



## TOUR INFORMATION FOR PANAMA: Darién Lowlands

*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 countries where Yellow Fever is endemic must have proof of a current vaccination.

It is always a good idea to take photocopies of your passport and air ticket with you when traveling abroad. They can prove invaluable in helping you get replacements if your original documents are lost or stolen. You should pack the photocopies separately from the originals. It may also be necessary to physically carry your passports while doing day trips out from the camp. For this reason a well-sealed zip-lock bag is highly recommended to store your documents in, just in case of inclement weather while we are out in the field.

**Important:** As soon as you book on the tour, please email the Sunbird office a **colour scan of your passport – the page(s) with your photograph and passport details. These are needed to enter the Darién region.**

**FLYING VIA THE USA:** The cheapest airline routing to Panama is usually via the USA, however there are some European carriers (e.g. IBERIA, KLM) who fly there via Madrid or Amsterdam. If travelling via the USA under their visa waiver programme, all nationalities require a machine-readable passport, and must pre-apply for authorisation using the Electronic System for Travel Authorisation (**ESTA**).

Having an **ESTA** is a mandatory requirement and applications must be completed online via their website <https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov> at least 72 hours before departure 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 09042 450100. 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! After going through Immigration on arrival, 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.

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**ARRIVAL AND INTRODUCTORY MEETING:** The tour begins with an introductory meeting at 17.30, followed by dinner at our hotel in Panama City.

**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 major language in Panama is Spanish, but the hotel and camp staff all speak at least some (if not excellent) English. Our leaders' Spanish ranges from functional to fluent and you will have no need to learn the language. However, understanding even a few basic words may add interest to your trip, so you might consider bringing a small English-Spanish dictionary or phrase book.

**CLIMATE:** The days will likely be between the mid 70s and mid 80s and humid, with afternoon showers. Rarely do these showers reach the intensity or duration that would impact on a birding excursion, but be prepared for some birding in rain. High-quality rain-proof clothing and a small umbrella will go a long way toward making any rainy periods more enjoyable. Bring at least one heavier shirt or light jacket to prepare for rainy or unseasonably cool weather.

**ALTITUDE:** Maximum elevation reached on the tour is about 14000 feet.

**PACE OF THE TOUR AND DAILY ROUTINE:** We will try to be in the field at dawn. Most days will involve departures close to 06:15. Breakfast will be in an open communal dining room before our morning departure. Many of the birding sites that we visit on the tour are within an hour of the camp. We'll have full mornings in the field and some days will also involve lunches and full afternoons. On others we will return to the camp for lunch and a siesta. On two of the days we'll have lunch at a local restaurant with active hummingbird feeders.

There will be some narrow and slightly uneven trails on the first day and some slightly longer treks (of about a mile and a half) later on with some up and down (elevational changes in the 100-200ft range) and sometimes muddy trails. The trail that takes us to an area to look for Sapayoa on the first full day of the trip is particularly steep and may not be suited to all travellers. For those who opt to not take the trail, birding from the road nearby can be quite productive as well. It should be emphasized that these trails can, on occasion, be quite muddy if there has been a lot of recent rain. Comfortable and fully waterproof/mud boots are highly recommended. The camp has an array of rubber boots that can be borrowed for your stay, although if you require a particularly large or small shoe they may not have a good fit. We will also be birding from small boats on several days, which may require stepping into and out of the craft onto natural riverbanks.

**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.

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Travellers to eastern Panama including the Darien are at risk for malaria, although there are no recent cases known in the areas in which we travel. Please consult your GP.

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).

Special medicines may be difficult to obtain so bring enough to cover your particular needs for the entire trip. We have found that with careful eating habits, intestinal problems can be largely avoided.

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 and biting gnats, and occasionally mosquitoes can be locally numerous around the Camp. 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.

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:** We use a single hotel during most of the tour: the Canopy Camp near the end of the Pan-American Highway. This camp was built using the model of African-style luxury tented camps. We will be using large, walk-in tents that are positioned on individual platforms set around a clearing. Each tent is apportioned with comfortable beds, electricity, fans, and other amenities. A private bathroom with a shower and flush toilet is located adjacent to each tent on the platform. Hot water in the cabins is currently not available. The tents have internal wood flooring, screened windows, bedside tables and some shelving for personal effects and are remarkably comfortable.

The first and last nights of the tour will be at a modern, comfortable hotel either near the Panama City Airport.

**LAUNDRY SERVICE:** Laundry service is available at the Canopy Camp, and generally will be returned to you the following day.

**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. See <http://www.power-plugs-sockets.com/ecuador> for specific information.

**FOOD:** Breakfasts will be at the Canopy Camp before our morning departures and will include fresh fruit, cereal, yogurt, eggs, bread and a meat dish. Some of our lunches will be field picnics; others will be at the camp or at a local restaurant. All dinners will be at the camp, save for the final dinner at the hotel in Panama City. The food is of excellent 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.

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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.

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, bottled water is available throughout the tour. Bottled or filtered water may also be provided in some rooms where we stay.

**INTERNET ACCESS AND CELL PHONES:** Internet access is generally available in almost every corner of the world, and wireless (Wi-Fi) is increasingly common in hotels, airports, restaurants and cafes. WIFI is available around the common areas of the camp, but the service tends to be very slow and can cut out for extended periods of time.

Mobile phones can be useful while on tour but keep in mind that many countries operate on a different cellular technology. Your phone may be incompatible with the local system, so please check with your local carrier. Fortunately, with the advent of smartphones, it is easy to download applications such as Skype or Google Voice, which can make calling home free or very inexpensive. Another option is to replace the data (“SIM”) card in your phone in-country. The SIM cards, including data can be very cheap. If you wish to use this option you will need to check that your smart phone has a SIM card slot.

**FIELD 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:

Sun hat	Cotton socks
Lightweight sweater	Cotton light-weight trousers
Sturdy hiking shoes	Wind-proof jacket/fleece
Rubber boots (highly recommended)	Rain-proof jacket

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

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

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

### LEADER’S EQUIPMENT:

Field guides	Sound equipment
Telescope	Basic first aid kit
Laser pointer	

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**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.

**PHOTOGRAPHY:** Scenery and memory shots will be plentiful and simple to obtain but birds are difficult to photograph. During afternoon breaks there are excellent opportunities for hummingbird and 'feeder bird' photography. Digiscoping is often very compatible with the tour, though it is recommended that you bring your own telescope as the leader's telescope is not available for this activity. Bring all the memory cards you are likely to need with you as it may be difficult to find precisely what you need at short notice. Camera equipment should be packed in moisture-proof and dust-proof bags, as a precaution.

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.

**TRANSPORT:** Transportation during the tour is by specially modified open rainforest trucks, or by vans or comfortable buses. Transfers to/from the airport to the Panama City hotel will be by courtesy shuttle. Transport to the Canopy Camp will be by 15- or 22-passenger vans. The leader will arrange a seating rotation. Participants should be able to ride in any seat in tour vehicles.

**SMOKING:** Smoking and 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.

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

### 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., Robert Dean. 2010. *The Birds of Panama: A Field Guide*. Cornell University Press. Range maps and updated taxonomy are a plus over Ridgely, but some of the colours and shapes are off.

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. **Recommended.**

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.