

Darién Province



Mention that you're going to the Darién to anyone and you'll no doubt be greeted with everything from fear and panic to horror and disbelief. Bad press and grave misconceptions about safety in the region would have you believe that the Darién is a no-go zone of Colombian guerrillas and narcotraffickers, but while the dangers of the province shouldn't be underestimated, they should at least be contextualized. There are certainly regions that shouldn't be visited unless you're looking to get kidnapped. However, these are few and far between and easily avoided by anyone with the slightest regard for personal welfare.

Home to a 576,000-hectare national park, southern Darién is where the primeval meets the present and the scenery appears much as it did a million years ago. Even today, the local Emberá and Wounaan people maintain many of their traditional practices and retain generations-old knowledge of the rainforest. Parque Nacional Darién is also one of world's richest biomes and is home to the legendary bird-watching destination of Cana. But while the south is home to Panama's most spectacular rainforests, the north is home to its worst scenes of habitat destruction. Although most news items focus on the spilling over of Colombia's civil war into Panama's borders, the real battle lines surround the province's rapidly disappearing forests.

With the right planning, the Darién offers spectacular opportunities for rugged exploration and is best approached by travelers with youthful hearts, intrepid spirits and a yearning for something truly wild.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Spotting macaws by the dozens in the historic gold-mining town of **Cana** (p286)
- Flying in on a chartered puddle jumper to **Reserva Natural Punta Patiño** (p281), a lush jungle reserve on the edge of Golfo de San Miguel
- Interacting with the Emberá in **Mogué** (p282), a traditional village on the banks of the Río Sambú
- Hiking along the spectacular jungle trails surrounding **Rancho Frío** (p285), a ranger station on the edge of the national park
- Going for a world record at the **Tropic Star Lodge** (p289), a remote fishing lodge that's been the site of some of the world's largest catches



■ POPULATION: 397,000

■ AREA: 8653 SQ KM

■ ELEVATION: SEA LEVEL TO 3478M

LOCAL LORE: NEW EDINBURGH

On November 2, 1698, five Scottish ships known as *Saint Andrew*, *Caledonia*, *Unicorn*, *Dolphin* and *Endeavour* made landfall on the Caribbean coast of the Darién. The settlers christened the colony New Edinburgh and set out to make a life on the edge of an unchartered jungle. However, despite early successes in cutting a canal, constructing fortifications, erecting huts and clearing farmland, the settlement was abandoned by the following July and no more than one ship carrying less than 300 survivors made it back to Scotland.

Although it's unclear exactly what happened during those ill-fated months, the Scots had all of the odds stacked against them. Stifling heat and humidity caused fever to spread throughout the colony, while malaria and yellow fever helped to bump up the mortality rate. It's also believed that they failed to establish a successful trading colony because of their poor choice of goods, namely wigs, shoes, bibles, woolen clothing and clay pipes. It didn't help that the Spanish conquistadores were determined to annihilate the colony, though it wasn't too hard to kill starving and ill men.

Today little remains of New Edinburgh, but the abysmal failure of the Scottish colony is legendary. Of course, had New Edinburgh thrived, then perhaps the Darién would have looked dramatically different today.

area of Colombia (where the greatest concentration of them lives today) around 1910. Other historians say the tribes arrived much earlier. Of course, the tribes themselves aren't sure as they do not possess a written history.

Before the introduction of the gun, the Emberá and Wounaan were expert users of the *boroquera* (blowgun) and they envenomed their darts with lethal toxins from poisonous frogs and bullet ants. Many scholars believe that it was these people who forced the Kuna out of the Darién and into the Caribbean coastal area they now inhabit.

The Emberá and Wounaan are famous throughout Panama for their incredibly fine dugout canoes. Known as *piraguas*, these boats have very shallow bottoms, so they can be used during the dry season when the rivers run low. Throughout its history, the Panama Canal Authority has employed Emberá and Wounaan craftsmen to make the *piraguas* which are used by officials to reach the higher parts of the canal's watershed.

Until it left Panama in the late 1990s, the US Air Force turned to the Emberá and Wounaan for help, but for an entirely different reason: jungle survival. Because both groups have the ability to survive and thrive in tropical wilderness, quite a few of them were added to the corps of instructors that trained US astronauts and air force pilots at Fuerte Sherman, near Colón.

Today, the majority of the 8000 Emberá and Wounaan in Panama live deep in the rainforests of the Darién, particularly along

the Sambú, Jaqué, Chico, Tuquesa, Membrillo, Tuira, Yapé and Tucutí rivers.

Culture

The Emberá and Wounaan continue to survive on subsistence agriculture that is supplemented by limited fishing and poultry raising. Historically, both population groups were more reliant on slash-and-burn agriculture and hunting, but both practices are now restricted within the confines of the national park. However, the increasing number of commercial rice and maize plantations in the Darién have enabled the Emberá and Wounaan to work as seasonal migrant laborers.

The Emberá and Wounaan are also exceptional woodcarvers and basket weavers. Traditionally the men carved boas, frogs and birds from the dark *cocobolo* hardwood, though recently they have taken to carving tiny animal figurines out of the rock-hard *tagua* nut. The women produce some of the finest baskets in Latin America, which are woven from palm fibers, and require several months of intensive labor to complete. Both carvings and baskets fetch a high market price, and provide a much needed secondary income for most communities.

Emberá and Wounaan homes are extremely well suited to the rainforest environment. Built on stilts that are 3m to 4m off the ground, the floors consist primarily of surprisingly thin, but amazingly strong, strips of palm bark. This vaulted design protects occupants and food from ground pests and swollen rivers,

and the palm bark is plentiful in the forest and easy to fashion. A log with stairs carved into it provides easy access to the home.

To permit breezes to enter, more than half of the typical Emberá and Wounaan home is open sided. The roofs are made of thatch, which keeps the rain out and acts as good insulation against the tropical sun. The kitchen typically occupies one corner and has an oven made of mud. Beneath the home, medicinal plants and edible vegetables and roots are grown. Pigs and poultry are often raised in pens.

Over the past few decades, the Emberá and Wounaan have gradually replaced their traditional attire with Western wear. Except for a few older individuals, the men have set aside their loincloths for short pants and now prefer short-sleeved shirts to going around bare chested. The women, who traditionally wore only a skirt, increasingly don bras and some have taken to wearing shirts as well. However, many women still wear traditional jewelry, especially wide silver bracelets and elaborate necklaces made of silver coins. Many Emberá and Wounaan also continue to stain their bodies purplish black with juice from the *jagua* fruit. The dye from this fruit is believed to have health-giving properties and it has the added bonus of warding off insects.

Like the Kuna, the Emberá and Wounaan have a strong measure of political autonomy, though their culture is at danger due to increasing external pressures. In the Darién, the biggest threat is encroachment by Latino settlers and habitat destruction by loggers, which has accelerated in recent years due to the paving of the Interamericana. Missionaries, particularly evangelical Christians, are fiercely active throughout the province and have almost entirely eliminated the core religious values of both groups. The younger generation is also being lured to the cities by increased employment prospects, which has prompted fears that both populations are dwindling fast.

Ultimately, the survival of the Emberá and the Wounaan is dependent on whether or not the Interamericana is brought into Colombia. If the road is finished, then all of the external pressures currently facing the Emberá and the Wounaan will exponentially increase and it's unlikely that such small populations will be able to survive assimilation. Fortunately, there are still a number of hurdles in completing

the road, namely a civil war in Colombia, which means that it's likely that both populations will continue to survive for at least another generation.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The Interamericana does not go all the way through Panama. It terminates in the middle of the jungle near a town called Yaviza in the vast wilderness region of the Darién, before starting again 150km further on in Colombia. This transportation break between Central and South America is known as the Darién Gap – it's literally the end of the road.

Despite occasional announcements by international authorities eager to improve transportation and trade between the continents, it is unlikely that the Interamericana will be pushed through the Darién Gap any time soon as Panamanians are concerned that a road could help Colombia's civil war spill over into Panama. A road could also increase illegal immigration and drug traffic and may help spread foot-and-mouth disease in cattle, which is presently limited to South America. A paved road would also make logging easier, perhaps leading to deforestation of the largest forested area in the country.

Any printed information on the Darién can become rapidly outdated. Travelers should always seek up-to-date information on local dangers. The best source of this information is a guide who leads frequent trips to the area.

Local Autoridad Nacional del Ambiente (ANAM; National Environment Authority) offices in towns such as El Real or La Palma can provide some information on the park and help you find guides. Travelers should also check in with the police in these towns before heading out into the jungle.

Panama City's Instituto Geográfico Nacional (p74) usually sells topographical maps for some regions of the Darién.

Keep your baggage to a minimum on any trek through the jungle. You will need insect repellent, sun block, a hat and rain gear. Food can only be found in the few towns and it is not available at the ranger stations. Bring drinking water or a means of purifying water.

Remember to plan your trip to coincide with the dry season (mid-December through mid-April); otherwise, you'll be slogging your way through thick mud and swatting at moth-size mosquitos.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The greatest hazard in the Darién is the difficult environment. Trails, when they exist at all, are often poorly defined and are never marked. Also, the many large rivers that form the backbone of the Darién transportation network create their own hazards. Any help at all, much less medical help, is very far away – if you get lost out here, you are done for. To minimize these risks, it's recommended that you explore the Darién either as part of an organized tour or with the help of a local guide. Hiring a knowledgeable guide will also provide up-to-date information on the no-go areas and it provides safety through numbers.

Dengue and malaria are serious risks in the province. Take a prophylaxis or chloroquine – and cover up as much as possible, especially at dawn and dusk. Areas of the Parque Nacional Darién are also prime territory for the deadly *fer-de-lance* snake. The chance of getting a snakebite is remote, but you should be careful – always wear boots while walking in the forest. Although they don't carry Lyme disease, ticks are everywhere in the Darién. In reality, they're nothing more than a nuisance, but you'd be wise to bring a good pair of tweezers and a few books of matches.

The US State Department has strongly advised against crossing an imaginary line drawn from Puerto Obaldía in the north to Bahía Piña in the south, with Yaviza in the center. Unfortunately, this ill-conceived advisory includes the entirety of Parque Nacional Darién, which is a shame as the destinations listed in this chapter are completely safe to visit.

Particularly treacherous, however, are the areas between Boca de Cupe and Colombia, the traditional path through the Darién Gap – there is minimal police presence in this area, and it is unlikely that you will be given assistance if (when) trouble arises. Although the forest trails from Boca de Cupe to Cana are generally safe, it's recommended that you avoid the towns of Balsal, El Naranjal, Púcuero, Limón, Paya and Palo de las Letras. The areas north and east of this are also considered dangerous, including the mountains Altos de Limón, the Río Tuquesa and the trail from Puerto Obaldía.

Although the no-go zones in the Darién are well removed from the traditional tourist destinations, the dangers in these spots cannot be underestimated. Narcotraffickers utilize these jungle routes and they don't

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL IN THE DARIÉN

If you're thinking about whether or not to visit the Emberá and Wounaan communities in the Darién, please consider the impact that you might have. On one hand, revenue from tourism can play a vital role in the development of the region, particularly if you are buying locally produced crafts or paying for the services of a local guide. However, a living community is not a human zoo and indigenous tourism can be an exploitative force. If you do decide to visit, please remember that Western interests have already caused an irreversible amount of damage to the region – be aware of your surroundings and be sensitive to the plight of the Emberá and the Wounaan.

Unlike Kuna Yala, the Darién sees few foreign visitors, and it's unlikely that the cruise-ship circuit will swing this far south anytime soon. As a result, the Emberá and Wounaan tend to view tourists with equal parts respect and awe, and at times you will be amazed at the hospitality of your hosts. Although they are tough people that have made lives for themselves in an unforgiving habitat, the Emberá and Wounaan have smiles that could melt gold.

Of course, you should still make an effort to respect the sensibilities of your hosts. Although some men and women still walk around topless in the village, these are still fairly conservative societies and it's recommended that you cover up as a sign of respect. In regards to photography, the Emberá and Wounaan are less shy (and capitalistic) about photos than the Kuna. Although most villagers will be happy to pose for a photo, you should always ask before flashing your camera at a subject. Generally speaking, you will not be asked to pay for a photo, but it's best to ask your guide what is expected from you.

Tourism has a long way to develop in the region, which is one reason why a visit to an Emberá or Wounaan village is so refreshing. However, let's all work together to keep it that way. As an informed and conscientious traveler, please do your best to keep informed about proper conduct in the Darién.

STRIKING A DELICATE BALANCE

As little as 50 years ago, over 70% of Panama's total land mass was covered by forest. This sobering statistic gives a quick indication of the country's gravest environmental problem, namely deforestation. Today, trees continue to be felled at a frightening pace, with the Darién serving as the ecological ground zero.

While travelling in the Darién, you will undoubtedly see huge trucks transporting felled trees to saw mills in either Chepo or 24 de Diciembre, a village near Tocumen Airport. However, an even greater number of trees are moved to the mills by barge. Others are sprayed with a chemical that prevents rot, floated down the rivers and picked up at various mills along the way. This chemical wrecks havoc on the local environment, particularly on the health of agricultural plots and fish stocks.

Unfortunately, most Panamanians seem unconcerned with the rainforest's ongoing destruction. For much of the population, hunting and logging have been a way of life for generations and many communities maintain the belief that their economic welfare is dependent on these practices. Furthermore, Panama's national parks are staffed by only a handful of rangers, though their areas of coverage are colossal. For instance, in the Parque Nacional Darién, there are never more than 20 rangers assigned to protect 576,000 hectares, an area more expansive than some entire countries.

The destruction of the rainforest not only wipes out the animals that inhabit it, but also migratory animals that move with their seasonal food supplies. It also threatens the traditional cultures of the Emberá and the Wounaan, who still rely on the bounty of the rainforest for their survival. Finally, deforestation results in regional water shortages during the dry season, as well as a whole list of other environmental problems ranging from pollution to erosion.

Regardless, Panamanian politicians agreed in 2000 to pave the Interamericana as far as Yaviza, which will permit logging trucks to work the Darién year round and accelerate the region's destruction. In Panama, the loggers have a lot of influence.

For more information on the environmental situation in Panama, visit the home page of ANCON at www.ancon.org (in Spanish).

appreciate bumping into travelers trekking through the woods. Parts of the Darién Gap have also become areas of activity for guerrillas from neighboring Colombia, although they usually come to rest and hide, not to attack. However, Colombian paramilitary forces often cross the border to hunt the guerrillas and the last place you want to be is caught in the crossfire. Missionaries and travelers alike have been kidnapped and killed in the southern area of the Darién.

Despite these warnings, there are parts of the Darién that can be visited in complete safety – these areas are covered in more detail later in this chapter.

TOURS

The Darién is the only major part of Panama where a guide is necessary. If you speak Spanish, you can hire guides locally who can show you the way and cook for you. The cost is reasonable, about US\$10 to US\$20 per day, but transportation costs can be expensive, especially since the price of fuel has

skyrocketed in recent years. However, it's advised that you go with a tour operator, who will take care of all arrangements, provide food and relieve you of the necessity of speaking Spanish.

Ancon Expeditions (p89), in Panama City, is the sole operator in the Darién, though they are highly recommended for the quality and professionalism of their tours. Offerings include:

Coastal Darién Explorer A three-day trip to Ancon's lodge in Punta Patiño on the Pacific coast; the cost is US\$575 per person (minimum four people) and the trip is available on request (subject to availability).

Darién Explorer Trek A two-week trip aimed at serious hikers that includes Punta Patiño on the Pacific coast, Mogueé village, Rancho Frío and Cana; the cost is US\$2450 per person and the trip leaves on fixed departure dates with a minimum of four people.

The Realm of the Harpy Eagle A four-day trip to Ancon's lodge in Punta Patiño and a visit to the Emberá village of Mogueé; the cost is US\$695 per person (minimum four people) and the trip is available on request (subject to availability).

Ultimate Darién Experience A five-day trip to Ancon's field station in Cana, which is an outstanding spot for bird-watching; the cost is US\$1300 per person and the trip leaves on fixed departure dates in the high season (December to April) with a minimum of four people. An eight-day version is also available.

VOLUNTEERING

An excellent organization that sometimes takes volunteers is the **Fundación Pro-Niños de Darién** (☎ 254 4333; www.darién.org.pa). This nonprofit organization started in 1990 and works on a variety of projects throughout the Darién. The foundation aims to improve the lives of *niños* (children) through educational and nutritional programs. The organization also works to help residents develop sustainable agriculture.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The 266km Interamericana journey from Panama City to Yaviza passes through Chepo, El Llano, Cañita, Ipetí, Tortí, Higueral and smaller, unmapped communities in Panamá Province before crossing into the Darién. All of these towns are served by buses running between Panama City and Yaviza. There are eight buses daily to Yaviza between 5am and 3:45pm (US\$15, seven to 10 hours). Be sure to tell the bus driver your destination.

Travelers can also fly into the region. **Aeroperlas** (☎ 315 7500; www.aeroperlas.com) has three flights per week and **Air Panama** (☎ 316 9000; www.flyairpanama.com/tickets) has one flight per week to La Palma (US\$40, one hour). From La Palma, Aeroperlas offers three flights per week to El Real (US\$35, 15 minutes).

GETTING AROUND

In the vast jungles of the Darién Province, rivers are sometimes the only means of getting from one point to another, with *piraguas* providing the transport. In La Palma you can hire a motorized boat for US\$120 to US\$200 per day, which can take you to the Río Mogueú or the Río Sambú. From either of these rivers you'll have to negotiate with indigenous villagers (in Mogueú or La Chunga) to take you further upriver in *piraguas*. Hiring boats in Río Jaqué is possible but strongly ill-advised owing to the dangers of guerrilla activity. A shorter (and cheaper) boat trip goes from Puerto Quimba to La Palma.

THE ROAD TO YAVIZA

The Interamericana runs along the spine of the Darién Province, edging closer to Colombia with each passing decade – for now however, Yaviza is the end of the road.

PUNULOSA

This community is notable for its border police checkpoint. Get used to it – this is the first of many. Here, motorists traveling in either direction are stopped and asked where they are coming from and where they are going. Sometimes travelers headed southeast are asked to present identification; if you're a foreigner, your ID is your passport. The soldier will return your identification to you in a few minutes. Occasionally, a soldier will give you a lecture about the dangers near the border – that's because these soldiers are the ones who have to go there if something happens.

METETÍ

Punulosa is something of a suburb of Metetí, which is located only 1km southeast of the police checkpoint. You can stop here if you want to break up the trip to Yaviza or if you're planning on hopping a boat to La Palma. Both are good options as it's still a long way to the end of the road and the scenic boat ride to La Palma is a great way to penetrate the heart of the Darién.

If you're spending the night, the **Hotel Felicidad** (☎ 299 6188; r with shared/private bathroom US\$8/15) is one of the more decent hotels along this stretch of road. Of course, decent still means concrete cubicles and there are more hourly paying guests than you may be comfortable with, but what do you expect along a trucker route? If you're looking for a hot meal, the downstairs **La Felicidad** (meals US\$2-4) serves up heaping plates of rice and beans to truckers who just worked up an appetite.

If you're interested in taking the boat to La Palma, take the turnoff for Puerto Quimba, a port on the Río Iglesias. The road between Metetí and Puerto Quimba is about 20km long, and surprisingly is paved. From Puerto Quimba, boats to La Palma leave hourly from 7:30am to 6:30pm (US\$2.50); they depart from La Palma hourly from 5:30am to 12:30pm, and from 2pm to 5pm. There is a pickup-truck shuttle service between Metetí

GETTING TO COLOMBIA

The Interamericana stops at the town of **Yaviza** and reappears 150km further on, far beyond the Colombian border. Although a trickle of travelers have walked through the infamous Darién Gap, the presence of Colombian guerrillas, paramilitaries, smugglers and bandits make this a potentially suicidal trip.

However, the border can also be crossed at a rugged point on the Caribbean coast between **Puerto Obaldía** on the Panamanian side, where you can obtain your exit stamp, and the town of **Capurganá** on the Colombian side, where you can obtain your entry stamp. **Aeroperlas** (☎ 315 7500; www.aeroperlas.com) has one flight per week from Panama City to Puerto Obaldía (US\$40, one hour). From Puerto Obaldía, you can either walk or boat to the Colombian village of Sapzurro. On foot, this takes about 2½ hours, but the track is indistinct in places, and the presence of bandits, smugglers, narcotraffickers, guerrillas and paramilitaries (just to name a few) in the area makes boating the better option. From Sapzurro, it's a two-hour walk to Capurganá – be advised that there is a fair amount of risk crossing here and you should get solid information about the security situation before attempting it. Tourists have made it safely to Colombia along this route, though the point worth emphasizing is that not everyone has made it.

For information on sailing to Colombia, which is by far the safest of the available options, see p263.

and Puerto Quimba every 30 minutes from 6am until 9pm (US\$1.25).

Traveling to La Palma by boat from Puerto Quimba is an excellent alternative to flying straight in from Panama City. The scenery along this 30-minute river trip is virgin jungle and dense mangrove forests – and you're bound to meet an interesting cast of characters onboard the boat.

YAVIZA

Yaviza is the end of the road – literally. Here, the Interamericana stops abruptly without so much as a sign announcing that you've reached the famous Darién Gap. From here, a narrow stretch of dirt road is lined with a few odd buildings and people who appear to have nothing but time on their hands.

If you have a pressing need to spend the night in Yaviza, the **Hotel 3Americas** (r from US\$8) has some tired-looking rooms with a mess of a communal bathroom. Unless you have any compelling reason to be in Yaviza, it is recommended that you take the turnoff at Metetí, proceed to Puerto Quimba and take the boat to La Palma. The scenes from the boat to La Palma will give you a good sense of the wild frontier and natural beauty that still remains in the majority of Darién Province, whereas the views from the highway between Metetí and Yaviza convey mostly destruction.

There are eight buses daily between Panama City and Yaviza (US\$15, seven to

10 hours). From here, foolish travelers can hike along the Darién Gap if they so desire, though you'd best sort out your personal affairs prior. If you do make it to Colombia – and we can't emphasize enough how seriously dangerous and inadvisable this is – send us a postcard.

PARQUE NACIONAL DARIÉN

Although it's overshadowed by the security situation in the province, the Darién is the crown jewel of Panama's national parks – leave your fears behind and explore the jungle out there.

LA PALMA

La Palma is located at the mouth of the Río Tuira, where the wide river meets the Golfo de San Miguel. It is the provincial capital of Darién Province and the most populous town in the region. However, despite its lofty position as capital of the largest province in Panama, La Palma is literally a one-street town.

Most travelers pass through La Palma for one of two reasons: they're here to catch a plane to somewhere else, or they're here to take a boat ride to somewhere else. The two most popular boating destinations are the Ancon nature reserve and lodge at Reserva

Natural Punta Patiño (right) and the Emberá villages that line the banks of the Río Sambú (p283).

Every facility of possible interest to the traveler is located on the main street, which is within 300m of the airstrip. La Palma is home to the only bank in the Darién Province, the Banco Nacional de Panamá. There's also a hospital, a port and a police station (if you intend to go anywhere near the Colombian border and you speak Spanish, you should talk to the police here first), as well as three hotels, three bars and several food stands.

If you have to spend the night in La Palma, the **Hotel Biauquira Bagara** (☎/fax 299 6224; r with shared/private bathroom US\$15/20) is run by the friendly Ramady family, who live in a home beneath the rooms they rent. All of the rooms have private cold-water bathrooms with a tub, which is a godsend after a week or two in the jungle. There's also a lovely sitting area facing the river, which is a nice place to stew on the fact that you're actually in the Darién.

If you're planning a boating excursion, it's probably best to stock up on groceries here as the selection in the minimally stocked local supermarket is about as good as you'll get in these parts.

There's no shortage of cheap and somewhat cheerful eateries in town, though the **Restaurante El Regocijo** (plates US\$2-4) is one of the more popular, given that it's also a cantina. As a word of caution, steer clear of *puerco de monte* (mountain pig) – this dish is actually wild peccary, which is illegal to hunt and even more illegal to serve up in a restaurant. Unfortunately, no one in La Palma really seems to be paying attention, though a foreigner washing down a plate of poached meat is bound to attract some unwanted attention.

Air Panama (☎ 316 9000; www.flyairpanama.com/tickets) and **Aeroperlas** (☎ 315 7500; www.aeroperlas.com) fly direct from Panama City to La Palma (US\$40, one hour). Air Panama has one flight per week while Aeroperlas has three flights per week.

If you're looking to hire a boat and a guide, you can usually find someone in the vicinity of the dock who owns a vessel and is willing to go on an adventure with you for the right price (US\$120 to US\$200 per day, gas included).

RESERVA NATURAL PUNTA PATIÑO

On the southern shore of the Golfo de San Miguel, 25km from La Palma, is this 26,315-hectare wildlife preserve, which is owned by the private conservation group ANCON and managed by the organization's for-profit arm, Ancon Expeditions (p89). The only way to reach the preserve, short of hacking your way through endless expanses of jungle, is by plane (or boat). However, landing on the tiny strip of oceanside grass that's called a runway in these parts is definitely part of the Punta Patiño experience.

The preserve contains species-rich primary and secondary forest, and is one of the best places in Panama to spot harpy eagles. However, even if the mother of all eagles doesn't show, Punta Patiño is a great place to rack up the bird count, and there's a good chance of seeing everything from three-toed sloths and howler monkeys to crocodiles and capybaras, the world's largest rodents.

In the waterways around the reserve, you'll almost certainly see brown pelicans, magnificent frigate birds and laughing gulls, though don't forget about the cetaceans – bottlenose dolphins and humpback whales frequent these waters. Other birds to keep an eye out for include terns (royal, sandwich and gull-billed), American oystercatchers and waders on the beach near the lodge.

In the mangrove patches near the waterways, you'll have a good chance of spotting Amazon kingfishers, white ibises and great and little blue herons as well as waders including willet, whimbrel and spotted sandpipers. A specialty of the area is the black oropendola, which has a higher than normal frequency near Mogue (see p282). Late afternoon and early morning are good times to look for crab-eating raccoons venturing down to the water's edge.

A swampy flat near ANCON's lodge supports large communities of capybaras, though as with all mammalian sightings, a little luck is needed to spot them. Not surprisingly, this community of tasty morsels attracts a few large crocs as well as the elusive jaguar, though you have a much better chance of spotting the former rather than the latter. Other commonly spotted mammals include gray foxes around the lodge (especially at night) and tayras in patches of nearby dry forest.

Visitors to the preserve are treated to guided nature hikes and night tours of the preserve.

THE MOTHER OF ALL EAGLES

The harpy eagle, Central America's most striking raptor, is considered by many to be the most powerful bird of prey in the world. Unfortunately, opportunities to see the bird in the wild are limited as they are rare throughout most of their range and are hard to spot in the canopy even when they are present. Fortunately, you're in the Darién and the area surrounding Reserva Natural Punta Patiño is home to a healthy nesting population. Although the chances of spotting one are still low, your chances are better here than anywhere else in Central America.

Harpy eagles are enormous birds with a wingspan of 2m and a height of 1.5m – they are immediately recognizable. Adults tend to have white breasts with a broad black chest band and faint leg barring as well as grey upperparts. They also have piercing yellow eyes which can be seen from the forest floor, as well as powerful yellow talons and a hooked bill.

Anyone who has had the privilege to watch a harpy eagle hunt will tell you that it is simply awesome. For instance, a harpy seen with a large male howler writhing in her grip will shift her talons with a resounding 'pop' in order to crush the monkey's skull and carry it back to the nest unhindered. With massive claws as big as a grizzly bear's and legs as thick as a man's wrist, the harpy is an undeniable killing machine.

A female harpy can weigh up to 9kg and such a large predator obviously has high energy requirements. As a result, harpies hunt all but the largest forest mammals, as well as other large birds and a whole slew of snakes and lizards. As an apex predator (like the jaguar), the harpy eagle probably never occurred in high densities, though deforestation has removed much of its prey base and its habitat. Furthermore, its habit of perching for long spells, even when people approach, makes it vulnerable to poachers.

Harpies rarely soar above the treetops, and usually hunt by rapidly attacking prey through the canopy. Monkeys are plucked from the foliage, unwary birds are taken from tree limbs and snakes are swept off the forest floor. However, the majority of the harpy's diet consists of sloths, which are extremely vulnerable in the morning when they are basking in the sun. A harpy will sit nearby – sometimes for days – until it is hungry, and then snatch the sloth at its leisure.

There's also the option to explore the mangroves lining the gulf by boat, or to just relax on one of the several wilderness beaches that hug this isolated stretch of coastline.

One of the best parts of visiting Patiño is staying at ANCON's private lodge, which is surprisingly sophisticated considering the remote location. Although you shouldn't expect five-star luxury, it's definitely more sophisticated than a simple rustic retreat. Each of the cabins has air-con, comfortable mattresses (for those sleepless nights) and private cold-water showers – you won't miss having hot water in these humid climes.

The lodge itself is perched atop a ridge overlooking the gulf and has arresting panoramas of the Golfo de San Miguel, particularly at daybreak. The staff is also extremely professional and attentive to the needs of the guest, and it's unlikely that you'll go hungry when they're working their magic in the kitchen.

Ancon Expeditions offers a package tour that includes the roundtrip airfare between

Panama City and Punta Patiño, lodging, food and activities. This can also be combined with a trip up the Río Mogué to the Emberá village of Mogué and a guided hike to a harpy eagle's nest. Punta Patiño is also a destination on Ancon's highly recommended two-week Darién Explorer Trek (p278).

If you prefer, you can hire boats in La Palma to reach Punta Patiño on your own without booking a guided tour, but you must notify Ancon Expeditions in advance so that they can reserve a cabin for you. However, it's recommended that you book a package through Ancon, especially since you'll probably save money in the long run.

MOGUÉ

Although there are countless indigenous villages in the Darién, the majority of tourists ultimately end up spending a night or two in Mogué, an Emberá village located on the banks of the Río Mogué, roughly equidistant between Punta Patiño and La Palma. Over the past decade, Ancon Expeditions

has helped develop the tourism potential of Mogueú, especially since the villagers here are keen to show off their culture and lifestyles, and are extremely adept at finding harpy eagle nests in the surrounding jungle. As a result, a visit to the village allows an up-close and personal encounter with the Emberá and a high chance of spotting one of Central America's rarest birds.

Despite the fact that Mogueú is set up for tourism, it is still very much a traditional village. Unlike Emberá villages in Panamá Province and Kuna villages in the Comarca, Mogueú may only see a few visitors a month, which means that a complete abandonment of its traditional ways is not possible. Although everything done for the benefit of tourists certainly has a price tag on it, the atmosphere in the village is extremely relaxed and there is no pressure to buy crafts, give gifts or spend money.

While in Mogueú, there is the option to watch a performance of traditional dance, purchase crafts including woven baskets and tagua-nut carvings and get a *jagua*-juice 'tattoo,' in the same manner that the Emberá paint themselves. Like henna, the tattoo stains the skin for up to two weeks, so it's wise to consider where you'll be heading after the Darién before you get painted. However, the experience is truly memorable – after being painted, the *jagua* dries on your skin for several hours before you're instructed to wash it off. Although a faint tattoo will appear immediately on your skin, the next morning when you wake up, you'll be about as blue as a Smurf.

Aside from interacting with the Emberá villagers, the majority of whom speak Spanish, the highlight of Mogueú is taking a guided walk to a nearby harpy eagle nest. At the time of writing, a young adult female harpy eagle was living in a nest about two hours on foot from Mogueú. Although there are no guarantees that you'll spot the bird, the hike itself winds through lush secondary forest that is brimming with tropical birds and the local 'harpy-eagle whistler' will do his best to call this incredible bird back to its nest. And of course, there's nothing quite like the thrill of the hunt, especially if it's rewarded with a clear view of this magnificent bird – bring a camera as harpy eagles are not scared away by human presence and thus easily photographed if you have a strong lens.

While in Mogueú, you have the option of sleeping in a tent underneath the communal gathering hall, or stringing up a jungle hammock if you've brought one along with you. Visitors have access to a private outhouse and cold shower, which is only unlocked when tour groups arrive. The villagers will also feed you until your stomach explodes and although the cuisine of rice, beans, meat and plantains is very simple, it's certainly tasty and unbelievably filling. Although the village sounds are part of the whole experience, light sleepers may want to bring earplugs to ensure a good night's rest.

Ancon Expeditions offers a package tour that includes the roundtrip airfare between Panamá City and Punta Patiño, lodging, food, activities and an overnight excursion to Mogueú. Mogueú is also a destination on Ancon's highly recommended two week Darién Explorer Trek (p278).

In theory, it's possible that you could visit Mogueú by hiring a boat in La Palma, but it's not recommended. Ancon Expeditions has worked hard to regulate the development of tourism in the village in order to minimize its ill effects, so it's best not to complicate things by going outside the market and visiting independently.

RÍO SAMBÚ

The mouth of the wide, brown Sambú river is 1½ hours by boat south of Punta Patiño. Traveling it is a heart-of-darkness experience: you will pass through spectacular jungle while gliding past traditional Emberá and Wounaan villages.

Be forewarned: a trip far up the Río Sambú is not everyone's cup of tea. Even before you reach the river, you will be on a boat rather a long time under a broiling tropical sun. And if riding in a boat that's loaded down with leaking gasoline cans bothers you, you should probably pass on the Sambú – you'll need to bring several large containers of gasoline along from La Palma to fuel the canoe that you'll hire upriver.

There are also other minor hardships, such as the lack of showers and toilets, and the abundance of creepy crawlies and biting insects. But, a trip up the Río Sambú offers you true adventure, something that may not even be possible anywhere in the tropics 50 years from now. Even if you travel deep into the Amazon, you'd be hard-pressed to find such wilderness these days.

At night, you can make camp where you please if you have a tent or a jungle hammock. However, unless you've brought a second hammock or tent for your boater, he will prefer an alternative – making a deal to sleep on the floor of an Emberá or Wounaan family's home. If you can speak Spanish, finding a family to move in with for the night isn't difficult, and even getting a hot meal is easy. Expect to pay about US\$10 per person for shelter and US\$5 for food.

If you speak Spanish, boats and guides can be hired in La Palma, but once you reach the Río Sambú, you will need to hire a separate *piragua* and a guide to get further upriver. You need to do this because the *piragua* you'll hire in La Palma to reach the Sambú will sit too low in the water to navigate the upper portions of the river to get any further upriver, you must negotiate the use of a shallow dugout in one of the Emberá villages. During the rainy season, the river is navigable by *piragua* all the way

to Pavarandó, the most inland of the eight indigenous communities on the Sambú.

EL REAL

El Real dates from the days of the early conquistadores when they constructed a fort beside the Río Tuira to prevent pirates from sailing upriver and attacking Santa María. Gold sourced from mines in the valley of Cana, to the south, was brought to Santa María and stored until there was a quantity sufficient to warrant assembling an armada and moving the bullion to Panama City. Today, El Real is one of the largest towns in the Darién, though it's still very much a backwater settlement.

For travelers heading to the Rancho Frio (opposite), El Real serves as a transit point since flights arrive here from La Palma. Prior to visiting Rancho Frio however, you must also stop by the ANAM office in town and pay your entry fee of US\$3. The best way to locate this office is to ask someone to point

LOCAL VOICES: MELIO & THE PLIGHT OF THE EMBERÁ

Melio, the chief of Mogueú village, is a widely respected Emberá elder who is renowned in the Darién for his musical prowess, particularly on the local version of the flute. A proponent of both increased tourism in the Darién and the cultural conservation of the Emberá, Melio has travelled as far as Washington DC to promote his aims.

- **What is the history of Mogueú?** There is a lot of history in this community. I first came here with my family in 1968 and I was a founding member of Mogueú. Now, there are over 600 people in the village and the surrounding area. Before we came here, my family lived in scattered huts along the rivers. It was not in our culture to have a village. But, once we came here and had access to the ocean, we could salt our meat. My distant relatives had never tasted salt before, so they would keep coming here to gather some. They liked it so much they kept moving closer and closer until our community was formed. The same thing happened all throughout Emberá lands.
- **How has tourism affected the community?** Tourism has been good for us because it affects our community directly. The government doesn't do much for us and they only come around during the election times. The government speaks about helping us, but they always abandon and neglect us. They don't help us secure our land, even though we protect it. At least with tourism, people come here to see the forest and our culture and we feel the impact immediately.
- **What is happening now to Emberá culture?** In this community, we've always been concerned about maintaining our culture. But, everywhere else our culture is disappearing rapidly, especially our language. People aren't speaking Emberá as much as they used to because more people are getting access to school and are learning more Spanish.
- **What can you do to help save your culture?** I try to get involved in rescuing our values and instilling our community with pride in our culture, like our *jagua*, our crafts, our dance and our music. This is how it was in the old age. I'm 60 years old and this is what I have left to do. That's my job.

you toward it as none of the wide paths in town have names.

Be advised that before heading up to Rancho Frío, you must either hire a local guide or be part of an Ancon tour – ANAM will not let you proceed if you are unescorted.

If you end up in town too late to start the trek to Rancho Frío, you can spend the night at the **Hotel El Mazareno** (☎ 299 6567; r per person US\$8), though it's strongly recommended that you plan accordingly and avoid a night in El Real. If you can't, however, you'll have the privilege of choosing from one of seven mildewy rooms, each of which is equipped with a U-shaped foam mattress and toilets that flush with varying degrees of efficiency.

Before heading up to Rancho Frío, be sure to stock up on groceries in town as food is not available at the ranger's station.

Also before hitting the trail, drop into **Fondo Maná** (plates US\$1-2), a friendly spot where there's only one item on the menu and it's whatever the senora is cooking up when you arrive.

From La Palma, **Aeroperlas** (☎ 315 7500; www.aeroperlas.com) offers three flights per week to El Real (US\$35, 15 minutes).

RANCHO FRÍO

Thirteen kilometers south of El Real, as the lemon-spectacled tanager flies, is the Rancho Frío sector of Parque Nacional Darién. The sector is home to **Pirre Station**, though this should not be confused with the station at the top of Mount Pirre near Cana (p289). Nomenclature aside, Rancho Frío is, to steal a line from the famous naturalist guide Hernán Araúz, 'Panama's foremost theater of life.'

Although most of the bird species represented here can also be found at Cana, there are a number of rare specialities here including the crimson-bellied woodpecker, the white-fronted nunbird and the striped woodhaunter. However, the real strength of this sector is the network of accessible trails that originate from Pierre Station.

One trail leads to Mount Pirre ridge, which takes most hikers two days to reach, while the other winds through thick jungle to a series of cascades about an hour's hike away. Neither trail should be attempted without a guide as they are not well marked, and if you get lost out here, you're finished.

If you intend to visit Pirre Station, you must first get permission from the ANAM office in El Real and pay US\$3; if no one's at the office when you arrive, ask around for Narciso 'Chicho' Bristan, who can take care of business. However, as previously mentioned, in order to hike into Rancho Frío, you must either hire a local guide or be part of an Ancon tour – ANAM will not let you proceed from El Real if you are unescorted. If you're not part of an Ancon tour, the ANAM office is a good place to inquire about hiring a local guide – expect to pay about US\$20 per day.

At Pirre Station, there are **barracks** (cots per person US\$10) with a front room with fold-out cots for visitors, a small outdoor dining area beside a very basic kitchen, a *palapa* (open-sided shelter) with a few chairs and a number of flush toilets and cold-water showers. There is also a shady **campsite** (per person US\$5) where you can either pitch a tent or string up a jungle hammock. There is no electricity at the station.

If you plan on eating (which is always a good idea), you must bring your own food. The rangers will cook your food for you (US\$5 a day is most appreciated), but you must provide bottled water. However, if you've got a water-purification system or tablets, the water in the creek is OK to drink, and there are lots of lemon trees in the vicinity of the station. Be sure to try the *zapote* growing at the station – this fruit has a fleshy orange meat with the appearance, taste and texture of mango and it's highly addictive.

Pirre Station can only be reached by hiking or by a combination of hiking and boating. If you prefer to hike, take the 'road' connecting El Real and Rancho Frío – hiking this barely discernible path takes several hours (depending on your pace) and is pretty much impossible without a guide.

The alternative is to hire a boater in El Real to take you up the Río Pirre to Piji Baisal – expect to pay about US\$40 plus the cost of gasoline. From Piji Baisal, it's a one-hour hike to the station, and you'll need a guide to lead you to the station as there are no signs to mark the way.

Only 15km separate Pirre Station and Cana, and between the two there's nothing but virgin rainforest. Unfortunately, no trails link the two, but it's possible to backtrack to El Real, take a boat to Boca de Cupe and then follow the old mining trail to Cana. This historic

highway is just under 30km long, and can be done in two long days. If you're interested in hiking along this rugged trail, check out the Darién Explorer Trek offered by Ancon Expeditions (p278).

BOCA DE CUPE

The frontier town of Boca de Cupe marks the outer range of the Panamanian Defense Forces. As you edge southeast towards the towns of Balsal, El Naranjal, Púculo, Limón, Paya and Palo de las Letras near the Colombian border, you're essentially on your own. Of course, there's little reason that any sane person would head in this direction.

At the time of writing, however, the **Boca de Cupe Trail** that heads southwest to the Ancon lodge at Cana was completely safe – and highly recommended. This 30-odd kilometer trail follows the old mining highway that cuts through the Cana Valley and is easily one of the most challenging and rewarding treks in the whole of the Darién if not the whole country. You will walk through a variety of jungled terrain, pass by rusting railway tracks and spot countless tropical birds and the odd mammal or two. There's even a downed US military helicopter along the edge of the trail, though it's anyone's guess as to what happened.

If you're interested in hiking this trail, you will need to join Ancon Expeditions' Darién Explorer Trek (p278) – independent travel along this route is not allowed.

There's not much to Boca de Cupe aside from a few rows of wooden houses and a small military base. Keep in mind that you will need to register at the base before setting out on the trail, and you (or at least your tour leader) will probably be the recipient of a disparaging lecture. The soldiers stationed here are equally shocked and mortified that anyone would have an interest in hiking through the Cana Valley, and they're not afraid to share their displeasure with your group.

Boca de Cupe is accessed via boat from El Real, but you will need to stop at a riverside security checkpoint along the way. However, all of these arrangements will be taken care of by Ancon, so you can just sit back and enjoy how surreal your life has become.

CANA

Nestled in foothills on the eastern slope of Pirre ridge, the historic mining town of Cana has the distinction of being the most isolated

place in the Republic of Panama. It's also one of the world's top birding destinations, with a list of 400-plus species including 60 exclusive to this area. Daily sightings include up to four species of macaws, numerous parrots, jacamars and cotingas, all of which are literally perched at your doorstep. The shoulders of Mount Pirre (1491m) also rise above Cana and are home to a number of rare endemics including the coveted Pirre warbler.

Birding aside, Cana itself is an out-of-this-world destination that sees far few visitors than it should. The area surrounding the old mining camp (now a private Ancon lodge) is home to an impressive network of jungle trails that are dotted with rusting equipment, abandoned shafts and rivers flickering with gold dust. Unfortunately, the Darién's undeserved reputation has kept away the tourist crowds, but the folks at Ancon are working hard to change that.

Orientation & Information

Cana, which is little more than a clearing in the rainforest canopy, simply consists of a grass runway, a few scattered wooden buildings and an extensive network of jungles trails.

Be advised that Cana is a private lodge of Ancon Expeditions, so you will need to make an advance booking before arriving.

History

A geological survey of Cana determined that a lake covered most of the valley's floor during prehistoric times. However, experts speculate that the lake emptied when an earthquake created a divide that allowed the water to drain. As you enter the valley by air, you can still see a marshy area and some ponds, which are believed to be remnants of the prehistoric lake.

During the early 16th century, Spaniards discovered gold in Cana and in the years that followed, they extensively mined the valley using native labor as well as slaves brought from Africa. Las Minas del Espíritu Santo (Mines of the Holy Spirit), as they were once called, attracted over 20,000 people to the Cana Valley. These workers lived in the town of Santa Cruz de Cana, though the entirety of this settlement has long since been consumed by the jungle.

One of the longest rivers in the Darién, the Río Tuira, runs northward past Cana and out to the Pacific Ocean. The Spaniards used to

LOCAL VOICES: RICK MORALES & THE FUTURE OF TOURISM IN THE DARIÉN

Rick Morales works as a guide for Ancon Expeditions, and has lead countless expeditions throughout the Darién and in the rest of Panama. A linguist by training, Rick is completely bilingual and can convey his passion for wildlife and conservation in flawless Spanish and English.

- **What is your background and how did you become a guide?** I grew up in the western highlands of Panama, surrounded by mountains and by nature, so exploration became a hobby of mine since I was a child. To be honest, I never thought that I could make a living as a guide, so I decided to take a different path and enrolled in university to study linguistics. Later on, by chance, a friend that worked at the same shipping agency as me changed career paths and moved to what was later known as Ancon Expeditions. When we spoke on the phone, she told me that the guides at Ancon had the same interests as I did. The next thing I knew, I was flying to the Darién with Hernán Araúz, one of the most famous guides in the country. That was seven years ago and it was the beginning of my career.
- **What makes your job unique?** The best part of the job is that you get to travel to all of these amazing places and you're always meeting lots of interesting people. You can learn a lot from the guests who come on our trips, as well as the locals who live in the areas we visit – it's a never-ending learning experience. But, the most exciting part is definitely the hunt. There's a hunter inside every one of us. Even though we may not hunt for survival anymore, there's still that innate instinct. When you're out in the forest, trying to spot something, you have to key into that skill. You hone into a slight sound or movement, and sometimes it's rewarded with a great prize, be it a rare bird, a troop of monkeys or a herd of peccaries. That's the most exciting part – you never know what you'll spot! The only difference between us and the typical hunter is that we carry binoculars instead of firearms.
- **What makes the Darién special?** The Darién is special because it represents the triumph of nature over human power. The Darién was the first place in the mainland Americas to be colonized by the Europeans, so you would think that with its long history of human intervention, the Darién should be the most developed place in Panama, if not in all the Americas. But, it's not – instead, it's one of the wildest places in the hemisphere, even after hundreds of years. This gives me hope that there are places out there that can resist human colonization, and exist as sanctuaries for nature.
- **Why has tourism been slow to develop in the Darién?** It is indeed more difficult to travel here without the assistance and support of a reputable outfitter, but that's due to the fact that it's a raw, wild place. Most of the Darién's inhabitants are not bilingual and very few have a service-oriented mentality. But there's a big difference between being 'raw' and being 'dangerous.' The Darién has this negative reputation as a dangerous place and this unfortunately deters a lot of people from coming here. The mainstream belief is that if someone comes to the Darién, they're going to run into trouble. The worst part is that this absurd idea is instilled in tourists by Panamanians themselves. Everywhere you go in the Darién, tourists are warned by police that they're proceeding at their own risk. I really believe that if we could somehow erase this negative reputation, then more people would start discovering the Darién. I'm not implying, however, that the Darién is for everyone. People who are fond of nice hotels with all the creature comforts of civilization should reconsider going to this part of Panama. The Darién is wild and we should keep it that way. That last thing we want to see here is a bunch of foreign retirees living in a gated community called 'The Darién Village.'
- **What is the future of tourism in the Darién?** If people from all around the world started visiting the Darién, I think that tourism could help stimulate the economy of the region. Right now, people in the Darién depend on farming and fishing for survival. For the most part, farming is an extremely destructive activity because it doesn't yield a lot, yet you need to destroy vast areas of forest for a relatively small plot of corn or rice. Just think about how many locals could get involved in ecotourism if things changed here. People in the Darién could have another means of survival and a new appreciation for their natural wealth. But first, we have to change the Darién's negative image.

send supplies to the Cana Valley via the Tuira and they sent gold from the valley to Santa María, on the western bank of the river. Here, the precious metal was kept for safekeeping until boats arrived to transport it to Panama City. Naturally, the vast quantities of gold at Santa María attracted pirates and the town fell numerous times throughout its history. When the Spaniards left Panama in the 1820s, the mines were abandoned and the jungle quickly reclaimed the valley.

When an English outfit visited Cana in the early 20th century, they discovered that there was still gold to be found in the hills. Hoping to strike it rich, they ran train tracks from the valley to Boca de Cupe and moved men, supplies and gold along them in small locomotives and freight cars. When the Englishmen cleared out 20 years later, they left their trains and heavy machinery behind – today you can still find several rusting locomotives, numerous freight cars and abandoned mine shafts amid Cana's dense jungle.

Wildlife-watching

Everybody's experience is different, but Cana is 'bird central' for the Darién. You'll probably start to identify birds even before you land at the airstrip – king vultures soar overhead along with turkey and black vultures. You'll also be bombarded with flights of mealy, red-loreed amazons, brown-hooded and blue-headed parrots as well as flocks of orange-chinned parakeets. Remarkably, Cana is also home to four species of macaws (the chestnut-fronted, blue-and-yellow, great green and red-and-green), which crisscross the valley in their daily search for food. Outstanding amongst the raptors are white hawks and one of Darién's prizes – the crested eagle.

Cana's airstrip is flanked by the forest edge and is the ideal place to scope out dusty-backed jacamars, red-throated caracaras, rainbow-billed and chestnut-mandibled toucans, collared aracaris and crested guans, all seen regularly on tall trees. Flocks of swifts hawk and wheel, particularly at dusk, when they are accompanied by swallows and swallow tanagers.

Flowering bushes attract hummingbirds to Cana all day long. The variety of hummers include rufous-tailed and blue-chested hummingbirds, white-necked jacobins and green thornbills. Tanagers – golden-hooded, crimson-backed and flame-rumps – flit back and forth. Other visitors include yellow-billed caciques, white-headed wrens and various tyrants. Barred puffbirds perch in trees overlooking the clearing and bat falcons often scan from tall trees.

Great jacamars are often seen near the start of the Sendero Las Minas and you shouldn't have to venture far to see crimson-crested woodpeckers, slate-colored grosbeaks, dusky-faced tanagers and orange-billed sparrows. Several offshoots from the main trail frequently see army-ant swarms, which prompt obligate ant-followers including bicolor and ocellated antbirds. Cana also boasts numerous scarce and sought after species in this group including immaculate, bare-crowned and dull-mantled antbirds, black-crowned antpittas and rufous-breasted ant-thrushes. And the Darién is one of the best places anywhere to see the elusive rufous-vented ground cuckoo – most sightings have been with large ant swarms on the Mount Pirre and Boca de Cupe trails.

Pauraques are easily spot-lit around the lodge after dark, but keep your eyes (and ears)

THE BIRD THAT SAVED A VALLEY

In the mid-1990s, the mining lease for Cana was up for sale at the same time that the private conservation organization, ANCON, was looking into buying the land. Although the mines still contained unknown amounts of gold, an incredible diversity of wildlife had reclaimed the valley. Unfortunately, under the terms of the lease, the future owners of Cana were obliged to keep mining at Cana.

In a desperate bid to save the valley, ANCON lobbied hard to change the terms of the lease and eventually convinced President Ernesto Pérez Balladares to visit Cana and see for himself what was at stake. Balladares became the first Panamanian president to visit Parque Nacional Darién. While walking along the Las Minas trail, he spotted a great jacamar, a rare iridescent bird. Fortunately, this single sighting was enough to convince the former president that Cana should be a private reserve and not a mine – the bird saved the valley.

open for rufous nighthawks. Both common and great potoos are sometimes seen here. Other nocturnal possibilities include mottled owls and Central American pygmy owls.

Cana isn't just about birds – common primates throughout the area include Geoffroy's tamarins, white-faced capuchins, mantled howlers and brown-headed spider monkeys. White-lipped peccaries and gray foxes are seen regularly, and rare mammals sighted have included bush dogs and Baird's tapirs. The forests around Cana are also home to jaguars, pumas, ocelots and margays, but you'd be extremely fortunate to see one of these cats – they avoid people and generally prowl at night. However, their tracks are all around, especially in patches of mud along well-traversed trails.

Hiking

Three trails begin near the lodge: the Cituro Trail, the Machinery Trail and the Stream Trail.

The **Cituro Trail** begins at the northeastern corner of the lodge and winds a couple of hundred meters through secondary forest, paralleling some old railroad tracks and passing a rusted-out locomotive with the brand name 'Cituro' forged into it.

The **Machinery Trail** is a loop trail that begins at the western edge of the lodge and winds several hundred meters through secondary forest until it reaches the remains of another abandoned Cituro locomotive, a very overgrown smelter and other pieces of mining machinery.

The **Stream Trail** is glorious but short – only 50m – running from behind the field station to a small creek where you can take a refreshing dip.

Beside the valley's grass-and-dirt airstrip, which is about 100m from the field station, the mouths of two more trails disappear into the dense rainforest: the Pirre Mountain Trail and Boca de Cupe Trail.

The **Pirre Mountain Trail**, starting near the western end of the airstrip, offers a six-hour ridgeline hike to a campsite in the cloud forest high above the Cana Valley. The area around Pirre Station (not to be confused with the other Pirre Station in the Rancho Frío sector, p285) is home to some unique endemics including the Pirre hummingbird, greenish puff-leg, green-naped tanager, sooty-headed wren, Pirre warbler and

beautiful treerunner. A visit to Cana usually entails an overnight at Pirre Station.

The **Boca de Cupe Trail** runs north from Cana to the town of Boca de Cupe, which is usually a two- to three-day hike. At the time of writing, this trail was completely safe and one of the highlights of Parque Nacional Darién. If you're interested in hiking along this trail, you must join Ancon's Darién Explorer Trek (p278).

Sleeping & Eating

Our pick ANAM/ANCON field station is a wooden structure that was built by gold workers during the 1970s and enlarged in mid-1998 by the wildlife conservation group ANCON. Today it is the star attraction in Ancon Expeditions' portfolio of tour offerings. The building itself offers rustic wood-plank rooms, shared bathrooms and candle-lit evenings. When you consider the awesome hiking and the bird-watching possibilities in the area, the station is simply outstanding. Three meals a day are served in a second wooden structure where you can spot macaws flying overhead and spider monkeys playing in the canopy while you dig into your hot breakfast.

Getting There & Away

Unless you hike into Cana along the Boca de Cupe Trail, the only way into the valley is by chartered aircraft. However, keep in mind that Ancon Expeditions manages the valley's sole lodging, so you must make a reservation with the company prior to your arrival. There have been instances where people have chartered private planes to Cana and were given clearance to land, to be told to turn around and go back to their departure point.

Ancon Expeditions offers an excellent five-day, four-night package that includes an English-speaking guide, all meals, accommodations (including tent camping along the Pirre Mountain Trail) and transportation to and from Panama City. A similar eight-day package is also available. Cana is also the final stop on the two-week Darién Explorer Trek. For more information on tour offerings, see p278.

TROPIC STAR LODGE

Overlooking Bahía Piña, near the southern tip of the Darién, is one of Panama's legendary institutions, namely the **Tropic Star Lodge** (☎ 800-682-3424 in US; www.tropicstar.com; 📶 📷 📱).

THEY DROVE THE DARIÉN GAP

In 1960, back when the Interamericana reached only as far as Chepo, a group of adventurers sought to become the first people to drive between North and South America. Their destination: Bogotá, Colombia, 433km from Chepo by land – 297km of it through the primeval jungle that formed the Darién Gap.

The adventurers consisted of a distinguished crew of six men and two women, as well as nine local woodspeople, who were hired to cut a path through the jungle for their US-built jeep and British Land Rover. Also on board for most of the trip was Kip Ross, a *National Geographic* writer whose fascinating article on the expedition appeared in the society's March 1961 journal.

The entire enterprise took four months and 28 days. The team crossed 180 rivers and streams, and was forced to improvise bridges over 125 of them, built mainly from the trunks of palm trees. At times, progress was slowed to 5km a day and although several major vehicular mishaps occurred, no snakebites or serious injuries were sustained.

Among the group were historian Amado Araúz and his wife, Reina, the finest anthropologist Panama has produced. Reina founded seven museums and wrote the definitive books on Panama's indigenous groups before cancer took her life at the age of 49. Her son, Hernán Araúz, who works for Ancon Expeditions, is now widely regarded as the country's top nature guide.

This is the only lodge that serves Punta Piña, which has produced more International Game Fish Association (IGFA) world records than any other body of water.

The facilities at Tropic Star are 1st-class all the way and no expense has been spared in creating this remote luxury lodge. Stand-alone cabins have modern conveniences such as hot-water bathrooms, air-con and satellite TV, though it's the immaculate grounds that really make Tropic Star shine. Taking advantage of its dramatic hillside location overlooking the bay, guests can lounge in the manicured gardens, wade in the palm-shaded pool and dine on the catch of the day in the sophisticated bar-restaurant. There's even a so-called 'palace' that was built on-site by a Texas oil tycoon as his home away from home in 1961.

Of course, all of this shouldn't distract you from why you're really here – to fish. The lodge's fleet of 31ft Bertrams, the Fer-

raris of sportfishing boats, are all outfitted with top-notch gear and manned by some of the best captains in the world. Everything here is done just right and there's a sense of camaraderie among the guests, many of whom are professional sportfishers, millionaires and celebrities.

Weekly packages include the use of a boat with a captain and mate, all meals, and fishing tackle and leaders. Rates vary according to the number of people on the boat. From April to September, the rates are US\$8150/4850 per person for one/two people in a boat and US\$4050/3450 per person for three/four people in a boat. The rates go up from January to March.

Tropic Star can arrange a charter flight to transport you from Panama City to their tiny runway in Bahía Piña. From here, a short dirt road links the airstrip to the Tropic Star Lodge.

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