



## TOUR INFORMATION FOR PANAMA: Bocas del Toro and the Western Highlands

*These notes are designed to help you prepare for your tour. Please read carefully.*

**ENTERING PANAMA:** United Kingdom citizens will need a passport which is valid for six months beyond the intended length of stay. A visa is not required by British citizens. Citizens of other countries should contact their nearest Panama Embassy or Consulate for entry requirements.

Anyone coming directly from a country where Yellow Fever is endemic must have proof of a current vaccination.

**FLYING VIA THE USA:** Travellers with flights which transit through the USA and who are seeking to travel under the Visa Waiver Program must pre-apply for authorisation using the Electronic System for Travel Authorisation (**ESTA**). Having an **ESTA** is a mandatory requirement and applications should be made online at least 72 hours before departure via their website <https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov> as although the majority of responses are immediate, it can take 72 hours for approval in some cases. There is a small fee to pay as a processing charge followed by a small fee when authorisation has been granted.

For further information, or if you don't have access to the internet, please contact the Embassy of the United States in London on 020 3608 6998.

Citizens of other countries should contact their nearest US Embassy for entry requirements.

*Once you've applied for your ESTA please remember to print it out and take a copy of that document onto the aircraft with you.*

All visitors to the USA's first port-of-entry have their index fingerprints taken by an electronic scanner at Passport Control. You will also have your photograph taken at the same time. Although the process itself only takes a few minutes the queue can be quite long if several flights arrive at the same time!

You will then need to reclaim your checked-in luggage, go through security, then hand your luggage back to the airline staff who will be waiting nearby to give assistance. Once your luggage is back with the airline please proceed to the departure gate for your onward flight.

It is always a good idea to take a photocopy of your passport with you when travelling abroad. They can prove invaluable in helping you get a replacement if your original is lost or stolen. Obviously you should keep the photocopy in a separate bag to the originals.

**ARRIVAL AND INTRODUCTORY MEETING:** The tour begins with a 18:30 introductory meeting in lobby of our Panama City hotel, located on the shore of the Panama Canal. This informal meeting affords the leader the opportunity to introduce everyone to each other and to let you know generally what to expect on the trip - pace of the tour, daily routine, etc. We strongly recommend you arrange your flights to arrive by 17.00 so that you can be present at the introductory meeting. Many people choose to arrive the night before or arrive in the morning of Day 1. If you elect to arrive late in the evening of Day 1, please be aware that the birding day will start early (06.00) on Day 2; and you may therefore only get a few hours' sleep that night. After some optional birding around the hotel and breakfast we'll take a mid-morning flight to Bocas Del Toro.

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**CURRENCY:** The official currency is the US dollar. As the tour price includes all travel, hotel and main meal costs, you need only bring enough money to cover items of a personal nature.

**LANGUAGE:** The main language of Panama is Spanish. English-speakers are present in most places. The leader will speak at least passable Spanish. Even though you will almost certainly not need to converse in Spanish, you might consider bringing a small English-Spanish dictionary or phrase book.

**CLIMATE:** The days will likely be between the mid-70°s and high 80°s around Bocas, and as cool as the upper 50°s to mid-70°s around Los Quetzales, with some afternoon showers. Rarely do these showers reach the intensity or duration that would impact on a birding excursion, but November birding in Panama will involve some wet weather on some days. High-quality rain gear and a small umbrella will go a long way toward making rainy periods more enjoyable. Bring at least one heavier shirt or light jacket as well, as if windy and wet the higher elevations can feel surprisingly cold.

**ALTITUDE:** Maximum elevation reached on the tour is about 8500 feet around Los Quetzales, although we will not do any extended uphill or long hikes at that elevation. Otherwise we'll be below 3500 feet, and for the Bocas portion of the tour very close to sea level.

**PACE OF THE TOUR AND DAILY ROUTINE:** Most days will involve departures between 06:00 and 06:30. Breakfasts will be at either Tranquilo Bay or Los Quetzales Lodges before our departure. Most of the birding sites that we visit on the tour are within a 40-minute drive or boat ride of our lodges. Around the Bocas Lowlands we will bird from our boat (with seating for all participants and shade), or a standard minibus. For our day on the canal it may be necessary to step off the boat onto the beach or possibly into water when we disembark for lunch and a walk on the beach looking for waders. Having one pair of shoes that can be wet is advisable, though the lodge's generator room will fully dry shoes overnight if need be. The trails can be muddy in patches, but are mostly level, with some roots and rocks and with small rises. Our walks should be no more than 1.5 miles roundtrip. For our day in the foothills we may walk along the paved road for some longer stretches, with the van following us. Around Los Quetzales Lodge we will likely have one or two longer walks of about 2 miles on trails that are narrow, uneven and for short stretches steep and possibly muddy – if you are a user of hiking poles or would appreciate a steadying support we suggest taking a pole. Transport from our lodge out to the more remote birding sites will be in two or three 4x4 trucks, with general roadside birding near the vehicles. On several days we will return to our lodge for lunch and an early afternoon siesta, and we will plan an hour break before dinner whenever feasible.

**HEALTH: It is essential that you contact your own doctor to obtain the latest information on the regions you are visiting.** Please contact your doctor well in advance of your tour's departure as some medication must be initiated weeks before the period of possible exposure.

It is recommended that you are up-to-date on routine vaccinations. These include measles-mumps-rubella (MMR), diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis, varicella (chickenpox), polio, and your yearly flu jab. It is further recommended that most travellers have protection against Hepatitis A and Typhoid.

Malaria: Malaria is present in lowland Bocas del Toro area of western Panama. The portions of the tour in the Chiriqui Highlands (Los Quetzales Lodge) are not in malaria areas.

There is a risk of Yellow Fever transmission in Panama. A Yellow Fever vaccination certificate is not required to enter Panama, unless you are travelling via another infected country. Click here for a map of the regions affected:

[http://travelhealthpro.org.uk/country/174/panama#Vaccine\\_recommendations](http://travelhealthpro.org.uk/country/174/panama#Vaccine_recommendations).

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The sun in Panama can be very intense. Please bring adequate protection, including a sun hat and a strong sun screen of at least 15 rating.

Biting insects and arachnids are seldom a major nuisance although chiggers, mosquitoes and biting gnats can be locally numerous in the forested and coastal areas of Western Panama. Insect repellent will provide adequate protection. Many brands use diethyltoluamide (DEET) which, while providing the best protection, can be corrosive and therefore require care when using. There are many 'natural' and less-harmful repellents available from various camping supply stores.

It may be difficult to obtain any special medication during the tour, so bring all you are likely to need.

For further information on health advice refer to the Medical Advisory Services for Travellers Abroad website [www.masta-travel-health.com](http://www.masta-travel-health.com)

**ACCOMMODATION:** Four hotels are used during the tour.

The first night of the tour will be spent at the Radisson Amador, a fully apportioned hotel just west of downtown Panama City along the Pacific entrance of the Panama Canal with free fast WiFi. The last night of the tour will be at a modern fully apportioned hotel near the international airport.

Our lodge in Bocas, the delightful Tranquilo Bay Eco Adventure Lodge, has deluxe cabins, with private bathrooms and air conditioning. Each has a private porch complete with comfortable hammock and chairs. WiFi is available in the main dining house, although it can be slow at times.

Our highland lodge, Los Quetzales, has suites with hardwood floors and walls. Although somewhat basic the rooms have all the necessities, and the grounds are excellent for birding. WiFi is available and generally quite fast around the common areas and most rooms.

**LAUNDRY SERVICE:** Laundry service is available at both of our lodges, although it can take more than 24 hours to have items returned to you.

**ELECTRICITY:** Electrical current and plugs are the same as in the US, i.e., 110V, 60-cycle, parallel prong. Power failures occur, but not with any regularity. An international travel plug is useful and can be bought in most airport departure lounges. You may find the following website helpful: <http://www.power-plugs-sockets.com>.

**FOOD:** Breakfasts consist of fresh fruit, cereal, yoghurt, eggs, bread and a meat dish. Some lunches will be picnic-style and some will be held at the lodges. On our full day excursions a light mid-morning snack will be provided. All dinners will be at either the Tranquilo Bay or Los Quetzales, save for the final dinner at the hotel in Panama City. The food is of very good quality and features local produce and seasonings.

Sunbird tours are all-inclusive and no refunds can be issued for any tour meals participants choose to miss. While we will try to do all we can to accommodate the requirements of all participants, please note that we cannot guarantee all causes of food allergies can be avoided at every destination. Many restaurants offer set menus and are unable to accommodate all special requests within a group. Thus, participants with significant food allergies or special dietary needs should bring appropriate foods with them for those times when their needs can, regretfully, not be accommodated.

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Our tours are carefully scheduled to insure the best possible birding experience and although the leaders will do all they can to make sure the group eats at a reasonable time, sometimes early or late lunches and/or evening meals cannot be avoided. Any participants who need to eat at specific times may need to bring supplemental food with them.

**DRINKS:** Bottled water, a soft drink or a beer (or wine if appropriate) are provided at meals, as is coffee or tea. In addition, we keep a supply of bottled water on the tour vehicles. Bottled or filtered water may also be provided in some rooms where we stay.

**INTERNET AND MOBILE PHONE ACCESS:** See Accommodation above.

**CLOTHING:** The best approach to the variable climate is to take several layers of clothing that can be added or subtracted according to changes in temperature. The following items are basic:

Lightweight sweater	Sun hat
Lightweight trousers	Cotton socks
Sturdy walking shoes/boots for day hikes	High-quality raincoat
Trainers or watershoes	Wind-proof jacket
Rubber boots	
(not essential but can come in handy if it's rather wet)	

**MISCELLANEOUS ITEMS:** Please bring the following:

Notebook and pencil	Alarm clock
Small rucksack/day pack	Torch and spare batteries
Sun glasses and sun screen	Insect repellent
Water bottle/canteen	Plastic bags (rain protection for optics)
Personal medication	Shampoo
Ear plugs (if you are a light sleeper)	Hiking stick (if desired)
Compact umbrella	

**Optional:** Telescope & tripod (recommended if you have them), spare binoculars and spare spectacles (in case of loss or damage), field guide, swimwear.

**Note:** Some electronic equipment (especially laptops and tablets) can be sensitive to the high humidity levels. It is advised to bring some silica gel packets and large plastic bags to store your computers in.

**LEADER'S EQUIPMENT:** The leader will provide the following:

Field guides	Sound equipment
Telescope	Basic first aid kit
Laser pointer	

**LUGGAGE:** Our Final Information document, which will be sent to you approximately three weeks before departure, will give details about baggage weight and size restrictions imposed by the airline used for this tour.

If possible, please bring your luggage in soft-sided bags or cases (rather than large hard 'Samsonite'-type suitcases) as these pack more easily into our vehicles during the tour. Please note that on many tours there are no porters to carry your luggage so please ensure that **no bag is so heavy that you are unable to lift and carry it yourself**. As a general rule, in addition to using your luggage labels, it is a good idea to fix identification to the *inside* of each piece of luggage.

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**NOTE ON INTERNAL FLIGHT BAGGAGE RESTRICTIONS:** Please note that the Air Panama has tighter restrictions than international carriers for the internal flights from Panama City's regional airport (Albrook) to Bocas and from David back to Panama City. Each passenger is entitled to one checked bag of 31 lb (14 kg) max on flights within the Panamanian territory. Excess weight is charged at 2% of the published fare for every kilo over the max weight and is the responsibility of the participant. Additionally, carry-on hand luggage is limited to 9lb (4kg). Please pack with these restrictions in mind. You may be able to leave excess baggage at the front desk baggage check at the Radisson but note that we don't stay here again on this tour. The hotel isn't too far from the regional airport so it's possible to stop by and pick up the baggage before heading to the final night's hotel at the end of the tour (after returning on the flight from David).

**PHOTOGRAPHY:** Scenery and memory shots will be plentiful and simple to obtain. Although there will be occasions when bird photography is possible, a birdwatching tour is not normally the best means of pursuing this aim. Bring all your film or memory cards with you as it may be difficult to find precisely what you need during the tour. Camera equipment should be packed in moisture- and dust-proof bags, as a precaution. "Digiscoping" is perfectly compatible with the tour, though it is recommended you bring your own telescope as the leader's telescope is not available for this activity.

There will be plenty of opportunities to take photos of birds, mammals and scenery and the leaders will do all they can to accommodate anyone wishing to take photographs. However, if you are a serious photographer please bear in mind that this is first and foremost a birdwatching tour. Please do not allow your photographic desires to conflict with other participants' birdwatching activities.

**TRANSPORTATION:** Transportation during the tour is by standard 12 or 15 passenger minibuses, and around Tranquilo Bay by small boat (a half-shaded boat that carries up to 12 people, with seating for about 8).

**SMOKING:** Smoking or vaping is not allowed in the vehicles or when the group is gathered for meals, checklists etc. If you are sharing a room with a non-smoker, please do not smoke in the room. If you smoke in the field, we ask that you do so well away and downwind from the group if possible.

**TRAVEL INSURANCE:** Travel insurance is essential and we insist that you take out suitable cover as soon as your tour is booked. If you are bringing expensive optical equipment or other valuable items, please make sure they are also adequately insured on your home contents policy, as most travel insurance policies do not cover very expensive individual items. You may wish to consult your insurance broker regarding coverage. Please also ensure that your policy covers you in the event of a medical emergency, cancellation of a trip or severe delays. Medical costs abroad can often be extremely expensive. Please note that Sunbird is not liable for any medical or repatriation costs resulting from injury or illness during a tour or for covering any costs resulting from a flight delay such as extra hotel accommodation.

If you wish, insurance can be arranged by Helen Fisher, Bullerwell Independent Insurance Brokers, 13 Goldington Road, Bedford, MK40 3JY. Tel: 01234-866964. Please contact Helen for a quote and she will send the schedule directly to you.

**TIPPING:** All tour-based tips are included in the tour price. These include tips to local guides, drivers, hotel porters, and waiters and waitresses. You only need to pay tips for personal services such as room service or drinks from the bar.

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### BIBLIOGRAPHY:

#### General Interest

Krichner, John. 2017. *The New Neotropical Companion*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

Skutch, Alexander F. 1980. *A Naturalist on a Tropical Farm*. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA. This is one of several Skutch books well worth reading, accounting his personal experiences in the Neotropics.

#### Field Guides

Angehr, George R., and Robert Dean. 2010. *The Birds of Panama: A Field Guide*. Zona Tropical Publications. A newer guide with more modern taxonomy, and facing text and maps, but the plates are not of as high quality as the original Ridgely.

Ridgely, Robert S., and John A. Gwynne, Jr. 1989. *A Guide to the Birds of Panama; with Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Honduras*. Second Edition. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. **Essential.**

DeVries, Philip J. 1987. *The Butterflies of Costa Rica (Vol. 1-2)*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

Leenders, Twan. 2001. *A Guide to Amphibians and Reptiles of Costa Rica*. Zona Tropical, Miami, FL.

Reid, Fiona A. 1997. *A Field Guide to the Mammals of Central America and Southeast Mexico*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, NY.

**NEOTROPICAL BIRD CLUB:** Please support this charity which aims to raise money to support conservation projects, encourages an interest in the conservation of birds, and liaises with and promotes the work of existing societies within the region. You will find their contact details and further information about the Club at [www.neotropicalbirdclub.org](http://www.neotropicalbirdclub.org)

**FINAL INFORMATION:** Final information with instructions for meeting the group, hotel addresses, etc, and your air tickets will be sent to you about three weeks before the start of the tour. Other news will be communicated as necessary. If you have any questions about any aspect of the tour, please contact us.