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# HATS OFF TO PANAMA

## A Country Brimming with Activities

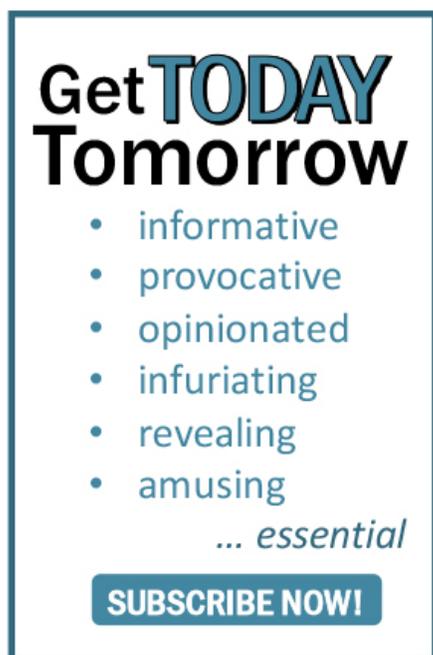
Steve Gillick

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29 JUL 2013: Think of Panama and you conjure up images of Hats or the Canal. I set aside a generous six days to explore the country, however the first guide book I checked, suggested a two-week schedule, so right off the bat, I know my colleague and I would have to cram in as much as possible in

order to do justice to our visit. As for hats? We spoke to a few locals and the resounding reply was “Panama Hats are for tourists to take home and tell their friends that they bought them in Panama”.



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We took the direct flight from Toronto to Panama City on Copa Airlines and checked into the RIU Plaza Hotel. Our 30th floor room provided a great view of the ocean side of the city and we were to soon appreciate the hotel's great location: Excellent restaurants are a short walk away, as is the coastal road, Avenida Balboa, which traces the ocean all the way to Casco Viejo (the old town). One block away is the now iconic Revolution Tower, nicknamed, the Twist or Twisty Building that resembles stacked strands of DNA, creating a 'twist-scaper'. The Tower can be seen throughout the area and therefore we always knew our direction 'home'.

Embracing the philosophy that the best way to immerse oneself in a city is to 'go local', the next morning we caught a 'communal' van at the bus

terminal for the two hour trip to the town of El Valle de Antón. Blasting the local creole/zydeco-type, accordion-based music, as well as a memorable disco-reggae-kazoo-electronica version of “I’ve had the time of my life”, we stopped to pick up and let off passengers throughout the journey. But what a great way to see the countryside!

When we decided to rent bicycles to visit the sites at El Valle we didn’t realize that the town is built on the side of a mountain—a minor oversight that meant we had to bicycle UP to the waterfall, then DOWN to the mud baths, then UP to the tree frog. But it was worth it in the long run.

The van stopped in front of the fruit -vegetable-artisan market and next to the souvenir/hammock store that doubles as the bicycle rental shop. We biked and walked up a steep incline to the National Park where we bought our tickets (\$3.75) to visit Chorro el Macho --The ‘Manly’ Falls (there are also ‘Young Women’s’ Falls in the area). Many signs in Spanish (only) describe the flora and fauna of the area. The 35-meter waterfall offered some cool relief from the 34C day temperature: Giant trees with giant leaves, forest paths and a rickety suspension bridge were our introduction to the lush natural resources of the country.

Then it was on to Pozos Termales, the hot springs, for a therapeutic mud bath. On arrival you have the option of using light mud for normal skin or dark mud for sensitive skin. Here is my ten step guide to achieving muddy vitality:

1. Change (into a bathing suit)
2. Slosh and Smear (the mud all over your body)

3. Apply (mud to your face, hair, neck and ears)
4. Bake (sit around while the mud dries)
5. Peacock (strut to show off your mud application technique to others ♦ as many seemed to be doing)
6. Hose (there is one water pipe to wash off the mud)
7. Immerse (in the thermal pool to relax and get rid of any excess mud)
8. Dry (bring your own towel)
9. Dress (there are a few change rooms)
10. Float (with your skin all baby-smooth, you tend to float out of the area, feeling ultra-clean and rejuvenated)

Afterward we pretty well negated the effects of the soothing mud by riding our bikes uphill in the sweltering heat to the zoological park. El Valle is recognized as the home town of the Panamanian golden tree frog, but it is regarded as a national symbol. In fact August 14th is National Golden Frog Day. Images of golden frogs can be found on buildings, bridges and lottery tickets, with the belief that good luck will come to those who look upon the tiny creature. In the zoo, we found one lonely--but energetic and hungry- golden frog in its glass enclosure. Good Luck awaits!

We celebrated with a cold Panama lager and caught a van/bus back to Panama City. Our first 24 hours in Panama were only a small taste of a country brimming with activities. In the next few

days we experienced our first foray into birding, howler monkeys, three-toed sloths, army ants, agoutis, the Embera tribe, the Canal, the old city and incredibly fresh seafood. I even tried on a Panama Hat!

Part Two on Friday.





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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