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# HATS OFF TO PANAMA

A Country Brimming with Activities.  
Part 2.

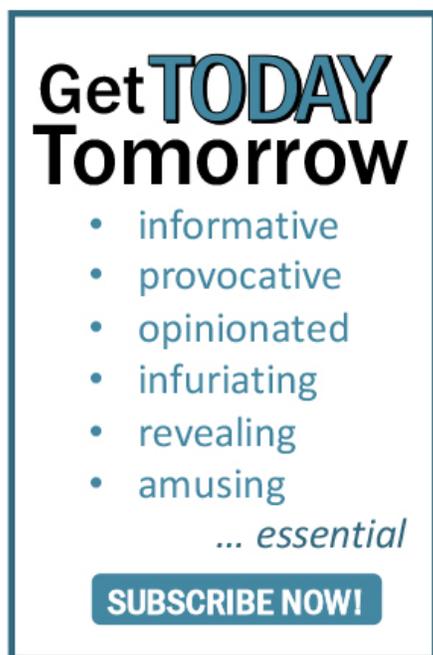
Steve Gillick

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02 AUG 2013: Gonzalo slammed on the brakes, rushed to the trunk and grabbed the tripod with the Nikon Field Scope attached. He set it up in an instant, invited us to look through the lens and proudly pointed out the Grey Headed Cachalaca

sitting in a nearby tree. At that point we knew this trip would be something truly unique.



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Our first two days in Panama included an introduction to the city, as well as a trip to El Valle De Antón to visit a Panamanian golden frog. Our next four days immersed us into the heart of the country: the rain forest, the indigenous people and the history.

On Day Three we woke up at 4:30 am, threw some clothes in a backpack and met our guide Gonzalo Horna, for a two-day wander in and around the town of Gamboa and Soberania National Park.

Gamboa is about 45 minutes outside of Panama City. We crossed the only access to the town—a single lane wood and iron bridge—just as the sun was rising and apparently, one of the best times to spot birds. Gonzalo's credentials as a birding expert were both impressive and intimidating for two Toronto people who can spot a Pigeon or a Seagull but not much else. This was to change

shortly. Birding is a major travel niche market. Those interested in developing new business can get up-to-speed by participating in a short outing with birders in their own community to gain an understanding of their needs and expectations. Patience, silence, a spotting scope and a camera with a decent zoom lens, are the basics. In Gamboa and Soberania, there are 894 different species of birds, including the Thick-Billed Euphonia, the Broad-Billed Motmot and my favourite, the Violaceous Trogon, with its purple head and yellow belly.

In Soberania National Park you can ascend the Canopy Tower to see Chestnut-mandibled toucans, a variety of vultures, kites, swifts and parrots, and with a trained expert, you can also spot Howler Monkeys and three-toed sloths sunning themselves in the canopy in the early morning. The Discovery Centre has feeders that allow you to get up-close-and-personal with hummingbirds only a few inches from your camera lens. It's quite an experience whether you are a dedicated birder or just a beginner.

We drove and walked through various areas of the rain forest to feast our eyes on 'big belly' trees and strangler vines and the odd Agouti or two (small dog-sized rodents). At one point we encountered a contingent of thousands of army ants carrying eggs across a path: wave after wave of ants determined to fulfill their mission. A few meters away, thousands of leaf cutter ants were carrying their treasure of dime-sized leaf bits to their nest which was down a rut, up a tree and on into the forest. Absolutely fascinating.

That evening we checked into Ivan's Bed and Breakfast in the town of Gamboa, had a delicious

dinner and a good sleep and then the next morning, walked the 12 minutes to the Panama Canal to watch container ships pass only a few meters in front of us. Continuing with the theme of water travel, we stood on a dock on the Chagres River a few hours later when, out of the mist, a dug-out canoe appeared with Moises, our Embera guide, to take us on the short ride to his village. At one time the area was used to train US troops in jungle survival skills. (Astronaut Neil Armstrong trained here), but now it's home to 38 adults and 17 children of the Embera tribe. After a musical greeting by the welcome committee, Moises explained the traditional dress of the men and woman, the history, food, music, dances and the meaning of the handicrafts sold to visitors to help support the village.

Reluctant to leave the rain forest, we returned to Panama City where on Day Five we enjoyed a full tour, courtesy of The Panama Tourism Authority. We explored Panama Viejo, where the original city was founded in 1519, then Casco Viejo, the walled 'old town' with its collection of balconied houses on cobblestone streets that one finds in many colonial Spanish towns. The entire city is undergoing renovation at the present time but many streets and historic sites are accessible.

And then it was on to the Miraflores Visitors Center that provides viewing areas to watch ships pass through this set of locks (one of three) on their way through the Panama Canal.

On our last day, we walked from the hotel to Casco Viejo (about one hour along Avenida Balboa) taking photos of the super-tall office buildings and condos, the historic statues, the marinas and the pelicans. We sampled delicious, fresh ceviche (raw

seafood marinated in citrus juices) at El Mercado de Mariscos--the seafood market-- before wandering around the old city for a second time, and then returning to the market for a lunch of perfectly grilled shrimp.

Our six day 'Panama Immersion' was a real eye opener as we had the opportunity to experience the history, tastes, touches and smells of the country as well as an appreciation of the fascinating niche interests and attractions.

Hats off to Panama ♦ a country brimming with activities and perfect for those travellers seeking that 'what else-what's new' when they explore the world.

This is Part 2 of a two part story. [Click here to read Part 1](#)



Valentin Imperial ★★★★★ Riviera Maya, Mexico



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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