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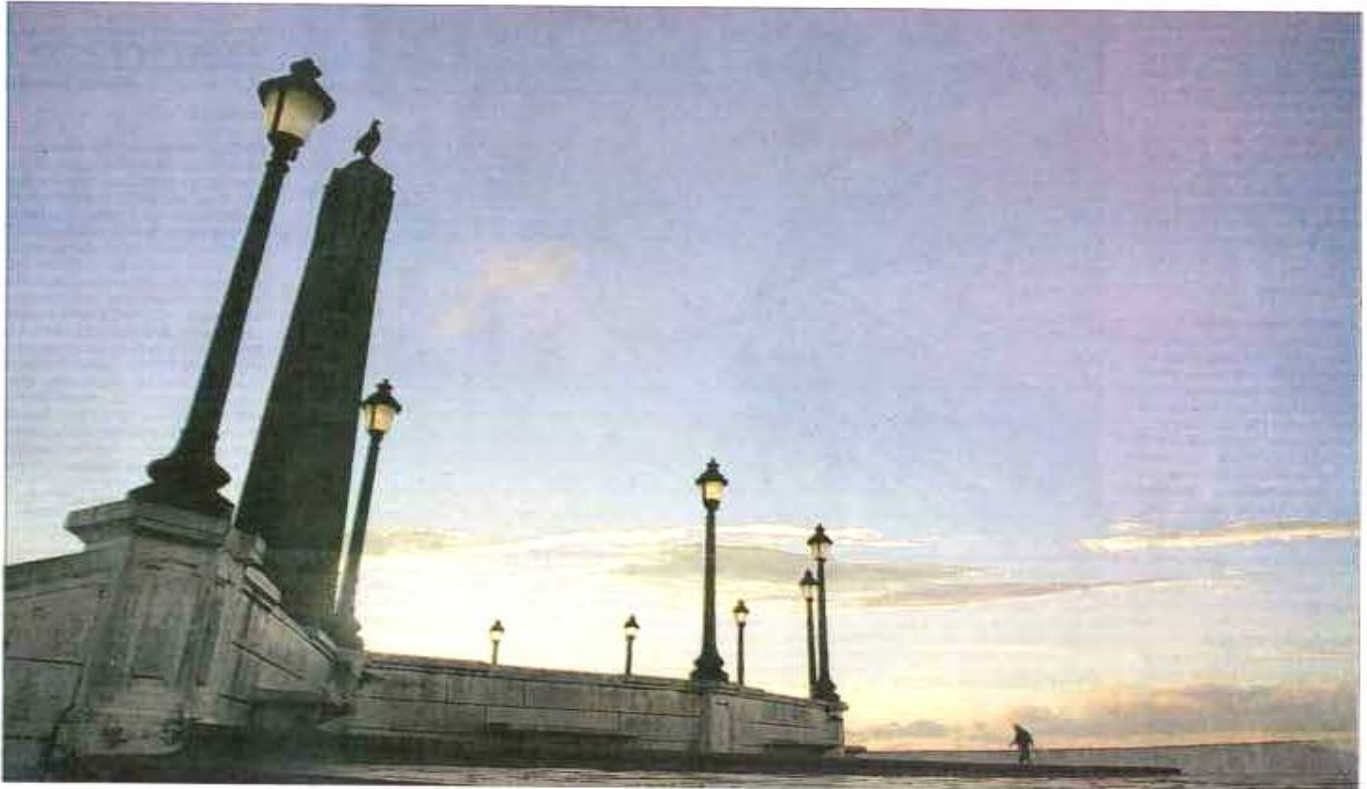
NEWSPAPER OF THE TWIN CITIES

MARCH 15, 2009 • STARTRIBUNE.COM • BEWARE THE IDES OF MARCH • MINNEAPOLIS • ST. PAUL • \$1.75

## travel

« LET US ... TREAD OUR DREAMS  
BENEATH THE JUNGLE SKY. » Arna Bontremps, poet

STARTRIBUNE.COM/TRAVEL • SUNDAY, MARCH 15, 2009 • SECTION G



ARNULFO FRANCO • Associated Press

Paseo de las Bovedas, along an old Spanish fort in Panama City, sits in the shadow of sleek towers. Such contrasts are standard in a country where visitors can see a high-tech canal and wild jungle.

# Beyond the Canal

• In Panama, our correspondent swings by the great feat of engineering before heading to his real destinations: a coffee farm and the dark jungle.

By PETER MANDIEL • Special to the Star Tribune

Panama enjoys a map. Unfold one, and your eye will land on it. This is the spot. The link that keeps us northerners connected to places like Peru. And it's a thin one — stretched like taffy. Where would you dig your canal from Atlantic to Pacific? You would work on it here.

Panama wants us to think of it as more than a feat of engineering, more than a continental bridge, more than headquarters for summer hats. This is why I am here. I want to check out its jungle and its animals and birds that you have to sneak around quietly to see.

When I meet my International Expeditions tour group, I find that I am not alone. Everyone seems equipped for observation. There are excellent binoculars. Extraordinary lenses for cameras. Bug spray that is state-of-the-art.

And though we've just arrived, there are already

factions. "Pleased to meet you," says a guy from Iowa. "Ever seen a Harpy Eagle in the wild? Well, you might on this trip."

"Are you a birder?" cuts in a California gal. "I sure hope not. I'm an animal person myself."

The woman, who is in her late 70s, shows us a typed-up list of countries she has visited. It is extensive. No one in the group can come close. Does she have a favorite? It's the Kingdom of Bhutan. "Visiting there is like going back in time," she explains. "Only the airport is new."

Panama, on the other hand, has stretches near Panama City that look like a Latin American L.A. It has its national fast food: Pio Pio Chicken, Don Lee Oriental Cuisine. It has the complexes of its canal: locks and wharves and dredgers. Freighters stack up, waiting to move through.

Panama continues: A jungle adventure. G4 ▶



PETER MANDIEL • Special to the Star Tribune

On one of the jungle walks taken by tourists on International Expeditions' "Wildlife Bridge of the Americas" tour, a parrot lands close to the group.

SPRING O'BRIEN

# Beyond the Canal

• PANAMA FROM GI

We take a walk around Casco Viejo, the Old Quarter of Panama City. Some of the Caribbean-style buildings are peeling pastel-colored paint, but there are restored areas that bustle with corner restaurants and shops. A promenade displays Pacific waves and gives a view of the city's modern skyline with its almost Hong Kong-high glass towers. The bird watchers are happy about the presidential palace since it's known as the Palacio de las Garzas, the Heron's Palace. "It is a place of birds," explains a local who is standing near it. "They live inside the building."

From here, we get on a bus to visit a set of canal locks called "Flower View" (Miraflores). And though I don't see any gardens nearby, there is a canal museum and a restaurant that lets you look down on what's going on. "Here comes a container ship," announces Alvaro Perez, our guide.

While we are having dessert, a massive vessel, the Magleby Maersk, is guided into the locks by robot locomotives on either side. Water whooshes. Lock gates open. Our chocolate mousse is finished. The Magleby Maersk sails on.

After lunch, our group is moving, too. To the highland forests where coffee is grown. My ticket tells me that we're flying "Aeroperlas - A Carbon Neutral Airline." How do they do it? I wonder.

"Maybe," says a fellow traveler, "it's all the stuff that's not allowed onboard." We pore over a posted list:

- No Measuring Tape or Ghue.
- No Detergent.
- No Clamps or Hammers.
- No Salt. No Umbrellas.
- No Inflated Balloons.

"Flying Aeroperlas means flying light," says my cohort. I have to agree. I'm wondering if it's drizzly in the highlands as I hand over my umbrella to the man inspecting my suitcase.

The hill country isn't about rain, I discover. It's about mist. At Finca Lérica, the coffee plantation and lodge where we

are staying two nights, there are droplets in the air that Panama's sun can't destroy. "Finca" means farm, and we get a tour through row after row of what looks to me like holly. Waxy leaves. Fat red berries.

But these aren't berries, they're beans. Peelable and soft to the touch until they get to the roaster and go brown. According to the foreman, Panama isn't like Colombia or Brazil. It's a minor coffee player. "On the chart of global production," he says, "we are listed as 'Other.' But what we grow is good."

Back in Panama City, I join a busload of tourists who are going for an afternoon rain-forest walk. As the coach bounces us along, I roll with the rhythm, mumbling some jungle lines: Jaguar, jaguar, burning bright. In the forests of the night.

I know that's not exactly how the famous poem goes, but I am told there may be jaguars in this jungle. And I am keeping an eye out for one as we set off. We explorers are trying to keep feet out of mud, mighty ant mounds and traplike knots of vines. We get buzz-bombed by flies and walk smack into a shower that sends down not just drops of rain, but tropical nuts and sharp chips of bark.

Thanks to our guide, Wilberto Ordonez, we are inching along between cashew trees and giant philodendrons. I keep whisking mosquitoes off my watch to double-check it. There are so many leaf fans overhead that it feels like evening already.

Maybe it is the filtered light, but for the first part of our tour, nothing appears alive. This gray rock, Ordonez tells us, is a sleeping iguana. I am eager to believe. That silvery object, perched on a bush, is a type of butterfly.

Ordonez wants us to see wildlife. I am holding out for something that moves. Suddenly he is pointing and, for a second, I think it is another one of those sights that are invisible except to guides. But then I see



Photos by PETER MARTEL • Special to Star Tribune

In Casco Viejo, Panama City's colonial district, locals are restoring some of the Caribbean-style buildings.



Rows of coffee plants at Finca Lérica Coffee Plantation in Panama's Chiriqui Highlands.



Tourists eat lunch at the top-floor restaurant that overlooks the Miraflores Locks and the passage of ships through the Panama Canal.



Bruce Huston of Muscatine, Iowa, spots howler monkeys in the tree canopy.

it: a hairy foot that's banging upside-down from a branch.

There is more. A chest and a drowy head, and Ordonez outlines its shape for us. The shape of a three-toed sloth.

The second someone in our group snaps a picture, the sloth begins to move. His muscles work deliberately as if he runs on batteries that are losing power. Tensely, like a performer in the Cirque de Soleil, the

"No, wait," someone yells, but it is no use. There is a chuff, chuff, chuff as Ordonez hucks and chops, working like a talented chef, slicing and mincing, but never catching the turned-up feet and legs of our group member.

The chopping does not take long. The man is back on his feet with only some scrapes on his wrists and neck. Soon we are walking again, moving

"This is how you make the thing that Panama is famous for," he says. Although we are thinking "Canal," Ordonez shouts out, "Hat!"

I am wondering how you weave a head-covering out of this mess, but members of the group have moved ahead, and suddenly there is excitement: wiry figures scurpering around in the highest branches of a very tall tree.

Everyone has stopped, and we are listening for more. Jaguar! I think. And despite my earlier eagerness to see one, things have changed.

There isn't a bone in my body that doesn't wish this animal away. Not a muscle that doesn't tense for retreat, that doesn't plan to slip behind Ordonez and his sharp machete.

But the crunching is steady now, and there is a sound of

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sloth changes his branch.  
"He do not come down to defecate!" says Ordonez. "Maybe one time a week, on Saturday, he do it. But he do not come down."

Though this is only Wednesday, we get slightly nervous. Suddenly, as the animal arches his back, we all scramble at once, tripping backward, tearing our TravelSmart and L.L. Bean khakis against a clump of thorns.

A man falls into the thorn bush. We can see his yellow vest inside a network of spooled-up branches and spikes. For a second, no one says a word. This is a puzzle for experts, and it will take a person who is very smart to solve it. Ordonez is reaching for something and I can see a glint of steel as it is hoisted into the air.

even more carefully now.

The sun is starting to go orange, and our path grows even more shadowy. We approach a tropical anthill and Ordonez calls us to gather around. His gaze lands on a girl who's maybe 10 years old. "Stick your finger in there!" he commands. "Stick your finger in!" he repeats. "It hot!"

Curiosity wins, and all of us are sliding our pinkies into what Ordonez tells us is a compost pile constructed by cutter ants. "Nice," says one man. "It feels nice."

When we stop for a rest, Ordonez hacks at a large-sized palm frond. Passing the machete back and forth like a wand, Wilberto the Magnificent gives the palm a shake. Just like that, he is holding not a branch, but a dangling mop of fibers. We applaud.

"Howler monkeys!" says Ordonez, wide-eyed. "Look at the tails!"

We are snapping pictures, amazed that we are seeing these outside of a zoo. Something about seeing the monkeys makes us walk more quietly. Maybe it is the fact that every monkey stopped what he was doing to peer down at us. We are whispering now, and I have the sense that it is us — and not the jungle — that is on display.

As in old cartoons, I start to imagine pairs of eyes peering out of the leaves. I tell no one, but I am picking up the sound of something crunching. It stops whenever we stop. And it crunches again the second we begin to move.

Just when I am about to alert Ordonez, it happens. We hear a roar.

puffing, and then a low, dark growl. The jaguar, which must be a dominant male, is padding steadily toward us around a bend on the path.

We grab elbows, we sweat, we crouch low.

There is a gasp. Something black and yellow has sprung out of the bush into full view. It is our bus.

With its final crunching of gears and a breath of airbrakes, the coach has wheeled off the road and onto the end of our path. The driver has popped open the door.

Some of us are loading our gear now. Some of us are thinking about Panama; about its wild animals, its birds.

And some of us are wiping our brow.

Peter Mandel is an author of books for children. He lives in Prohoma, FL.

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**IF YOU GO**

U.S. nationals need only a passport to enter Panama. Although a \$5 "tourist visa" is required, you can buy one when you arrive at the airport. The currency is the U.S. dollar and while the official language is Spanish, almost everyone you meet speaks at least some English. Thanks in part to prosperity brought by the canal, Panama is a safe and welcoming country for tourists.

My eight-day tour, "Panama: Wildlife Bridge of the Americas," was run by an Alabama-based outfitter, International Expeditions. Among the highlights was a two-night stay at Finca Lérlda Lodge, a rustic but delightful guest house on a working coffee plantation ([www.fincaledra.com](http://www.fincaledra.com)). Prices for the tour start at \$3,498 per person based on double occupancy ([www.iftravel.com](http://www.iftravel.com); 1-800-633-4734).

The Panama Tourism Authority's official website is [www.visitpanama.com](http://www.visitpanama.com).



PETER MANDEL