



Not just a short cut

Nick Coates, a director at Audley, explains why he was actually glad he went to a business conference.

To be honest, I only went to Panama to attend a travel industry conference and that was only because I had an enduring fascination with the canal. However, what I found was a country so beautiful I now feel compelled to hijack the Audley Traveller to write about it. Panama, put simply, is an undiscovered gem.

Let's start then, with the canal (I won't bore you with the conference). It extends 50 miles from Panama city on the Pacific coast to Colon, a former pirate hang-out on the Caribbean. Each year more than 13,000 vessels pass through three sets of oversize locks, across Lago Gatun with its rainforested banks and through the Gaillard Cut, a colossal excavation that cuts through the Continental Divide.

The only way to see the canal is to travel on it. We sailed from Panama city's huge natural bay and through the colossal Miraflores Locks, where you have to wait your turn behind container vessels squeezing through





Panama city skyline



with only inches to spare either side. After a couple of hours the canal opens out into the lake, which is in turn surrounded by a birdwatcher's haven - Parque Nacional Soberania. Here I boarded a smaller boat to explore the intricate green waterways, finding toucans, sloth monkeys, a huge tarantula (nearly grasped by mistake) and rather boisterous howler monkeys. You could be in the remotest corners of the Amazon, until you turn a corner to find a car transporter en route from Yokohama to Southampton on the main channel.

The main canal is currently so busy that a new lane is to be built in a massive £3 billion engineering project which will double capacity and allow even longer and wider vessels to transit. How this will affect Panama city I do not know, but at present it is a lively, cosmopolitan place with skyscrapers and world-class restaurants, their eclectic style mirroring the cultural mix of the capital. Despite its modernity Panama city is also completely

charming, with the historic Casco Viejo district and its colonial charm. But it was when we got beyond city and canal that I discovered something quite unanticipated. It began with a short flight to Boquete, a small alpine-feeling town surrounded by coffee plantations and hot springs. The region is a paradise best explored on short country walks through pristine cloud forest and cooling cascades. I stayed on a working coffee plantation, providing a fascinating insight into the journey of a bean from the coffee plant to my mug back home in Oxford.

I then headed back down to the coast to Bocas Del Toro... and I still wish I had never left. A Caribbean archipelago, this National Park contains six large islands with jungly interiors and is home to the indigenous Ngobe-Bugle Indians. You can also find a small surfing community, one or two low-key resorts and deserted, perfect beaches, but I had too much to see and no time to indulge in the laid-back vibe. Spending my days

exploring above and below water, I headed out to Swan Key (a beautiful small offshore island home to the red-billed tropic bird and the white-crowned pigeon), I snorkelled in perfectly clear waters with barracuda and I paddled by canoe to find small villages hidden in mangrove swamps. I visited local schools and learned from my indigenous guides how to find the red frogs whose poison they use on their blowpipe darts, and also how to avoid the surreptitious caymans.

I had to leave the peace of Bocas because of my homebound ticket and an in-tray full of work. I had no time to get to San Blas, with its 400 Caribbean palm-fringed islands and fiercely independent Kuna people. I missed out on the colourful Indian markets of El Valle. Most regrettably, I had no time to explore the totally wild frontier of Darien, a dense area of wild swampy jungle which links (or is it separates?) Central and South America.

So this is my emphatic suggestion; do try and visit Panama, perhaps in conjunction

with travels to Costa Rica, Peru or Ecuador. Even better, you could go to just Panama. You could even pretend you were only going there for a conference. It really doesn't matter which - just as long as Panama appears on your travel radar and you do actually go!

Nick Coates
Director

FACT FILE

A two week trip to Panama including Panama city, time in the Soberania National Park, Boquete and Bocas del Toro starts at £2,850 per person including all flights, transfers and private excursions. Please call Nick Giles, our Panama Specialist, on 01993 838 607 for further details.

