-finch were seen along with white-fronted capuchins and three-toed sloths. Golden-collared manikins are common.

A late breakfast, some clothes washing and a 600m swim before a pre-lunch stroll to the jetty. Chatting to tourists was also firmly on the agenda.

A colony of gorgeous tent-making bats was discovered in a palm tree within Palmar's dining area.

The critter target swung towards frogs, with the island being home to the most poisonous of all dart frogs – the red frog. Apparently they are not toxic to humans. Or me. We hadn't seen any. When in doubt ask the locals. I was sent back to the jetty and told to look around



the bases of big trees. I soon found one – or it found me – briefly jumping onto my hand. I took some photos and went searching for Nigel.

Happy Hour intervened. We became briefly famous for shining the spotlight on tent-making bats. Just about everyone was drawn in to see what everyone else was looking at.

After dinner we demonstrably walked away from some hotties who wished to chat – we had more important business

to conduct – spotlighting. Nigel was happy (that's what Happy Hour is all about I guess) and babbling about the night sky. I was more interested in the black-and-white owl that was screaming at us in a nearby tree. Nice. It may have been eyeing the rather striking brown four-eyed opossum just metres away. We later saw another. The biggest mammal seen was James, a laconic West Indian security guard who was attracted by our spotlights. He was Captain Cool and mentioned that he often sees night monkeys feeding on bananas.....

As I went to bed beer-inspired Nigel was stressing over the misplacement or theft of various stars. Note to self – try to manage Nigel's beer intake in the future.

### Day 16 – 18<sup>th</sup> March 2018

This was probably an extra day on Isla Bastimentos that we didn't really need. The only things that kept us there was the excellent food, the surf, certain aspects of the other tourists, the spotlighting opportunities, Happy Hour and tame and varied wildlife.

The dawn, or lack of it – it was raining – saw me honing my sitting still skills. The precipitation soon stopped, just long enough to get a fair





distance away before it started again. I discovered a flock of crimson-fronted parakeets and then a hunting double-toothed kite.

A long afternoon swim, even longer chats to lodge staff and other tourists, and then an early dinner. cursory spotlighting revealed two species of sloth.

A live band tested the

effectiveness of my earplugs.

### **Day 17 – 19<sup>th</sup> June 2018**

The rain cycle had flipped from evenings to mornings so our departure from Isla Bastimentos to the main island was a tad damp. Our second boat trip – back to the mainland from Bocas Town – soon had us reunited with our vehicle and back on the road.

We couldn't find any access points to forest or any other reasons to stop along the Caribbean Coast, so a raft of birds were now out of range for us.

As we were in no hurry to get to our next destination, the mid-altitude town of Boquete on the other side of the continental divide, we took advantage of a break in the weather to walk the entirely deserted Palo Seco Road, which leads to some communications towers in La Fortuna Forest Reserve. Given that it was the middle of the day we were surprised to see a few good birds, with the stunning azure-hooded jay being the best of them. Several flowering orchids added to the mix.



Empanadas were consumed for lunch at a facility on the continental divide that displayed a sign reading “Restaurante”. Perhaps something of an over-promotion.

Our arrival at the delightful Boquete Garden Inn, was a little after 1530. Nigel sought a pharmacy in town whilst I wandered. He later found me and we drove a short distance to a road that accesses a nearby zip-line and accommodation facility. This was basically a four kilometre long concrete driveway through farmland with scattered trees and some good primary forest. There were an extraordinary number of birds, with many of them new to us. Given my interest in orchids and Tillandsias, this was the best site we found for these as well.

As the light failed we returned to our inn for a complimentary Argentinian malbec and a beer. Dinner was at the nearby George’s Grill. We were the only customers at this rather eccentric eatery owned by a friendly and curious chap, George (no surprises here), who was born in Egypt and had lived much of his life Canada. The meal, steak, was okay if not a little expensive.

### **Day 18 – 20<sup>th</sup> June 2018**

We were up and out of our room with lightning speed. We had our pre-made breakfast box and we didn’t have to go very far – to the “Zip-line Road”. It was a beautiful morning to explore excellent forest and woodland. Elegant euphonia, scarlet-thighed dacnis and orange-billed nightingale-thrush were just a few of the many splendid birds seen.

Hmmm, the car has a flat tire. Double hmmm (hmmm hmmm), the spare has a big bubble on its wall that didn’t quite seem to meet the manufacturer’s specifications. A slow drive to town was in order. Boquete Garden’s reception referred us to Alabama Steve, a local mechanic. Only \$US7 poorer and half an hour later we were back in business.

A pick a road, any road, and drive on it, excursion saw us add blue seedeater (said to be quite rare) to our trip list. A mountainside coffee shop was discovered. It had inspiring views, nice food, cold coffee and many soaring swallow-tailed kites.

A post-lunch bonus foray back to the Zip-line Road was soon corrupted by rain. Dinner was at El Sabrason, a Panamanian restaurant in town. You just pointed at what you wanted from a buffet. Many locals were eating there. It presented good value.



#### Day 19 – 21<sup>st</sup> June 2018

I didn't expect too much from the day. This is often a good thing and it was on this occasion. We walked the Waterfall Trail, arriving (after getting quite lost) before the pill box that extracts \$US3 per person for walking across someone's property opens at 0800. A helpful local chap pointed in the direction of the trail so off we went.

The trail tracks some of Boquete's water supply pipeline along a steep-sided valley. Various failed water delivery methods were seen. The first kilometre or so are through farmland and second growth forest. The further you walk the better it gets. One stunning monster tree, a Mexican elm, is estimated to be 1,000 years old. We plodded about for

four hours adding some very pretty birds, none better than red-billed barbet. Others of note included a black-and-white becard building a nest, a family of spotted wood-quails and several torrent flycatchers.

Some roadside columnar basalt features demanded a better look on the way back to town. Lunch was again at El Sabrason.

Sunny conditions saw another visit to the Zip-line Road. Barred hawk was seen as soon as I arrived. The law of diminishing returns then took over as the birds started to have a sameness about them. I amused myself with flowering orchids and bromeliads, including many growing on Eucalyptus trees. Echoing thunder promised a rapid change in the weather.

Early drinks were called. Dinner, again at El Sabrason, did not disappoint.

We chatted with Susan, the animated and joyful Canadian owner of Boquete Garden Inn before retiring to our hexagonal cabana.

## **Day 20 – 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2018**

Breakfast, like everything else at Boquete Garden Inn, was excellent.

We only had a short journey to our next destination – Isla Boca Brava on the Pacific Coast. We stopped several times along the relatively quiet backroad between Alto Boquete and Gualaca. We managed to find some birds, with fiery-billed aracari, streak-headed woodcreeper, crested caracara, American kestrel and king vulture being welcomed additions to our list.

Boca Chica, the jetty village for accessing Isla Boca Brava, was our lunch stop. A boatman transferred us to Hotel Boca Brava, about a kilometre away, for \$US3 per person.

Isla Boca Brava, 3000 hectares in area, lies only 200m from the mainland so the bird list is relatively high for an offshore island. The hotel is interesting, for the moment. It may fall into the sea at some point. It is rather rambling, dated and if not for killer views nobody would stay there. There are no nearby beaches. Once more wobble words are used to describe distances – “the nearest beach is just a 15 minute walk”, said Samuel the manager, groundsman, waiter, receptionist, life saver (more on this later) and security guard. In fact he was everything except the cook. Now Samuel, you know that Howler’s Bay is not a 15 minute walk away, don’t you? And calling it a beach is a bit of a stretch. Rocks, murky water and no people about makes it look more like a shark sanctuary to me.

Other nearby muddy bays are also known as beaches. They all have alluring names. Thankfully the trails that lead to them are quite busy with birds and ridiculous numbers of howler monkeys. Other mammals - raccoons, armadillos et al are said to occur but the abundance of local dogs makes sightings unlikely.

Our first walk yielded, amongst others, black-hooded antshrikes and lance-tailed manikins. Both of these are quite common on the island. A moderate number of other birds were in

evidence along with some shorebirds in the form of white ibis, American oystercatcher and a few terns and gulls.

The 270 degree views from the restaurant and the consumption of cold beer added to a full and joyful day in Panama.



### **Day 21 – 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2018**

A feeling that the day would not be too exciting saw a lazy 0730 breakfast. We then toddled off to Playa Cristina, noting that the local howlers were in good voice. A local puppy discovered us and decided we were the most interesting thing about and decided to join us. It was too young to understand aggressive hand gestures and abrupt demands delivered in English.

The murky warm waters of Cristina Beach were not overrun with bikini girls or any other kind. I didn't know it at the time but as I swam something sinister was brewing....

We were back at the hotel by midday. A necessary shower (cold – the only type available) preceded an unpleasant feeling on my toes. This quickly spread over the rest of my form. OMG the floor is covered in ants – tiny biting buggers. I put some clothes on and the problem got worse. I soon realised that the ants had taken possession of my daypack, and my clothes therein, while I was swimming and were now exacting their revenge for being geographically dislocated from their friends – if there were any, left on the beach. It gave me something to do – killing ants. Surprisingly each ant had to be killed three times. Tough little mongrels.

People-watching at the Hotel Boca Brava was limited by the number of folk on offer. It was nevertheless quite productive. Samuel (representing all the staff minus one) was taking an active interest in guest Clare (Clair?), an English lass and yoga teacher. Her responses were confusing – good luck Sam. Jasmina, a delightful and probably quite intelligent young

Colombian was hitched to Alex, a large happy and noisy Canadian teacher. This couple went paddling a double surf ski late in the afternoon and managed to get into some difficulties. Jasmina couldn't swim and was quite distressed. Next thing Nigel and I knew, as we slurped our cervezas in the bar, was the sound of screaming coming from the jetty. Alex had fallen into the channel and struggled to get back out. I yelled at him to stay where he was as Samuel came to the rescue. Jasmina later gave me significant looks – I was unable to interpret them.....



All this drama took place just before the New World's largest ever recorded thunderstorm descended. Views disappeared entirely, petrified dogs were mentored, concerns were raised about the structural integrity of the entire hotel, everything became wet – even inside the restaurant, and all conversation became difficult. Enough water was dumped on us in 90 minutes to turn Isla Boca Brava into an island.....

Dinner was challenging as rain blew in from every direction at once. Thankfully our cabin survived the tempest and the only water to come inside was on Nigel's mattress. So no problems at all.

### **Day 22 – 24<sup>th</sup> June 2018**

The boat that brings the hotel's cook was said to arrive at 0700. We determined to leave Boca Brava at this time as Panama was playing England in the soccer World Cup at 0700 and transport was likely to be impossible for a few hours – even longer in the very unlikely event that Panama won. We managed to get to the jetty early – 0615. The boatman arrived at 0630. Lucky.

A decision was made earlier to return to the Radisson near Panama City and to spend the rest of our time in the country there – five nights. Normally I don't much like retracing my steps. This time I had a good feeling about it - the Radisson is an excellent hotel with lots of wildlife and other accessible sites nearby.

Breakfast was at a roadside buffet joint. As England was starting to give poor old Panama a bit of a flogging in the football we kept our heads down and practised our Spanish.

The drive back to near Panama City was stress-free and simple, arriving at 1300.

Our new room had magnificent views over the forest and to Panama City. Toucans, parrots, sloths and marmosets could be seen from our balcony.

A post-dinner spotlight confirmed that a large number of common opossums call the golf course home. Three of these relatively unattractive beasts were seen in quick succession, one having so many kids she could hardly walk.



### Day 23 – 25<sup>th</sup> June 2018

Today's principal destination was the Camino de Cruces Trail. This was the trail used by the Spanish conquistadors to transport their loot from South American across Panama to ships bound for Spain. It was later used, in 1671, by the infamous Captain Morgan and ~1200 pirates to sack Panama City and presumably set some sort of record for all-round targetted nastiness. To walk the abandoned though very obvious trail was atmospheric and thought-provoking.

**Las Cruces**

**U**sted está parado sobre las huellas de conquistadores españoles, indígenas, esclavos y piratas, y posteriormente buscadores de tesoros, en uno de los senderos más importantes en la historia de las Américas. Por cientos de años esta estrecha ruta expedicionaria fue el eslabón que conectó Panamá y Perú con España, sobre la cual se transportaron los tesoros de las Américas. El movimiento español sobre el comercio y esta ruta depositó el cido de otras naciones, atrayendo a ladrones, piratas y corsarios a las costas panameñas y a este sendero. Aunque el camino ha sido abandonado y reclamado por el bosque, todavía se pueden apreciar puntos de este pasaje como lo fue en tiempos pasados.

**Y**ou are standing in the footsteps of Spanish conquistadors, Indians, captives and pirates, and later treasure-seekers, on one of the most important trails in the history of the Americas. For hundreds of years this narrow cobbled route was the thread that connected Panama and Peru to Spain, over which passed the treasures of the Americas. Spanish monopoly of the trade and the route ensured the jealousy of other nations, and drew thieves, pirates and privateers to Panama's shores and this trail. Although the road is long abandoned and being reclaimed by forest, you can yet experience the passage in much the same way.

**La historia más fascinante de este sendero fue la travesía del océano Índico por el estrecho de Anas de las Indias. Después de vencer a Pizarro, San Lorenzo, el primer barco español en cruzar el océano Índico, navegó desde el Canal de Panamá a Perú en 1521. Los barcos que navegaban por este sendero eran muy pequeños y los viajes eran muy peligrosos. Los viajeros tenían que viajar con mucho cuidado y con mucha prisa. Los viajes eran muy largos y los viajeros tenían que viajar con mucha prisa. Los viajes eran muy largos y los viajeros tenían que viajar con mucha prisa.**

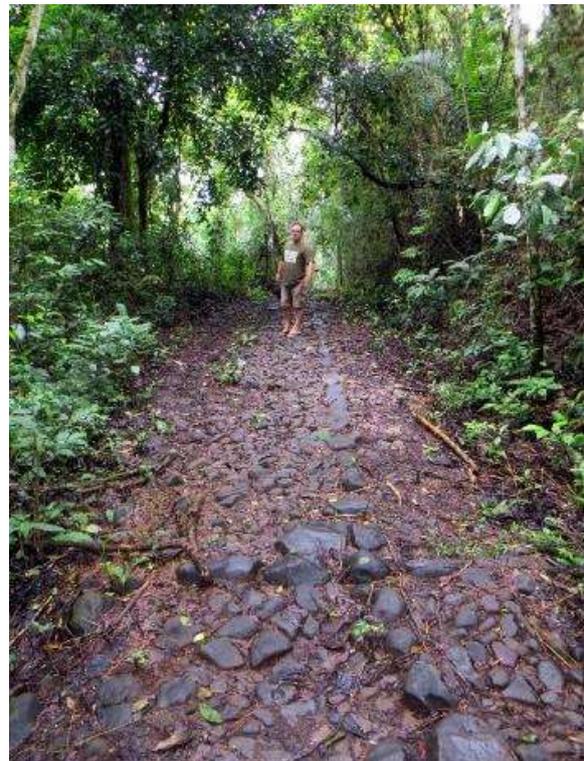
**The most famous tale of the trail was the crossing by the explorer Henry Morgan and his army of over 1,000 pirates. After taking the rest of his treasure, they made their way up the Chagres River to where the trail leads, heading to Vereda de Cruces in the Darien region. The crossing was hard only a few days and 100 men of Panama were to accompany them over the last 300 miles. As they crossed through the night, they were not only harassed by Indians, but also by the Spanish. The Army of more to be taken over Spanish soldiers. After reaching the region city of Panama, the pirates made the trail to the city of Panama. The trail was used by the Spanish and the English to sell in the Caribbean many pirates.**

**La ruta del oro hacia España comenzó en Lima, Perú. Los tesoros de las Américas fueron llevados al Panamá en donde los españoles se embarcaron en el viaje a España. Una vez que estaban seguros, era importante y peligroso pasar el agua y el agua que era hecha separadamente.**

**Maritime expeditions of this continent in search of gold and silver. The first expedition was the voyage of Vasco Núñez de Balboa, which led to the discovery of the Pacific. A few decades later, the Spanish conquistadors began to explore the Darien region. The trail was used by the Spanish and the English to sell in the Caribbean many pirates.**

**The gold mine in Spain began in Lima, Peru. Ships carried treasure to Panama City, where it was loaded onto ships for the journey to Portugal. Once safely there, it was shipped and stored for the use in Spain under heavy guard.**

**Along the Camino de Cruces, many legends spring up for the region's history. The most important of these was the village of Vereda de Cruces, where the trail crossed the great Chagres River. There, a brave man called don Juan de la Cruz, who the Chagres River in the Canal of San Lorenzo, was Pan to day, in Panama, but this was never connected to pure truth.**



Wildlife, on the other hand, was tough to find, particularly while it was heavily overcast. Slate-coloured grosbeak and orange-billed sparrow were welcomed sightings. Green and black poison dart frog was seen although we failed to catch it for a photograph.

The afternoon was spent at Panama Canal's Miraflores Locks. We were fascinated by the engineering and technology, both old and new, as we watched a number of ships make the traverse. The viewing areas are complimented by a live commentary – in English - of what's happening. A multi-storey and excellent museum on the history of the canal and its current operation explains everything you might wish to know and more. I won't expand on this here although one statistic is worth mentioning - the cost of one transit of a large ship through the canal is \$US1.2 million!



Back at the hotel and we booked Juan Antonio Chavez to take us to an Embera Indian community for the following day.

### **Day 24 – 26<sup>th</sup> June 2018**

Juan Antonio collected us at 0740 and after a longish and often frustrating drive through traffic and rubbish-strewn streets we eventually arrived on the Chagres River in Chagres National Park. Here we were met by a chunky and undeniably handsome Embera with the unlikely name of Alex. Juan Antonio joined us on a short motorised canoe ride to the village of Tusipono. We were welcomed by colourful and beautiful villagers with music, dance and in some cases, expressions of extreme boredom.

The community had been transplanted “to a similar habitat” from The Darien, near the border with Colombia, decades ago. A few of the older members of the village remembered their old home and were ambivalent regarding which was best.



Tourism is a significant earner for the Embera and our “green season” visit had them scrambling to cover the bases for the song and dance and handicraft sales gigs.

Another tourist couple joined us for a canoe journey upstream that eventually accessed a trail to a waterfall and swimming hole. Much of the trail was in a fast-flowing creek. Timing was everything. We arrived just as a very large group of US high school students were exiting the swimming site. Some of the girls had clearly not bought swimming gear and were



in their underwear. It was difficult to know where not to look. They soon departed, leaving us surrounded by a different kind of beauty.

I practised my weather forecasting skills. It wasn't too hard; although it was late morning it had become so dark we could scarcely see each other. I strongly suspected a little precipitation. Had we left the pool any later we might have been swept away. Torrential rain and thunder left me wondering whether we would get back to the canoe before the creek fell on us. Now, dugout canoes don't have much surface area. Ours soon had 150 litres of water in it.

Back at the village and the welcoming song and dance show was repeated. I gifted my remaining stuffed toys to several very young and gorgeous girls before a village elder, a rather handsome middle-aged lady, explained that the community would perform some traditional dances for us before our lunch.

The collibri (hummingbird) dance looked much the same as the kingfisher dance to me. My attention may not have been properly focussed at the time. Did I mention that the Embera are attractive? Next, in the fine tradition of native cultures all over the world, the tourists were invited to join the locals for a dance. The most beautiful girl in the village (all of Panama?) approached me. Is this really happening? Oh well, maybe she needed an optometrist. Nigel's lass was delightful, although a few decades or so older and wiser than mine. You couldn't get the smile off my face.

Meanwhile the youngest Embera were dancing with koalas and kangaroos. At the end of the dance my newest best friend caused a small sonic boom in her speed to depart. So ended another fantasy.

Lunch, local fish, plantain biscuits and fruit was tasty and very well presented in banana-leaf cups decorated with hibiscus flowers. Our



hostess then explained the history and culture of her people. Juan Antonio interpreted for us. There was the opportunity to ask questions. I had plenty, for the dual reasons that I wished to appear interested and I was interested!

As an explanation of the production of the village's handicrafts was given the torrent outside continued. I had in mind to buy some woven items. This plan was thwarted by a saleslady who had forgotten the price she offered earlier in the day. She now wanted more. I politely explained she could keep her harpy eagle mask and army ant platter.

A break in the weather saw us depart. An indelible and wonderful experience.

Juan Antonia took us back to the hotel by a slightly different and more direct route. His knowledge of his country, people, society, geography and the operation of its brothels was first class. His commentary was continuous.

A mid-afternoon stroll around the Radisson's Palm Summit Trail revealed a couple of lifer birds within several mixed species flocks and a range of mammals that included white-tailed deer.

### **Day 25 – 27<sup>th</sup> June 2018**

The Plantation Trail received another visit. There was quite a different suite of birds and mammals present than those seen three weeks earlier. New birds included southern bentbill, blue-capped manikin and cinnamon woodpecker. There were army ants moving

their bivouac and a couple of posing green and black poison dart frogs. Howlers, tamarins and agoutis were the mammals spotted.

Michelle, the smiling receptionist at the Radisson was the recipient of some Los Quetzales cocoa, whilst Carlos, one of the golf course's buggy drivers managed some leftover rice and other food. He later found us wandering the course and gave us a complimentary buggy tour of the area and its wildlife. We spotted caimans, agoutis, coatis, capybaras and many birds.

We learnt that ordering two pizzas in the restaurant resulted in more food than could be eaten. Tasty.

### **Day 26 – 28<sup>th</sup> June 2018**

This was our last full day in Panama. For me the Palm Summit Trail would be the site of the last hurrah. It was quite busy with critters. Coatis, squirrels, agoutis and capuchins amongst them. The undoubted birding highlight was a pheasant cuckoo that flew down the hillside and flopped in front of me. It then started a bizarre display performance. It was still going through its limited chords and flopping about like a deranged mutant lyrebird when I tired of not slapping the march flies that were chomping on my legs, and decided to depart.



violet sabrewing (photo: Nigel Miller)

I found Nigel and poked back to the cuckoo site. Alas the bird (or reptile, suggests Wings' guide Gavin Beiber) had gone elsewhere. An ant swarm of small army ants quite close to the hotel was to be our last. The usual suspects were in attendance.

The hire car was given a wash and minor interior clean at the golf cart washing bay. Then to the bar to watch Panama play Tunisia. A small excited crowd were cock-a-hoop as Panama led one nil early on but weren't so enthusiastic by the end of the game.

### **Day 27 and a little bit – 29<sup>th</sup> June 2018, and, oddly, 1<sup>st</sup> July**

Our first flight, to Los Angeles was due to leave at 1225. This meant a leisurely breakfast and drive to the airport via a petrol station, or, in our case, three petrol stations. Next, return the hire car, hopefully without them looking underneath it, and spend the rest of the day(s) doing not too much aside from being tortured by planes and airports.

We said goodbye to the Radisson, at the same time adding a couple of Facebook friends. I think everyone should have a friend with the surname Chavez, and Michelle at reception had been so kind to us. Plus she can wave to Mayette and I next year as we pass through the Panama Canal on a cruise ship.

We needed to buy some petrol on the trouble-free (this time) drive to Tocumen International Airport. Our first attempt failed as the self-serve outlet could not be understood before I got cranky with it. The second guy failed to fill the tank despite my excellent Spanish instructions. Our next site was closed for some unknown reason. We finally achieved our goal, experiencing yet more of Panama City's road network in the process.

We made some fine guesses on how to return the hire car. This is something you don't think too much about when you pick the thing up a month earlier, tired, smelly and in darkness. A chap sauntered over to give the vehicle an inspection and that was that. Back to interview the grey sock darling at Thrifty and off to Copa's check-in.

Through the mysteries of plane seat pricing we found ourselves in business class, wait for it, because the tickets were cheaper than economy!

A striking lady whose sole mission in life was to keep economy class riff-raff out of the business class check-in area took one look at me and started pointing elsewhere in the airport. Having passed this test the young lass at the check-in gazed disturbingly at my backpack before asking me to sign a form that



said, basically, that it was a disgusting and miserable piece of s\*it. She then put the whole pack into a large clear plastic bag before she dared stick it anywhere near her plane. What, damaged, after more than 200 flights, really?

Endless scans and paperwork checks followed.

Sitting in Row #1 of the 737 I luxuriated in watching the cattle class scum file past. They were no doubt wondering why someone flying business class couldn't afford better shoes than Dunlop KT26s.

The taste of the high life ended abruptly on our arrival at Los Angeles. We had almost seven hours to kill while waiting for our 14+ hour flight to Sydney.

The plane was fully occupied and the journey uneventful. I pondered whether I would ever fly so far again. Not anytime soon, that's for sure.

We emerged unscathed from Sydney Airport. I thanked Nigel for his company and good cheer and hopped on a train to Wollli Creek, there to discover there were no trains running to The Shire. So back onto a train to Sydney City and a bus.

I opened my luggage at home and found a note left by the USA Transportation Security Administration. It explained that my wonderful backpack was considered suspicious and had been thoroughly searched. So my "random" status had finally caught up with me...

### **Steve Anyon-Smith**

67 Wattle Road Jannali 2226

tel: 02 9528 8733

mob: 0426 842 466

email: [steveas@tpg.com.au](mailto:steveas@tpg.com.au)

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