

April 2019

Dear All,

This is the story of our trip to Soberania national park in what used to be Panama's Canal Zone. The park is famous for its wide variety of bird species, but we had signed up for a combined Birds and Mammals package, hoping to see something of everything.

We had originally intended to go in February, a good time to escape BC's winter and enjoy Panama's dry season, but my residence card didn't arrive until March. The end of April is the beginning of Panama's "green season", and may be damp, but the good news was that we'd save about \$3000 over February's prices.

Now that I had the card we were trying to squeeze a year's worth of travel into nine months. We were packing for Panama while I was booking a trip to Scotland and England and trying to organize a trip to Minnesota, all complicated of course by having to work around the medical



appointments that are required to keep us moving!

Monday April 22nd

It was cloudy, cool, and drizzly, a good day to be heading out, but it was a shame to be missing a lot of the spring flowers though. We were on a similar schedule to last year's trip to Costa Rica, flying overnight on Aeromexico to Mexico City and then taking a morning flight to Panama City.

It should have all been routine but something always changes; in this case our Jetset parking area had been converted to up-market valet parking, and we were now in the value lot, further out. The lot's number plate recognition didn't work and the machine took over a dozen scans to read our booking code. We supposedly could get to the airport by bus or train, but found that there was no bus. The train was free but we had to "buy" our free tickets from the machine. Then the gate closed on me and I found the ticket only worked once and I had to go get another. But the stairs to the train we needed were outside the gates so we had to exit and buy more free tickets. Then we got off a station early! Luckily we had plenty of time.

I'd printed our boarding passes but they were large and unwieldy so Aeromexico gave us normal card passes and we dumped the paper ones. Then Sandie found that her new one had been smudged by their printer and was unreadable, so she got stalled going through Security and eventually had to pull out her tablet and find the email and get that scanned instead. After a few repetitions of this she was relieved to finally get on the plane.

Tuesday April 23rd

Things improved. At breakfast time, in Mexico City, we had to go through Immigration into Mexico, and the official seemed a bit miffed that we planned to emigrate within hours without sampling the delights of the city, but he gave us the necessary stamps and entry visas. By early afternoon we were landing at Panama City, where, as expected, it was hot and humid, around 32C, 90F.

We didn't need any currency. Panama nominally has its own currency, the Balboa, but it is pegged to the American dollar and although it has its own coins, the banknotes are all American. The Balboa is named after Vasco Nunez de Balboa, the first European to cross the Isthmus of Panama and view the Pacific Ocean. No relationship to Rocky Balboa.

We had a scheduled pickup at 3.30pm; nice to have two hours leeway for a connection, but not when you arrive a little early! Luckily our driver was an hour early. He'd come in a large van but we were his only passengers. He had little English and although I can read some Spanish I don't speak much so it was a quiet trip.

Tocumen Airport is to the east of Panama City's impressive array of skyscrapers, and we were avoiding the city and its traffic jams and taking back roads through what looked like an industrial wasteland, with shacks and businesses mingled. I noticed an autorepair shop under a bridge with all the equipment kept outside. The roads are narrow with the road markings long gone but the locals seem to remember what they once were. I never understood their rules for roundabouts.



We joined a four-lane tollway and the scenery improved with tidy houses and some beautiful gardens. We passed the Rod Carew baseball stadium. Carew was the Minnesota Twins' first baseman and best hitter when we came to Minnesota, and now I know that he originally came from Panama.

We left the tollway and followed two-lane roads through what appeared to be dense jungle, and passed a sign for Soberania national park. Finally, in spitting rain, we climbed a steep spiral up Semaphore Hill to a gate labelled "US Military Defense Site". We had arrived at the Canopy Tower.

After the Americans left in 2000, the tower looked like the b & w picture. It has since been given new windows and a coat of paint, but it still looks like a radar tower, with a roof-top yellow bubble that used to protect the equipment from the weather.

The building's entrance was ringed by hummingbird feeders with birds buzzing around our heads. The building's ground floor looked to be part office and shop and gathering area. We were met by Lory. She said all the guests were out on trips at the moment. Our room was two floors up a spiral staircase that hugged the outside wall; the steps were a bit too small for my feet; I'd have to be careful.



Our room was wedge shaped with twin beds backed by a large window looking out on trees and jungle. We had a bathroom to the side. Most of the window was an open screen with an overhead fan for comfort.



Above our floor was a common area with bookshelves, sofas, dining tables, and kitchen, with nearly 360 degrees of windows. In a few minutes we had seen toucans, howler monkeys, and tamarins, small monkeys. The howlers were true to their name, but the sound is not threatening, even when loud, more a murmur that we became fond of and missed when we moved to the Lodge a week later.



There was a steep set of steps which led up to a hatch and the top floor, an observation deck that surrounds the yellow dome. We'd just

got up there when the spitting turned to torrential rain and a worker came rushing up to close the hatch and avoid a flood of the commons area. A couple of howlers came to the open windows to check us out. They also seem to like a good backscratch on the branches.



The guests came back, an oldish mix of English, Americans, Canadians, and a younger couple from Spain. These were obviously serious birders, reviewing the day's sightings with their guides against a bird and mammal checklist.

Prior guests include David Attenborough and Jimmy Carter.

This was officially "happy hour" when we had access to booze on the honour system, recording consumption in "the book". No one seemed to drink much. Wine was included with dinner. With only a dozen rooms there was only one meal on the menu but there was

enough that you could pig out on meat or veggies or salad and ignore the rest. Sandie wasn't very keen; too much sugar in the veggies but I was happy with Panamanian food, spicier than what we'd had in Costa Rica.

We were scheduled for a night excursion after dinner, but postponed it as we were just too tired to enjoy it. Instead we set the alarm for 4.30 am (2.30 am Vancouver time!) and collapsed into bed. The room had cooled off a little, enough anyway, and the fan helped.



Wednesday April 24th

We were up before the birds and even before the howlers, and off on our first tour before dawn. Our guide was Jorge, pronounced “Horhay”. Our transport was a flat-bed truck with a snorkel behind the cab and equipped with sideways bench seats, four to a side; I called it the birdmobile.

We were going to the Panama Rainforest Discovery Center. The

birdmobile took us down the hill and across the Chagres River to the odd little town of Gamboa, another relic of the Canal Zone. It includes the prison where the Americans held dictator Manuel Noriega after his surrender to their troops in 1990.

The Discovery Center is on the Pipeline Road, constructed in World War 2 as a backup in case the canal itself was destroyed. It was never used and is now famous as a place to see the more than 500 species of birds that inhabit the surrounding jungle.

We were there primarily to visit another tower; a platform reached by a 100 foot high spiral staircase. It was above the canopy, so we had a 360 degree view of the forest. There were over a dozen of us up there plus a couple of guys with howitzer-sized lenses. My big lens was about half the size, but it was about all I could carry.



It was hot up there in the sunshine but there was a nice breeze. Some of the birds were easy to identify like



these keel-billed toucans, but mostly we were struggling with unfamiliar species and names.

Jorge, our guide, had a laser pointer so he could direct us to birds that we couldn't see yet, and a spotting scope so we could see a close-up of the bird. He could imitate many bird and animal calls and also had a phone and speakers that could project any of the local bird calls.

We were amazed by the guides' eyesight and their ability to identify distant birds flitting through the treetops. Jorge was very patient with the two of us; we probably saw only about half of the birds he did.



There were butterflies and capuchin monkeys as well as the birds: toucans, motmots, trogons, parrots, vireos, as well as the more familiar hawks and kites and vultures and woodpeckers. There was considerable excitement at



the sighting of a blue cotinga, a rare and beautiful blue bird. All I could see was a distant blue pixel. The postman butterfly is on a lantana, I think; an invasive weed around the world but at home here in Panama.



After a couple of hours we came down to the Center's verandah where we were entertained by dozens of hummingbirds visiting the feeders. Walking the trails found a few more birds in the undergrowth and we had some warnings about the ants. There are columns of leaf-cutter ants everywhere, taking gigantic leaf fragments back to the nest. These are mostly harmless but there are also columns of army ants which can give painful stings. Then there are the bullet ants, usually solitary and about an inch long. They are called bullet ants as their sting is as painful as a bullet wound. Victims may be sick for a few weeks too.



No, I wasn't wearing sandals! We were all being careful not to lean on rails or trees without looking first. There were constant scurrying noises in the undergrowth, probably lizards we'd disturbed. There are some snakes of course, but they rarely make any noise.



We returned to the Canopy Tower for a good lunch and for a checklist session with our guide. The checklists include all the likely birds and mammals to be seen in Panama and the guide calls out which ones have been seen on the last trip. It makes it easier to match up my photos to the birds in the books. After lunch is siesta time, but I was usually updating this journal.

Igua, a member of the Kuna tribe, an indigenous people who come from islands just off Panama's Caribbean coast. He took us back to the Chagres River, this time to Gamboa's marina, another relic of the Canal Zone, now being enjoyed by Panamanians. Igua parked the truck and we walked the road into the marina. Igua told us that the water is usually low at the end of the dry season but this year it was exceptionally low, possibly a problem for the canal as its highest elevation, Lake Gatun, is at the same level as the marina.



The birds were quite different from those of the morning trip. There were oropendulas, birds that make untidy hanging nests in the

trees around the river. Most numerous were the jacanas, also called Jesus birds as they stride along lily pads and appear to walk on water; we'd

seen their relatives in Africa and tropical Australia. On the water were whistling ducks and gallinules and ibis, and a snail kite was hunting around the lagoon. Perched around the water were great-tailed grackles, relatives of the noisy birds we had in our back yard in Minnesota.

Our guide for the afternoon trip was



Black vultures were plentiful but there were no crows, a family absent from all of South America as well as Panama and Costa Rica. As well as birds we saw iguanas, a yellow-headed gecko, and this creepy unknown beetle. The butterfly looks to be a monarch; perhaps it took a wrong turn somewhere in Mexico.



We turned around at the large hotel and made our way back to the truck where we disturbed a two-toed sloth and its baby. Sloths only descend to the ground once a week to take a dump, but they promptly bury it so we didn't know if we'd interrupted her before or after. Either way she and the baby moved up



the tree in a hurry, at least by sloth standards. In the first picture the baby's feet can be seen curled around the mother's back. In the second they have separated with the baby above the mother, who's showing off her big eyes and her two claws

At our checklist session that evening the Spanish couple showed us their pictures of a crocodile at the marina. All the rest of us, including Igua, had missed it.

Thursday April 25th

Our alarm went off at 5 am, a 30



minute lie-in. These hours made sense; we were in the tropics, with twelve hours of daylight year-round. Everyone wanted to be out and looking for birds from 6.30 am to 6.30pm. This bug was on Sandie's bed in the morning. Not surprisingly it's known as a headlight beetle.

We were going to be off on a day-long trip to the San Lorenzo Forest on the Caribbean side of the country. It turned out that we were the only people signed up for the Mammals and Birds tour, so although we'd be in a group of 8 for the Bird trips, we'd be on our own for the Mammal trips, essentially a private tour. Quite a few of our fellow guests were intrigued by our itinerary, particularly those that wanted to see more than birds. Our tour had been the last on Canopy's list with details on a separate web page so they hadn't noticed it.

We were traveling inside the pickup this time. Igua took us back to the four lane tollway and turned north towards Colon. Because of the isthmus' orientation, the Panama Canal goes north-south, from Colon on the Caribbean side to Panama City on the Pacific. Igua told us that the tollway is new; the trip used to take hours rather than minutes.

Colon is named for Christopher Columbus, who visited the coast on his fourth voyage. Today it has a reputation for crime, but we only touched on the outskirts, which looked to be a mix of shacks and ugly concrete buildings. Most of the traffic appeared to be American school buses, some painted in the liveries of local bus companies. We were surprised to see a Sobeys' supermercado, presumably a Canadian enterprise.



San Lorenzo is on the other side of the canal from Colon. When the canal was built a hundred years ago there were no bridges so it cut the country in half and traffic had to either use a ferry



or drive across the locks when they were empty. A hundred years on there are two bridges at the Panama City end, carrying the Pan-American Highway, but we were about a month too early for the opening of the new bridge at the Colon end.



Instead we drove to the Gatun Locks, where we drove across the bottoms of the locks with waiting freighters towering over us. The locks are drained for a few hours in the morning to allow road traffic through, but we'd have to come back by ferry. The picture shows one of the lock gates holding back the waters of Lake Gatun.

We stopped to look out over the lake and Igua explained how the canal works. Lake Gatun was created by damming the Chagres River and the lake is the heart of the canal. Ships coming in from the Caribbean are elevated by three successive locks up to Lake Gatun's 84 feet. They then follow a dredged channel across the lake to the Pedro Miguel lock where they drop to Lake Miraflores and to the Miraflores Locks where they drop again to the Pacific Ocean. Every time a ship drops down to the ocean, millions of gallons of fresh water are lost so it is fortunate that the area is a rain forest with prodigious rainfall.

There was little traffic on the other side of the canal and we drove to a quiet dirt road leading into the jungle. There were plentiful birds; trogons, manikins, and hummingbirds, as well as orchids, air plants, and large showy bromeliads. There didn't seem to be any mammals but we didn't care; we were enjoying the trip anyway.



The two pictures show a “sensitive plant”, a kind of mimosa, before and after touching. The stems are still there but the leaves shrivel to nothing when touched; if left alone they reappear after a few minutes.



Igua told us about his career and family. He used to be an independent guide, but had signed on with the Canopy group as they pay him even in the green season when tourists are less plentiful. His family were back on the island, so he only sees them for a few days at a time. His three kids go to school on a boat rather than a school bus.



He drove us to another area on the Caribbean coast. We came to a strange abandoned town, another part of the Canal Zone. In places like Gamboa we had seen how some of the American buildings had been recycled or repurposed but here this military housing had been abandoned

back in 2000 when the Canal Zone reverted to Panama. Igua seemed embarrassed by the derelict houses, but if there were no jobs in the area we couldn't see how anyone could afford to live there.

We came to the castle at San Lorenzo at lunch time. It was extremely hot and we could feel the reasons for taking a siesta. But we were tourists and had to be out and touring!





The castle overlooks and guards the mouth of the Chagres River. Long before the canal, this was the most important waterway in the Americas. Ships could carry soldiers up the Chagres to where they could march to the Pacific coast where another ship would take them south to pillage Ecuador and Peru; Inca gold would come back though

Panama on its way to Spain.

The castle's at the top of sheer cliffs, and was successfully defended against Francis Drake's ships, but it was attacked from the land side and destroyed by pirate Henry Morgan, and subsequently rebuilt by the Spaniards. The Dutch and the French had a go at it too.



Today there are large bronze cannons, a few walls and some extensive cellars. There we found our first and only mammals of



the trip, a dozen chestnut sac-winged bats. Overhanging the cliffs was this balsa tree, raw material for model airplanes.

We had a picnic lunch there under the trees, with enough food for a party of 8, much more than we could eat. The trees were festooned with hanging oropendula nests, and underneath were plovers and iguanas. We saw one oropendula (with the yellow tail). Above, vultures were circling.





On our way out we were almost hit by a large bird. Igua was excited as it was a rare bird for the area, a crested guan. To his surprise we knew the species from our stay in the Corcovado last year. We'd surprised one back then and it had fallen from the top of a shrub into its branches, a really clumsy bird.

We were given the option of taking the train back from Colon, but the train would take us to Panama City and they'd have to send a driver to collect us from there. As we already had a night walk scheduled for after dinner it was hard to see how we'd have enough time, so we opted to return with Igua. On our way we saw cars being driven slowly and erratically. Igua thought the drivers were looking for blue crabs at the side of the road and sure enough he spotted one and caught it for us. Most end up in the pot, but this one was lucky.



The locks were now in use, so we had to return on the ferry, which operates alongside the new bridge. The canal itself was busy with freighters and the ferry has to give way to them. It felt like we were waiting at a stop sign looking for a gap in main road traffic.



We stopped on our way back up the hill to the Tower; the howlers were on the move high above us in the canopy. After dinner, our night walk turned out to be a night drive.



We had our headlights on and sat in the back of the smaller birdmobile with Igua and his hand held spotlight.



Sloths show up easily with a spotlight and we found the strap-hanging two-toed sloth just outside the gate and then another tree with both two and three toed sloths in the upper branches. Harder to see and photograph was an anteater, also in the tree tops; I'd not known that anteaters climbed trees. This one was a young tamandua.

Our driver Eduardo took us slowly down the hill. At one point he stopped and showed us the bullet ant which he'd seen drop out of the trees onto his windshield. As we'd been leaning on the cab roof a few feet behind we counted that as a lucky miss!

Down on the main road we were a hazard, with other traffic having to swerve around us, but nobody honked; the locals must be used to it. We found a cat, but a domestic cat not a jaguar. Just as well as it looked mad at being interrupted in its hunt. On our way back up the hill we caught a glimpse of an olingo, a mammal similar to an Australian possum.



Sandie had been in pain from her legs ever since the climb at the Discovery Tower, but this night they were particularly bad. They felt freezing cold so we guessed that there was some kind of circulatory problem. Wrapping me around her legs to warm them up was ineffective. She was in so much pain that we discussed leaving the next day. With the kind of trips we do and our age, we quite expect to have to be carried out of somewhere. Maybe this was the end of our travels. But, to Sandie's surprise, a simple pain killer was enough to take the edge off and allow her to sleep. Something else to be investigated when we got back.



Friday April 26th

We all met up on the viewing platform at about 6.30 am, easier than it sounds as the mornings were always warm and there was tea and coffee close at hand. The guides were there with their pointers and spotting scopes and there was usually plenty of bird activity.

The guests changed from day to day. Tim, a young American teacher, had left the previous day to go on to the Canopy Camp in the Darien area. He seemed to know the birds as well as the guides did, and he got on well with everyone. The Spanish couple had gone too. Barbara and Alex from Edmonton were with us for another couple of days. Martin, a retiree from England with a great sense of humour, was on a month-long trip to Panama.

George, from New York, had just joined us. If you read children's books then you know Curious George; this was Garrulous George, an expert on everything, whether you needed one or not. More recent arrivals were Charles and Jessie from Telluride; though Jessie never made it to the early morning sessions.



Once again we were on our own, on a morning boat trip onto Lake Gatun, and once again we had to tell the envious others about our mammal package. We had been given a detailed itinerary when we booked but although we were taking the advertised trips, the order depended on what the other groups and guides were doing and every day's schedule was a surprise to us!

On our way out we stopped partway down the hill to look at this black and white owl. From there, we went back down to the river again and boarded a boat at the marina. It was large enough for a dozen of us, but there was just the boatman, guide Igua, and the two of us. We had an awning but as always we kept our arms and legs covered despite the heat, as this trip would be an opportunity for some serious sunburn.



We putzed around the Marina for a while getting a closer look at many of the water birds we'd seen there on the Thursday evening. We also found a number of small crocodiles. These were American crocodiles, sometimes seen in brackish water around the Florida coast, and generally larger and more aggressive than the American alligator.



We headed under the road and railway bridges out into Lake Gatun. This is part of the canal so we were sharing the waterway with freighters headed in both directions. We were under canal rules and had to wear lifejackets. The canal's banks showed evidence of a hundred years of history: rusting machinery, empty buildings, and the remains of docks. We blasted through this area at speed and then slipped into the backwaters around the islands, what used to be the hilltops around the Chagres River.





As well as this enormous crocodile, we saw many water and wading birds. Amongst them was the limpkin, on the right, thought to be one of the oldest species of birds. The bird on the left is an anhinga, also called the snake bird as that's what it looks like in the water.



We saw more monkeys, capuchins and tamarins. We weren't the only tourists out there and the monkeys obviously were used to being fed. This cormorant was circling our boat looking for a handout when it strayed too close to a crocodile, barely escaping the croc's lunge.



The guys spotted a group of baby crocs at the water's edge and scooped up a couple for us to look at. So I got to hold a crocodile, the biggest one I



ever want to get close to. Igua was making baby croc noises to sooth the ones we'd caught when mama croc showed up next to the boat. I let mine go! On the other side of the boat.

As well as the crocodiles, we also found these basilisk lizards and a large green iguana.



For the afternoon the two of us were going to the Gamboa Wildlife Center, close to the hotel we'd walked to on the Wednesday. We drove through a strange subdivision that used to be for US civilians working on the canal. Now it's owned by the hotel; the houses are large and well maintained but they look to be mainly empty with the windows wide open.

Igua left us in the hands of the Center's staff and promised someone would pick us up later. Rain was coming and going but it was warm rain. We were on a tour with about ten others, a mix of English and Spanish speakers.

There was a sloth in a tree outside the Center but I couldn't see it. There were plenty inside within the rescue centre, either injured or orphans. The injured can usually be returned to the wild, but orphans can't survive their stressful life in the wild without a mother's training and may have to be in captivity for the rest of their lives, maybe 30 years.



Amongst the islands we felt like we were out in the wilderness, but this feeling disappeared when a gigantic container ship



appeared, following the dredged channel through the lake and looming over us and the islands.



There are three kinds of sloth in Panama, two-toed and three-toed, and a very rare pygmy version of the latter. They all have three toes on their back feet. The obvious differences are in their front feet, but there are many other differences including facial and skeletal. (See the comparison picture.) The two species are only distantly related, a case of convergent evolution. In both cases, they can hang by their claws for hours without any muscular effort.



The Center only had two-toes on show as the three-toes can't take the stress of human visitors. This two-toe was definitely unstressed, lying on its back and munching hibiscus flowers.



This stick insect launched itself up my camera strap onto my arm. I donated it to a little boy sitting on his Dad's shoulders and



he set it loose on his Dad's head. They are creepy but harmless.

We moved on to the butterfly garden and got closer views of the butterflies we'd been seeing all week. The stars were the giant blue morphos, but they weren't any easier to photograph in the garden. The instant they stopped flying their wings would snap together showing only their brown undersides.



The final stop for us was the orchid garden. We were told that Panama has over 14000 species of orchids so the garden's hundreds of varieties were just a sample. Sandie enjoyed this.

The bird perched on the orchid is a yellow-throated euphonia.

Tatiana, the Tower's manager, arrived to collect us. We were just about worn out so we said we were ready to go, but we had forgotten about the frog garden. We missed the frogs.





Back at the tower, a three-toed sloth was fully exposed in a cecropia tree that had not yet leafed out, an odd choice as there were nearby evergreens to hide in. However we appreciated the entertainment while we drank our Balboa beer.

Saturday April 27th
Next morning the sloth was still in the tree; it hadn't rushed off anywhere.

We were back with the birders, this time with George and Martin and Charles. The sign said Camino de Oleoducto, the more romantic Spanish name for Pipeline Road. We were walking the gravel road with Igua and stopping for any interesting birds. Every so often Igua would leave us and walk back and collect the birdmobile so that we didn't have to backtrack.

There was no shortage of birds. One of the oddest was this Great Potoo, a nocturnal bird that impersonates a broken tree branch during the day. The half-open eyelid is the only giveaway. This one had a chick, also motionless and making like a twig.



We saw kingbirds, trogons, puff birds and this splendid crimson-crested woodpecker.



This blue-crowned motmot was just emerging from its underground burrow when I clicked the shutter. The birds fly in and out at full speed, presumably so that predators can't track the burrow's location.

This ani is distinctive with its aristocratic bill.



As well as birds we saw a crocodile from a safe distance and found this lonely howler monkey draped over a branch. We saw a pack of coatimundis (also called coatis), relatives of raccoons, moving through the forest. They looked to have a lighter coat than those we'd seen in Costa Rica.



We lost George for a while as he'd wandered off looking for that tower we'd climbed on our first morning. Sadly nobody was in a hurry to find George.



Back in our bedroom we watched this large green iguana cautiously make its way onto a branch and then crash down from twig to twig when something spooked it.

At lunch, Ed and Margaret from San Francisco joined us. We were going out on the birdmobile again that afternoon with the morning group plus Jessie and the newcomers. They opted to sit inside the cab, a smart move as a rainstorm hit us as we made our way down the hill. By the time

we turned onto the road for the marina, those of us on the bench seats were soaked. We'd all saved our cameras and binoculars of course.

This time we were walking the trails around the outside of the Wildlife Center, where we'd been the previous afternoon.





We saw kiskadees, herons, motmots, and others we weren't able to identify.

Igua showed us a leaf-cutter ants' nest, terminus for the incoming lines of ants carrying those gigantic leaf fragments. The ants climb up a shrub until they are overhanging the nest and then drop their loads, which form a pyramid of plant matter. This feeds a fungus which the ants use to feed their young, so the ants are a kind of farmer.

These "growths" on the sides of tree trunks are nests for termites and other kinds of ants.



Even if there are no ants, the trees themselves may be hazardous, like this black palm, sporting spines that break off in your flesh.

We met Chris from North Carolina on this trip. She had arrived exhausted that morning and had missed the birdmobile and the rainstorm. One of the other guides brought her down to the trails.

That evening we had a barbecue outside on a deck, about 15 guests in all. Nobody seemed to be fighting off any bugs. I had been stung on the face a couple of



times that week, by flying ants I think, but neither of us ever saw a mosquito.

Sunday April 28th

The day began at 6.30 am up on the platform. The kitchen staff had put out some bananas and the tamarins came by for their breakfast. This

toucan was the flashiest bird to come visit us up on the platform.



I think this was the morning that my right eye went bad. My eyes had improved a little although they felt dry and scratchy as usual, but now my right eye's white had gone blood red. It looked awful to others but I felt no difference so I resolved to leave it alone to heal.



This was our shortest trip of the tour, just a walk with Igua down Semaphore Hill with Ed and Margaret and Chris. For once the birds seemed to be in limited supply but we had our first good view of an agouti, a large rodent, which tiptoed down to the edge of the road and then raced across it into the undergrowth.

There were also flowers and strange fruits to keep us interested. The guides know less about the shrubs and trees, not surprising as there are thousands of native tree species plus plenty that have been imported from Africa and South America. Jacarandas are popular here as garden trees just like they are in Australia, but they come from Argentina.



A couple of hours' walking downhill and looking up at the treetops had done a fair amount of damage to my back. Chris looked to be in worse shape than me; high in enthusiasm but low on stamina. We were both happy to see the truck which came down to collect us.

That afternoon we were off on our own again. Alberto was taking us to the Miraflores Locks, back towards Panama City. It was slow going as it was a Sunday and the police had set up a sobriety check. We passed inspection and moved on to the locks' museum. Alberto paid for our admission and showed us where to find him when we were done.

The first floor showed the two attempts to build the canal. The French tried first, attempting to dig a simple trench at sea level from the Caribbean to the Pacific, a similar design to that of the Suez Canal. They ran into two show-stoppers. The first was disease; thousands of workers died from malaria and yellow fever. The second was the instability of the soil; when the jungle was stripped away the hills would subside into the canal. A much smaller "angle of repose" meant that four times as much soil had to be removed, making the project infeasible.



Igua took us down through the forest to a tree with a cavity and there, spending its days in the cavity, was a night monkey. Its face is partly hidden by a leaf but the picture's the best I could do perched precariously on the hillside.



Twenty years on, the Americans managed to minimize the disease problem, and persuaded the province of Panama to declare independence from Columbia. With three dams to raise the water levels and three levels of locks, they had a more complex design, but it required much less digging. In return for building the canal the Americans got the Canal Zone, a ten mile strip along the waterway. They realized that maintaining the jungle cover was important for the stabilization of the soil. Now, a hundred years later, much of Panama's jungle has been cleared for farming, but the Canal Zone has been untouched and is now protected by national forests and parks. Which is why we were there.



Admission included a movie and we were expecting the story of the canal's construction and operation, but we watched an extended scene of the peoples of Panama being terrified of Spaniards on horses followed by mostly text pages summarizing Panama's recent history. The audience was mystified.

The next floor showed pictures of Panama's nature, interesting, particularly the giant bedbugs, but not relevant to the story of the canal. On the floor above was a good display of the canal's

controls and the job the pilots do in taking a ship through from ocean to ocean.

Finally, the top floor showed the recent expansion of the canal, additional locks able to take ships 40% longer and 60% wider. The new locks have side basins that reduce the amount of fresh water lost when ship transits the canal.

Up on the observation deck we watched a bulk carrier being towed through a lock by "mules", electric locomotives. There was a constant and loud commentary in English, describing the ship's transit through the lock as if it were an exciting athletic event.

There was another suspension bridge close to the locks, and visible from the top of our Tower. Likewise, as we drove back towards the Tower we could see it poking out from the top of Semaphore Hill. Up on the hill, a troop of howlers were making their way above us in the canopy.



When we got back Igua asked us what we thought of the movie. "Garbage!" I said and he laughed and said he agreed. The previous movie had been a factual history and he said he didn't know why it had been replaced but said he'd pass our opinion on.

We had new guests, Amanda from a Toronto travel company, reviewing the Tower, a plum assignment for a birder, and Jim and Stephanie from Arizona.





Sandie and I were going out on a night tour, but it began before we even left the Tower, as Sandie met this woolly possum on the staircase. It scooted past her up the stairs to the dining area pursued by her and Igua, and then it disappeared somewhere in the kitchen.

Driving down the hill we found the usual sloths and then a pair

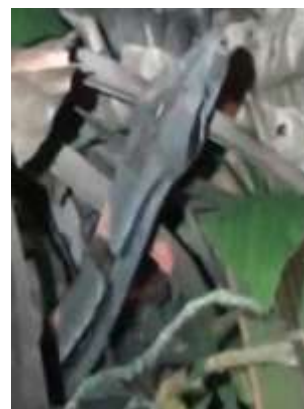


of pacas, another kind of large rodent.



Then we saw a large snake partway across the road. Something chose this moment to sting me on the end of my nose and suddenly my eyes were streaming and I couldn't see. Sandie didn't get a picture either as I was in her way but heroic Igua took her video camera and followed the snake into the undergrowth, getting pictures of various bits of its head and body. He asked if he

should bring the snake back but she said no! It was bigger than him, a boa constrictor, capable of a nasty bite.



Shortly afterwards we found a nine-banded armadillo, similar to those we'd seen in Texas. Even in daylight they are hard to see with their bodies buried in the leaf litter, chasing ants, so I was surprised to find Sandie had caught this frame on the video. The head and ears are on the right.

*Monday
April
29th*

There was a large flower

on the cecropia tree. Perhaps that was why the sloth had been there. The flower was gone by lunchtime.



Birds on the tower included colourful honeycreepers and tanagers.



Igua took the two of us to the Metro national park in Panama City. It was slow going with the traffic, made worse by a fallen tree across the road. The park was green and inviting but littered with concrete buildings half-buried in jungle. We were warned not to stray far off the

paths as this used to be a US Army training ground and there was some doubt about the clean-up.



We found lots of small birds, mainly wrens and doves, nothing very exciting. We saw more



agouti, obviously very comfortable with people around. Look at those cute ears! And some basilisk lizards, also called Jesus lizards, because they



can run across the water for short distances. Igua tried to persuade one to do this but it ran around the pond instead.



It was even more hot and humid down in the city, with no breeze. We were laboring a bit on the steep hills. We went to the main office to pay for entry, a nostalgic event for Igua as he used the work there years ago. He also met up with a fellow Kuna so they were chatting away in their native language. His family speaks Kuna but he said that Spanish is required for most jobs. We walked around the garden centre, a good spot for birds and butterflies, but in retrospect I think this was the only trip that I didn't really enjoy and it was because of the constant roar of traffic blotting out the sounds of the birds and the jungle.

Back at the Tower we said goodbye to Igua who had a couple of days off and was going home to see his family. He told us that Alberto had injured his arm and was off work so we wouldn't be going on our last night tour. We thought we'd lost out but they transferred our tour from the Tower to the Lodge and we did it later.

Our last afternoon we should have been going to look for sloths and raccoons at Punta Colebra on the Pacific coast, but instead we were rejoining Jorge and the birders for a trip to Summit gardens. Summit was close by, once a part of Soberania, but now a city park with lawns and some zoo pens. We would likely have been fried by the sun down on the coast, so we were quite happy with the switch to our schedule.

While we were waiting for Jorge the tamarins kept us amused. They were making their way



around the Tower high above us, leaping from tree to tree. The baby couldn't make the same jumps but could leap to smaller branches, albeit with a lot of dramatic swaying. They were ganging up on a large hawk that had perched in one of the trees and presumably was a threat to the baby.



Summit park was large and a destination for bus tours from Panama City: families, schoolkids, and tourists like us. It was more tended and civilized than the jungles we'd become used to but we noted that the ornamental ponds had crocodiles. Unlike the jungle, the park gave us a clear view of some magnificent trees, like these buttressed examples.

It was easier to see birds too because the specimen trees were surrounded by lawns. We saw agoutis there, including this mother nursing two babies. The zoo pens held a tapir and a jaguar. Sandie had thought she'd seen a tapir last year on our boat trip out of the Corcovado and confirmed that this was what she'd seen, a surprise as we hadn't realized there were any outside of Malaya.



The jaguar looked bored but it was large and powerful; they are generally bigger and heavier than the cougars that inhabit our forests.





The birders were disappointed to find that the harpy eagle's cage appeared to be empty. We had to make do with this life-sized picture. The harpy is the rainforest's largest eagle and it feeds on sloths and monkeys that it picks out of the canopy. Some of the party were going on to Canopy's Camp Darien specifically to see the harpy in the wild.

Back at the Tower, the possum was reportedly still around somewhere. David and Hetti (I think) joined us for dinner. He had been a member of the Canopy team, lately manager of the Darien camp, and he was moving back to Maryland with his Columbian fiancée. Like Ed, he had been a member of the US Peace Corp in Panama and had liked the place so much he had stayed on.

Sandie was packing for our move to the Lodge, trying to keep our disgusting soggy dirty clothes away from our few remaining clean ones. She'd done one wash while we were there and some clothes took two days to sort of dry.



Tuesday April 30th

We were up early for our last morning on the platform, graced by this distinctive collared aracari and black-cheeked woodpecker.



The birders were going down to the bottom of the hill to walk along the park's Plantation Road. We said our goodbyes, checked out, and paid for the few beers we'd drunk, cheaper than we'd have paid in a Canadian liquor store. Interestingly, Panama's gasoline costs about 80 cents a litre or \$3 a gallon, even though Panama has no oil of its own.

We were the only passengers going to the Lodge that day. Our driver took us close to the locks, then over the canal's suspension bridge to join the Pan-American Highway. This is the road that connects the Arctic with Patagonia, with just a single break, the Darien Gap along the Panama-Columbia border.

The four-lane highway is quite close to the coast, but never close enough for us to see the Pacific Ocean. Mostly it is a commercial sprawl of businesses, factories, malls, and hotels. After a couple of hours we turned north into the mountains onto a pleasant two-lane road bordered by small farms, cabins, villages, and beautiful gardens. Everyone seems to have a bougainvillea.

The Canopy Lodge is in the Valle de Anton, an ancient volcanic caldera ringed by strangely shaped green hills, relics of the original volcano. The Lodge is quite different from the Tower; much more luxurious, and set in its own land, about 75 acres, with a rocky stream and extensive gardens and ponds. Our room was 3 or 4 times the size of our Tower room, with two king-sized beds and a large balcony looking out on the jungle.



The common and dining areas were outside, under a shelter, with views of the stream and an extensive bird-feeding platform. Guests could eat and drink and birdwatch at the same time. The manager Ayden filled us in on the essentials.



Amongst the guests we recognized Martin and Garrulous George, who'd moved there from the Tower a day or so earlier.



George had one of the other guests pinned down but we knew better than to butt in. There were Sue and Graham, originally English but now retired from Boeing and living in Arizona. Wally and Sandra came from San Antonio, one of the nicest parts of Texas, and Alan and Rosemary were there from Poole, in Dorset. Much younger than the rest of us was Rachel from Sydney, Australia.

The bird feeder was refreshed with fruit, usually bananas, every hour or so and there was a constant stream of birds: tanagers, woodpeckers, euphonias, and clay-coloured thrushes, Costa Rica's national bird, chosen for its song not its colours.



After lunch, our guide Moyo took the two of us for a slow walk up the hill towards the neighbouring Canopy Adventure, looking for birds, plants, insects and mammals. The Adventure site features a rocky swimming pool, trails, a waterfall, and a zip line, and it seemed to be busy with locals enjoying themselves. We met agoutis foraging at the compost heap, and many basilisks in the riverbeds, these looking even more like junior dragons.





We had these close-ups of a rufous motmot and a red-tailed squirrel, but most of our discoveries were flowers and fruits.



After dinner, we put our shoes back on and went out for a night walk with Moyo through the gardens and around the ponds. We were looking for mammals but only found one, another possum. But there were plenty of toads, big ugly and familiar toads. These were cane toads, the ones that are infesting Australia, in their native environment; this is where they came from. In Panama the crocodiles and other predators have learned to avoid them and their poisonous bodies.



There were a few frogs and large spiders but the biggest surprise was a scorpion, munching away on a centipede. This wasn't down on the ground but rather on a branch at eye level.





May Day, Wednesday May 1st

This was our last full day with Canopy. It began with a fine drizzle, and then a wet fog, but still quite warm. We'd been advised to bring warm clothes for the mountains but we didn't need them.

Alexis, one of the guides we'd met at the Tower, was taking Alan and us up into hills to our north. Rosemary was resting. We could hear plenty of birds, thousands of chickens in the surrounding farms. At first we couldn't see either hills or birds but the clouds slowly burned off.

We walked up a few dirt roads like this one and we ended the



morning walking up the Cerro Gaital trail, in a national monument.

We had a good view of a sloth in lower branches, and then some distant acrobatics as it changed position, but we saw more flowers than birds. Sandie was happy anyway.

The picture shows how efficiently the birds can strip a bunch of wild bananas to a pile of skins.



We'd hoped to be able to send some postcards but neither the Lodge nor the Tower had them. Ayden volunteered to lend us a car and driver to go to a store and a post office but we said it wasn't that important.



At lunchtime, instead of taking a siesta we walked around the Lodge's gardens for the last time, collecting pictures of flowers and honeycreepers.



After lunch, Danilo Jr, the youngest of our guides, drove us, Wally and Sandra, Rachel, and Martin up to the Cara Iguana area, to some private land, home to spectacled owls. George had left us, planning to travel in local buses along the Caribbean coast and into Costa Rica in search of the rare and beautiful resplendent quetzal.



That's not an official border crossing so there was some speculation as to who would get him first, the police or the banditos. I pointed out that they'd probably let him go after he'd given them advice for a couple of hours.

Actually he'd mostly avoided us after he'd tried to explain to Sandie that the relationship between north, east, south, and west depended on whether we were north or south of the Equator. For once his brain caught up with his mouth and he was appropriately embarrassed.

Our owl expedition was successful; we hiked down a steep slope into a copse of trees and there high above us was the spectacled owl on display. The property was accessed with permission of the current caretaker but there was some concern that it was to be sold and possibly redeveloped.

We made a number of stops on the surrounding roads without much success and Danilo took us back to Canopy Adventure where we were advised to pick up Gandalf-style hiking staffs. This shot of the mountainous terrain explains why.



As on the previous day the workers were busy cutting up the soursop fruits that grow around the property. They look weird but apparently they taste really good, somewhere between apple and strawberry flavours.





It was steep terrain, but the trail down had steps and railings. We crossed the river on this rope bridge, and passed by a rocky pool area, busy on the May Day holiday and then Danilo unlocked a gate and we entered the trail system beyond the resort. The trail up the mountain began with railings but soon became narrow and steep and muddy with trees on one side and a long drop on the other. We were stopping to listen and look for birds, but found nothing. The trail was getting steeper and rougher and there was some muttering amongst the troops. Sandie and I are used to



birders were.

Eventually Danilo gave us the option of turning around. Martin and I continued climbing with him and the rest opted to go back down. We didn't find the bird Danilo expected to see up there but we did meet a



giant bridled anole, a kind of lizard, interesting to me but not to the birders. By this time we were sweaty wrecks so we turned around too and were lucky to catch up with the others before they took a wrong turn up towards a waterfall.



Danilo managed to coax some of the group up another trail by describing it as nearly flat with railings, which it wasn't, but he was forgiven as he found us a mottled owl and this morpho butterfly which was slow enough for a rare picture, albeit just one wing.





At dinner, with a few glasses of wine, I was almost asleep, but we had one more night trip scheduled, the one that was transferred from the Tower. This time we walked up the road with Moyo in fine drizzle and found another mottled owl (or maybe the same one). We crossed into the Canopy Adventure and hiked some of those trails and bridges in the dark. What could possibly go wrong? Fortunately we had brought our hiking poles, more stable than a Gandalf



staff, and one of these saved my face when I tripped on some stone steps.

We found more toads, a bark scorpion, another sloth, assorted roaches and spiders and stick insects, and even a Brazilian bunny. Contrary to expectations, such bunnies do have fur.

Thursday May 2nd

Our ride to the airport wasn't until 9.30 am, so we had a much needed lie-in. I'm not sure my back would have taken another day like the last one. We'd said our goodbyes the previous evening as the birders were off on an early trip. We breakfasted alone, watching the birds and not moving very much except to click the cameras at the birds' banana bar.





This shrimp plant had burst into flower since we arrived, and this Muscovy



duck was feeding in the river. He may have been wild or a refugee from one of the nearby farms.

Driver Eduardo took us down to the Pan American Highway and then east back to Panama City. We took the arched Bridge of the Americas, the first permanent bridge over the canal. This gave us a view of the city's skyscrapers, impressive and totally different from the rest of the



Panama we'd seen. We'd heard some stories though about the faster and cheaper construction methods used and some towers that now had a worrying lean.

We took the Cinta Costera, a marine viaduct that bypassed the old city and took us out into the bay.

We approached Tocumen airport from its good side, avoiding the industrial zone we'd crossed on our arrival.

Sandie was miffed to have her kids' scissors with rounded ends confiscated as a deadly weapon. I was ordered to take my plastic watch off – that was a first for me. We'd have to take our luggage through customs inspection in Mexico City – another first as we hadn't had to do that when flying in from Canada or Costa Rica.

Even so we breezed through Immigration and Customs; always the way when you have six hours to kill! With some difficulty we found a sit-down restaurant tucked away behind a bar. My fajitas de pollo were easily ordered but Sandie's sides of egg and fries needed extensive consultation. The Coronas went down very well.

The airport is active all night and our flight took off at around 1 am. After six hours we were in Vancouver by 5 am local time, decidedly chilly compared to Panama's weather, but at least it was dry. Our value parking company kept up its record of incompetence, rejecting the plastic token it had delivered to us ten days earlier, so we had to call for help to get out. We did the week's shopping on the way home, and then I mowed the lawns and Sandie set about doing the washing before our soggy clothes rotted. Of course, once we sat down the day was over.

It had been a busy and sometimes grueling ten days, but a great experience with some interesting people, both guests and guides.

Love to you all from Pete and Sandie