



Panama: Beyond the Canal

EDITORIAL & PHOTOS BY CATHY SENEAL

Writer Cathy Senecal is surprised by Panama City's food and culture, but first heads to Chiriqui Province's cloud forests and island archipelagos

Hooaaaaar—hooohoo--gwwaaaarr!

On a quiet morning in a bungalow along Panama's Gulf Coast, I awoke to a loud guttural roar my first day there, a wakeup alarm in the truest sense. It was alarming. Though they only weigh about as much as a cocker spaniel, male howler monkeys are the loudest monkeys on the planet, and their roars can travel several kilometres. Luckily, for guests at Seagull Cove Resort, the howlers stayed hundreds of feet up in the forest canopy

and roared only a couple of times a day.

Mention Panama to most people and they will think "canal." But this "undiscovered" place, a mix of new and old, whose official currency is the U.S. dollar, is about to be discovered. Not by law firms, banks and real estate developers, who have long been in Panama, but by travelers looking to spend time in a safe, diverse country that is untrammelled and beautiful.

A few friends, both long time and new, chose Panama to be active, see wildlife, drink coffee and eat! Panama's Chiriqui Province followed by a few days in Panama City—a fas-

cinating counterpoint to the coast and highlands--delivered.

Gulf of Chiriqui

Accessible from David in western Panama, Chiriqui Province has the country's highest peaks, longest rivers and mistiest highland rainforests.

Seagull Cove Resort, where the howler monkeys hang out, has seven private bungalows up one hundred steps from the isle-strewn Gulf Coast just east of the majestic Gulf of Chiriqui Marine National Park. The park is rich with hundreds of uninhabited white sand islands, dense mangroves, and one of the largest coral reefs in the Pacific. Seagull

Cove Resort is a small but full service resort with a restaurant, bar, pool and all kinds of options for island hopping, whale watching, bird watching, kayaking, coastal rowing and more.

One evening, we set out for a sunset cruise among labyrinthine channels and island inlets. We motored past dozens of lone white pelicans perched like white ornaments on a Christmas tree, different from the squadrons of pelicans we see in Manitoba. While the sun dropped into a yolky canvas, we sipped pinot gris and watched dolphins leap out of the blue waves, creating frisky silhouettes in the waning light.

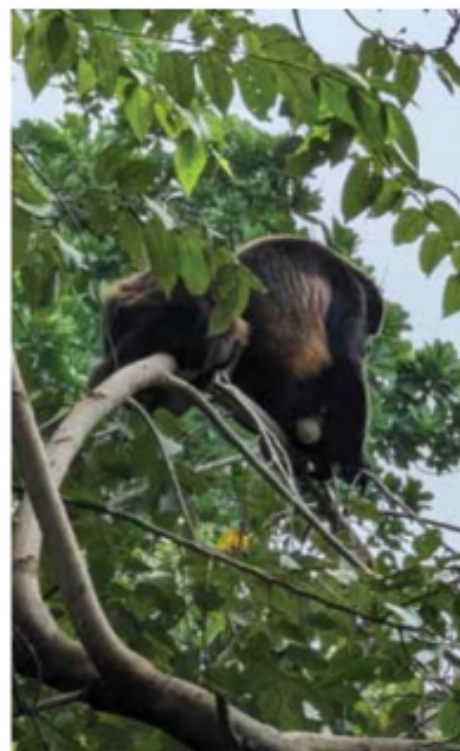
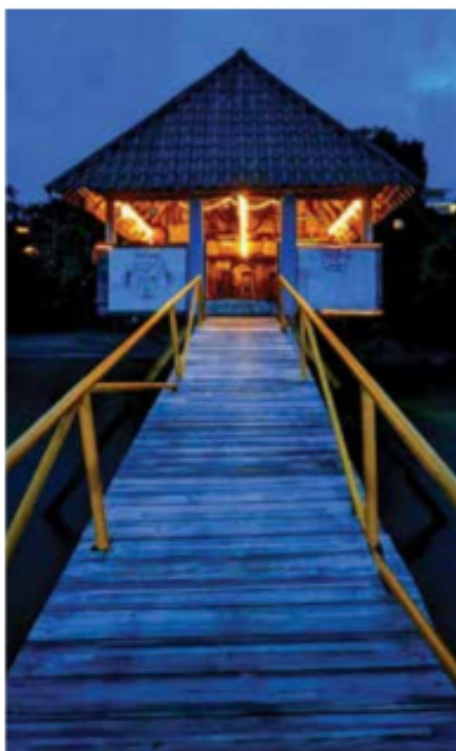
In the open air dining room overlooking the bay, we ate Sanchoco, a soup of corn, chicken, yams and spices; Bollos, tamales wrapped in banana leaves; Patacones, double fried plantains, or grilled fresh fish, and learned how to create a coconut-y sweet dessert. Everything was delicious and lovingly described to us by the half dozen staff, who felt like family.

While others rowed coastal sculls, available there for experienced rowers, a morning paddle had me rapt in the water listening to more troops howling out their distinctive roars among tropical shoreline forests or angling my kayak to manoeuver the occasional wake of water taxis and loaded banana tugs.

Saturday night, the resort hosted a barbecue bash in the Tiki Bar, an overwater palapa at the far end of a long 100-metre dock, to anyone in the area. We chatted with the locals, sampled ginger margaritas and chowed down on burgers. We howled too, not to mark our territory, but laughing at the wildness of an impromptu rainstorm, so gusty we couldn't leave until it was over.

Chiriqui Highlands and Boquete a Cool Reprive

Boquete (pronounced Bo KEH tay) Mountain Resort, part of Tree Trek Adventure Park, at 1700 metres above sea level, was a reprieve from the heat. Temperatures near the ocean were 29 degrees and higher. Up in Boquete, the center of the country's coffee industry, temperatures were 22 degrees.



Hiking the following morning past a misty cloud forest valley was gloriously cool. Red-legged honeycreepers and hummingbirds of iridescent violets and greens skimmed about. We walked across long swinging bridges high up in the canopy 40 metres above ground.

An on-site coffee tour at the Rio Cristal Estate revealed the intricacies of coffee growing, including the plantation's Geisha coffee, with flavours like a bergamot tea with jasmine and mandarin flower aromas and passion fruit taste. Altitude, volcanic soil and ocean breezes contribute to the taste of this brew, and intense processing methods make it one of the world's most expensive coffee beans, at \$500 a pound and up. How did it taste? Meh, but give me a traditional dark roast from Panama any day.

Panama City Surprises with Culture, Great Food and Sloths!

Panama City's four centuries old historic district, known as Casco Antiguo, or Casco Viejo (Spanish for old town), is a stimulating hotspot, and THE place to stay, roam around and eat in town, day or night. This UNESCO World Heritage Site is filled with nightclubs, award-winning restaurants, boutique shops, historic buildings, upscale hotels as well as Panama's Presidential Palace. A blend of Spanish and French colonial architecture, old and new, with flower-bedecked balconies make this area a sensory delight to spend time in.



By far, our favourite thing to do in Panama City was eat. As a gastronomy capital, Panama City has superb cuisine, including traditional Panamanian fare. At the revolutionary Fondo Lo Que Hay, one of Latin America's 50 Top Restaurants, we dined on Panama's top chef's Cassava Tostada with Tuna—bomb-y good—



and Half Sexy Concolon, a divine sticky rice cake with wood smoked tomato sauce.

Another favourite place was Benissimo for coffee and chicheme (traditional Panamanian drink) gelato. We also liked to start the evening with a Mandinga Mule at the homey dark Pedro Mandinga Rum Bar. I wish I had bought more chocolate from i Love Panama Chocolate, a little tasting shop that gives out samples of quality chocolate, like chili chocolate. Mmm.

Outside of Casco Antiguo, at Punta Culebra Nature Centre, run by the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, I finally saw my first sloth. Who doesn't love a sloth? Guides pointed out two of the dozen or so sloths living at the outdoor centre, as their minimal movement and greeny brown fur made them very difficult to spot.

Sloths and howler monkeys are great to see—and hear! But to learn about the incredible engineering of the canal and to see it in action, we checked out the Canal Museum and walked the Amador Causeway to see the various watercraft traversing the canal. It is Panama, after all.

Stay here:

Seagull Cove Resort – perched on the mainland near Boca Chica is great for wildlife viewing (whales, dolphins, monkeys, birds) and water activities. Independent rowing tours are available through Winnipeg's own Travel2Row.

Boquete Tree Trek Mountain

Resort – seven kilometres up the Chiriqui Highlands from Boquete in Palo Alto, surrounded in cool greenery in a rustic elegant resort with zipline canopy tours as well as coffee, tea, hanging bridge and rum tours.

Magnolia Inn – right in Casco Antiguo, this 3 star inn offers dorm rooms and private rooms with a communal kitchen and gathering area.

Hotel La Compañía – a 5 star splurge in Casco Antiguo, is rebuilt on the site where La Compañía de Jesús (Company of Jesus) settled after the original Panama City's destruction in 1671. Stroll the lobby for historic photos of canal construction.

Cathy Senecal writes about experiences involving wildlife, active experiences, natural settings and more, from her travels in more than 50 countries. @wildtripsawait

