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Latin America Trip (L20A-4)

Panamá – Day Trips

I headed down to Central America for a 19-day visit to Costa Rica and Panamá.

I found a few good candidate day trips to book for when I was in Panamá City. Not as many as for Costa Rica, as most seemed to overlap on the same few sites, especially those sites associated with the Panamá Canal.

Then I had issues confirming all three of the day trips I signed up for as so few people were signing up for such tours. I didn't realize it initially, but the coronavirus/COVID-19 situation had drastically reduced international tourism in Panamá, including just about everyone from China. I ended up being the only person on one of my day trips, and traveled with just one couple for each of the other two – and that was after the dates for those two tours were changed.

(Although there were no known cases of COVID-19 in either Costa Rica or Panamá when I was in-country, each reported its first case soon after I left. Less than a week after I left Panamá, the country closed its borders to non-nationals after the number of cases of COVID-19 rapidly increased.)

My first day trip ended up being my visit to El Valle de Antón, an inland village to the west of Panamá City. The village is located in the 2 ½ mile-wide caldera of the El Valle volcano. The volcano last erupted about 300,000 years ago, but it's warm enough underground that the area has some hot springs.

There is an eclectic mix of activities and sightseeing options that one can enjoy in town. I took this particular El Valle de Antón tour because it mentioned petroglyphs, what would be my only pre-Columbian archaeological site in Panamá.



The Mercado Municipal, El Valle de Antón's popular City Market, features local produce, baked goods, handicrafts and souvenirs.



A local enjoys a raspado, basically shaved ice with flavoring, some evaporated milk, and in some cases malt powder. I saw a number of raspado vendors during my stay in Panamá.



One popular destination is the short hike to Chorro El Macho waterfall. The total drop is about 70 meters (only part of which is visible here), the tallest falls in the region.



Our guide told us that the people of El Valle de Antón tend to be very short. At 6'4" I found myself having to duck a handful of times to avoid walking into spider webs hosting these large Golden Orb Weaver spiders, so I soon suspected that natural selection may have played a role in why the locals are so short.



We stopped at a hot spring, where visitors could coat their faces and/or bodies with some of the local mud, let it dry, wash it off, and then enjoy a soak in mineral water from the hot springs.



Our guide demonstrated how to apply the mud.



And this is the soaking pool. I can't say that I get the appeal of these types of facilities. It always strikes me as taking a warm bath with a bunch of strangers. That said, I have enjoyed a few truly natural hot spring sites I've come across in my travels.



The Panamanian Golden Frog (actually a toad) is a national symbol of Panamá. It's also toxic and endangered (they may actually be extinct in the wild at this point). We stopped at a facility seeking to breed them and restore the population of Panamanian Golden Frogs in their natural habitat in the mountains surrounding El Valle de Antón.



We saw a variety of animals and birds at the El Nispero Zoo and Garden, including several species of colorful birds.



Another resident of the zoo is this Baird's tapir, the largest species of land mammal native to Central America. What makes this tapir a Baird's tapir?

I'm guessing genetics. 😊



The zoo rescues and treats wildlife, such as this young sloth.



For me, the highlight of my visit to El Valle de Antón was this large petroglyph panel known as Piedra Pintada. The panel is believed to be about 5000 years old. Although its meaning is unknown, one tradition holds that it is a map of the region. A local gave us an explanation of its meaning based on that tradition, connecting various parts of the petroglyph to area features.

It was, however, disappointing to see that it had been painted in to make it easier to photograph, and the local who gave us the explanation kept hitting it with the stick he was using as a pointer. Both are destructive to rock art over time, so I have a very strong “do not touch” ethic when it comes to rock art, ruin sites and other archaeology features that I visit.



On the drive back to Panamá City, I got this picture from the Centenario Bridge looking south towards the Pedro Miguel Locks (left) of the Pacific end of the Panamá Canal.

My second day trip had two primary destinations. First was a boat trip on the Chagres River/Gatun Lake to an area in Soberania National Park called the Monkey Islands. Then we headed to a different point along the Chagres River in Chagres National Park to visit the native Emberá people's village of Tusípono to learn a bit about their culture and traditions.

The Chagres River plays a key role in the Panamá Canal. It was dammed to create massive Gatun Lake, through which a 20-mile segment of the canal passes. The lake is only about 85 feet above sea level, requiring three locks at each end of the canal to raise ships from sea level to lake level.

Gatun Lake loses about 53 million gallons of water to the ocean through the locks for every ship that passes through the canal, so national parks and a second reservoir can be found in the region to help capture rainfall during Panama's long wet season and to replenish Gatun Lake during the dry season.

Long before the canal, the fact that the Chagres River crosses half the country meant that there was a partial water route for moving commerce and Peruvian gold across the isthmus. That would be a factor later for one of the destinations on my third day trip.



We shared the Panamá Canal route on the Chagres River and Gatun Lake with large ocean-going ships making the canal transit as we were en route to and from the Monkey Islands.



A spider monkey hangs from a tree along our route



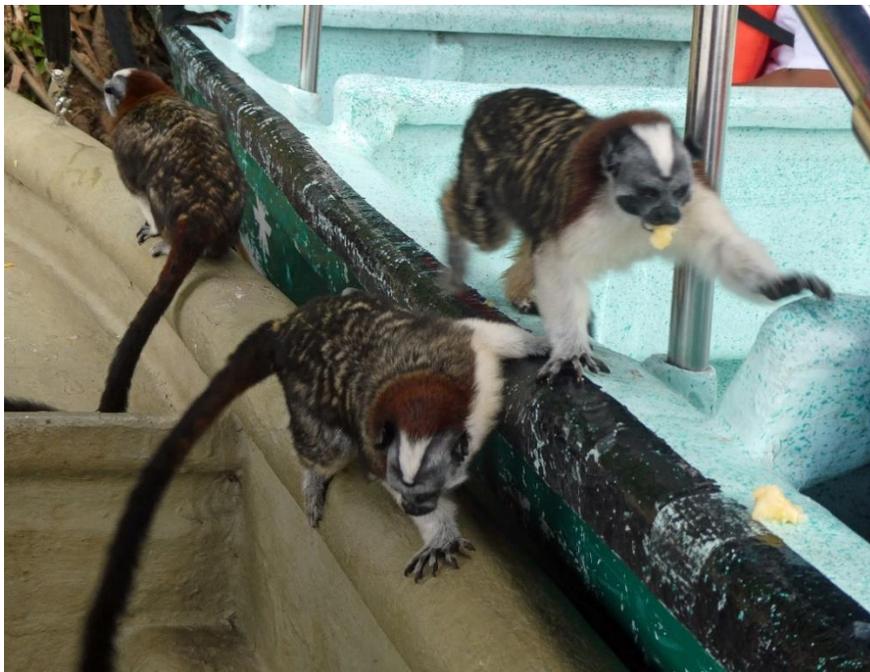
A capuchin monkey gets a drink



A tamarin monkey checks out the tourists



A tamarin monkey approaches a banana my guide offered it. The guides have pretty much ensured that tourists will see monkeys close up on these tours by regularly offering fruit and nuts to the monkeys. A couple of these monkeys didn't hesitate at all to jump up on my lap. As with the petroglyphs, it's pretty ingrained in me that when it comes to wildlife, you can look and photograph but don't touch. (Or feed.)



The tamarins sure are cute. Even as the Basement Jaxx music video for Where's Your Head At popped into my mind at about this point. (Yeah, I know that reference dates me.)



At our next stop, a member of the Emberá tribe met my guide and me for a ride up the Chagres River in a dugout canoe to the Emberá village of Tusípono. No paddling, though – note the motor on the back of the canoe.



Approaching Tusípono



Tusípono village housing



Note the carved log "steps" used to climb up into this home.

Generally, the village does not have modern utilities, but solar panels provide enough electricity to power lightbulbs at night.



The Emberá entertained us with some traditional music and dance.



Our visit also included a traditional lunch of fresh fruit, and fried freshly caught fish and plantain wrapped in large leaves.



We also got an overview of some of their handicrafts.

The men carve wood as well as “vegetable ivory”, the hardened white coating of certain types of palm tree seeds.

The women extract fiber strands from the sour cane plant and dye them through various natural means (achiote seeds for red, buried in the dark sands of the beach for black, etc.). They create bowls or vases of bundled grasses, and then wrap the dyed fibers around the grasses to create the decorative patterns.

My third and final day trip also had two destination. In 2016 Panamá completed the Panamá Canal Expansion project that would allow the canal to accommodate much bigger ships. At the Atlantic Ocean end of the canal this included constructing the Agua Clara Locks, which was our first destination.

Then we headed for the ruins of Fort San Lorenzo, an old Spanish fortress built to protect trade at the mouth of the Chagres River. We also did a little wildlife spotting between the two.



One of the new locks at Agua Clara, with the sliding gates closed (note the difference in water level from the left to the right). In the background you get a glimpse of the older, smaller Gatun Locks.

The new locks allow the Panamá Canal to accommodate much larger ships. But the larger locks also use a lot more water than the smaller locks do, so only ships that require the larger locks can go through them.

About 14,000 ships pass through the canal each year. Transit averages more than 11 hours.



The Caribbean Princess cruise ship starts entering Agua Clara Locks from Gatun Lake en route to the Atlantic Ocean



The Caribbean Princess has entered the first lock and the lock gates are closing.



The Prism Brilliance ship is entering the second Agua Clara Lock. The Atlantic Bridge, which spans the canal is in the distance. It is one of only three bridges that cross the Panamá Canal, although a fourth bridge is in the planning stage.



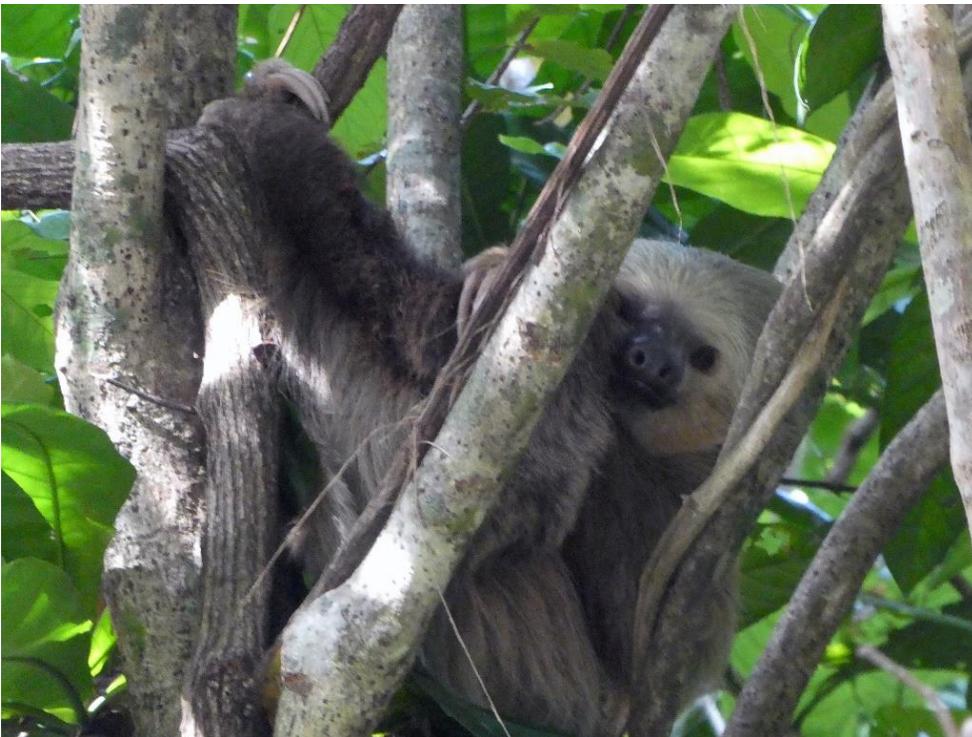
View of the Panamá Canal from the Atlantic Bridge. The Agua Clara Locks are to the left, the Gatun Locks are to the right.



We made a few wildlife viewing stops on our drives between the Atlantic Bridge and Fort San Lorenzo. I believe the upper picture features howler monkeys. The lower picture is of a mother monkey and its baby.



A capuchin monkey



A two-toed sloth, apparently awakened from its nap, keeps an eye on us



A green parrot in its native habitat



The Chagres River meets the Atlantic Ocean. The Spanish originally established the town of Chagres at the river's mouth to serve as Panamá's chief port on the Atlantic, especially for shipping gold and other goods carried across the isthmus from Panamá City. The trade drew unwanted attention from pirates and others, so the Spanish constructed Fort San Lorenzo nearby. Pirate Henry Morgan destroyed the original fort in 1670, but Spain built a new fort on a bluff overlooking the river in 1680. The port of Chagres fell out of favor once a railroad across the isthmus was completed in 1855. In 1916, the Panamá Canal Zone was widened a bit to include Chagres – remaining residents were resettled elsewhere and the town was abandoned.

The ruins of Fort San Lorenzo along with fortification ruins at Portobello now comprise Fortifications on the Caribbean Side of Panama: Portobello-San Lorenzo, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Fort San Lorenzo ruins and the Chagres River



View of Fort San Lorenzo ruins and the mouth of the Chagres River as seen from the ruins of the fort's upper battery. The village of Chagres was once located just across the river at its mouth.