
January 2008 Panama expedition

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Panama Tree Climbing Trip Announcement

What: Plans are under way for the January 2008 Panama Rainforest Tree Climbing Expedition. It will be our fifth annual tree climbing expedition to the Republic of Panama. (Unofficial tourism motto: "Hey folks, we're cleaner than Miami – and we also speak better English!")

Who: This adventure is recommended for recreational, educational and research tree climbers who are 18 years old or older and who have reasonable experience in double-rope climbing. Those men and women who have completed the basic climbing course offered by Tree Climbers International, Tree Climbing USA, Dancing With Trees, Tree Climbing Japan, Tree Climbing Colorado, Tree Climbing Taiwan, Blue Ridge Tree Climbers, Tree Trek Adventures, ISA, and other instructional groups are qualified for this adventure. Those who have competently learned DRT and safety techniques on their own are also welcome. It is recommended but not required that climbers have some understanding of single-rope climbing. A half-day class on SRT will be offered at the start of the expedition.

Where: The expedition will be based at the Institute for Tropical Ecology and Conservation (ITEC), a working biological field station in the tiny beachfront community of Boca del Drago, at the west end of Isla Colon. This is a medium-sized island about 10 miles long and seven miles wide. It is located in the Caribbean Sea, about three miles from the mainland of Bocas del Toro province in Panama. The area is adjacent to the Panama/Costa Rica border. Google Earth can provide a good bird's eye view of the tiny Boca del Drago community. The laboratory building is located at 9 degrees, 24 minutes and 53.94 seconds north and 82 degrees, 19 minutes and 50.54 seconds west.

When: Tentative plans call for a 12-day expedition to be held Jan. 9-20, which is the (alleged) dry season when daytime temperatures are in the upper 80s and the overnight lows are in the upper 60s. (This is, after all, a rainforest expedition, which means there is a chance of rain every day of the year, even in the "dry" season. That sounds like south Florida or the Pacific Northwest.)

What do you need to do now? If you are seriously interested, let us know now and we'll put you on the mailing list for updates and additional trip details. Make sure you have a valid passport. If you do not, contact the nearest passport agency (usually through your local post office or the clerk or court's office at your local courthouse). It currently takes about two to three months to receive a new passport. And, don't think you can get by with putting it off until the last minute. The Republic of Panama does not require a visa from North Americans but will charge you \$5 for a tourist card when you enter the country at Tocumen International Airport. Check with your health insurance carrier to determine if your policy covers overseas trips.

Sponsors: The 2008 expedition is sponsored by the Treeclimber's Coalition, Tree Trek Adventures, and Treeclimbing USA, with assistance from Dr. Peter Lahanas of ITEC. For additional information, contact Joe Maher at jmaher@treeclimbercoalition.org or Bill Maher at bill@treetrek.net.

Cost: The price for the 2008 rainforest expedition will be \$749, which will include your room and meals at ITEC, local ground transportation, guided climbs and field trips throughout the island and adjacent mainland, an orientation hike with field station biologists, and possible side trips. This is \$30 more than last year. The price increase is due to the increased shipping cost to get food and other supplies to the island. The cost does NOT include your transportation from your home to Panama City and on to the island, or any stops along the way.

How to get to Isla Colon: Full details with several options will be sent out to those who express strong interest in the expedition. The easiest way is to fly from North America on Delta, Continental or American Airlines. You will land and pass through customs/passport control at Tocumen International Airport in Panama City. You must then take a taxi or

bus across town to the smaller Albrook Airport, then take a commuter flight on Aeroperlas or Air Panama to the tiny but internationally-rated airport in Bocas del Toro. Most people find it easier and more pleasant to spend the night at a hotel in downtown Panama City between the two flights. Rooms there range from about \$50 a night at the Hotel Marbella to about \$22 a night at the older but still comfortable Hotel Covadonga. Both hotels have excellent dining rooms and at least one English-speaking staffer on duty at all times. (There are a wide variety of other hotels in Panama City to choose from, but these are two we have used on a regular basis.) After the 40-minute commuter flight from Albrook Airport, you will be met at the airport in Bocas Town by a representative of ITEC (if we know your arrival date and time) and you will be driven by van to the ITEC compound at the other end of the island. (We do not recommend that first-time travelers to Central America come in by land from another country, since this can be a tricky and sometimes confusing procedure that can end up costing you extra money and/or unexpected delays.)

When to make reservations: A \$250 deposit for the trip is due by October 1 and should be mailed to Abe Winters at Tree Climbing USA, 290 Nelms Road, Fayetteville, GA 30215. Abe's office phone number is 770-487-6929. The remaining \$499 should be paid by January 1. Airline reservations from your home to Tocumen International Airport in Panama City (code PTY) can be made on-line or through a travel agency at any time, but we've found it cheaper to make them in early fall after most of the various summertime fuel-adjustment fees have been removed. Remember to tell the ticketing agent or clerk that you are going to Panama City, Panama or they will try to send you to the town by the same name in Florida. Round-trip reservations from Albrook Aeropuerto in Panama City to Bocas del Toro can be made on-line at anytime to either Aeroperlas or Air Panama. Both have excellent English-language websites (aeroperlas.com and airpanama.com) and both accept U.S. credit cards and debit cards.

Personal Safety: Panama is by far the safest country in Central America, with a large and professional national police force and investigative unit. Still, it is best to travel in pairs or groups and avoid showing large sums of money. Many climbers on previous expeditions have worn money belts or have hidden "fanny packs" under their shirts or blouses. Do not let small children handle your bags or equipment. We do not recommend that you rent a car. Always ask a taxi driver (they speak better English than they pretend) how much it will cost for a particular trip. Most taxi rides around downtown Panama City are less than \$4, but a ride to or from Tocumen International Airport may cost \$20 unless you share a cab with another passenger. Taxi rides are more expensive on Isla Colon due to the high cost of fuel (and everything else) on the island.

Money: Panama uses the U.S. dollar for its currency, so no currency exchange is needed. Most banks and ATMs accept major U.S. credit cards and debit cards (The ATM on Isla Colon is frequently out of service or out of cash, but the machines in Panama City seem to be well serviced at all times.) Cash is the preferred way to handle things while on Isla Colon, and we recommend you do not bring anything larger than \$20 bills, due to the inability or reluctance of most businesses to provide change for larger bills. In the past, expedition members have found it very difficult to use a \$50 bill, and almost impossible to use a \$100 bill.

Medical stuff: We recommend a hepatitis vaccination, and climbers should consult with their personal physicians about any other vaccinations they may need or want. There have been no reports of malaria in the last quarter century in the parts of the country where we'll be climbing and traveling, but some climbers may want the malaria tablets for peace of mind. There is a small clinic-type hospital in Bocas Town that is about a 25-minute drive from ITEC, and a large medical facility in the nearby mainland town of Changuinola. Hospital Nacional in downtown Panama City has an international reputation and is as good as most major medical centers in the U.S. and Canada, and is staffed by doctors and nurses who trained in the U.S. There is a fledgling ambulance and rescue service. Emergency rooms provide first aid at a small fee, but there is a bigger charge for all other medical interventions and foreigners usually must pay in advance or provide proof of insurance or a valid credit card. For problems with medical emergencies, call the Red Cross in Panama City at 228-2187. Some climbers in the past have contacted their local insurance agent in advance and purchased a one-month travel policy for about \$40 to \$50 that covers medical emergencies.)

Side trips: This is a tree climbing expedition only on Isla Colon and it is NOT a tour. You are responsible for any side trips you make. Having said that, if you have the extra time we recommend that you visit the Miraflores Locks on the Panama Canal (about \$15-18 a person from downtown Panama City). If you are staying several additional days, you might consider visiting the internationally-known mountain resort town of Boquete, where you can tour the various coffee plantations and orchid farms, climb the Baru Volcano, or visit with North American expatriates at Valle Escondido's excellent golf community. There are a number of travel agencies in Panama that speak good English and regularly deal

with North American tourists. The one that we have used the most is Starlite Travel, which can be reached by e-mail at starlite@cwpanama.net or by telephone from the U.S. and Canada at 011-507-232-6401. The lady who manages the agency is Luz Fonger. Starlite can handle all hotel and in-country travel reservations for you, and meet you at airports in Panama City and drive you to various locations. The agency can arrange a variety of tours for you. The agency's fee is a little on the steep side, but it is a reliable firm. Starlite normally uses the slightly more expensive Hotel Marbella for your stays in downtown Panama City.

About ITEC: The ITEC field station on Isla Colon is a relatively primitive facility that consists of a two-story wooden classroom/laboratory building, a wooden dormitory building with six medium-sized rooms and one large bunkroom, and two wooden cabins. There are four cold-water shower stalls and four commodes for the dorm building. There is no hot water at the field station. There are no air conditioners, televisions or telephones (except for a solar-powered pay cell phone that rarely works because the nearest cell tower is many miles away). The only electricity is from a small generator that runs from about 6 p.m. until midnight. The field station has a small filtration system for drinking water. The blue waters and white beaches of the Caribbean Sea are about 10 yards in front of the compound. A reef is only another 15-20 yards offshore, and climbers are welcome to bring snorkeling gear. Behind the compound is a medium-sized farm pasture, and beyond that is the jungle. Meals are basic but good. There is a small sand-floor establishment about 150 yards farther down the beach, called Restaurante Yarisonori, where you can also purchase snacks, soft drinks and beer. Although you will wear long pants, boots and other appropriate clothing while climbing in the jungle, the dress code in the ITEC compound is incredibly laid back and usually calls for shorts, T-shirts and sandals or flip-flops.

Climbing adventure: We will be climbing in coastal rainforest (the real jungle, just like in the movies) where the typical emergent trees will range from 150-180 feet high and will include the giant ficus (figs), legendary ciebas, soaring virolas (wild nutmegs), and about 300 other species of trees. There will also be side trips with native guide Enrique Dixon Sr. in his homemade dugout canoe to climb in the saltwater mangrove swamps (and to find his favorite crocodiles). After-dark climbs in the rainforest and mangroves will offer several chances to see the elusive night monkeys. Up in the trees while you're climbing, you might meet noisy howler monkeys, colorful toucans, giant iguanas, and both two-toed and three-toed sloths. Many of the best trees already have preset lines in them to get you at least part of the way up into the canopy.

Special Gear: It's called a rainforest for a reason --it rains there. The single best equipment you can bring is a pair of inexpensive knee-high rubber "dairy" or "muck" boots (Walmart has some for about \$15 to \$20) because you'll often have to cross muddy swamps and wade through shallow creeks (remember, the cheap rubber boots work just as well as the expensive ones and you can leave them in Panama at the end of the expedition, if you want to). We also recommend a medium-sized backpack to carry your climbing gear. You should also bring a flashlight or headlamp, climbing gloves, a poncho and poncho liner from any Military Surplus store, your favorite brand of D.E.E.T. insect repellent, a hat, long-sleeved shirt, a set of bed sheets and pillowcase for sleeping (blankets are not needed due to the warm nights and hot days), and a mosquito net (preferably rated for "no-see-em" bugs) for your bed. We also recommend you get a couple of pairs of nylon "fast drying" pants and shirts (the previously-used camouflaged jungle fatigues from your local Military Surplus store are good). Other than that, you'll need your climbing equipment (only a limited amount is available at ITEC) and the standard stuff you'd take on any warm-weather vacation. Don't forget your bathing suit! Another note here: Commercial laundry facilities are available in Bocas Town, so you might want to pack fairly light and avoid paying a lot for overweight baggage. Both Areoperlas and Air Panama charge about 50 cents a pound for anything over 25 pounds, and most of us will have a lot more than that.

Trip secret: The real secret of having a safe and enjoyable visit to the rainforest will lie in your ability to accept the place "as is". After all, rural Panama is a third-world country. You must be willing to surrender to the idea that you will be living and climbing in a rainforest and that you will, therefore, spend a lot of your time in the rain. Because it rains a lot, there will also be a lot of walking in mud, mush and muck. Because you are walking in mud, mush and muck you will spend a lot of time with wet feet. You will also get a lot of mud, muck and mush on your clothes, on your face and in your hair. Because it is a tropical rainforest the temperature will be a bit on the warm side. In other words, not only will you get dirty, you will, heaven forbid, SWEAT! And then there are the bugs, all of which will look upon you as nothing more than a new item on the food chain. The secret to successfully enjoying yourself on an adventure of this sort is to realize, up front, that this is the way it is. The uncomfortable people are the ones who refuse to surrender to the circumstances and who try to stay neat, clean, dry, and smelling good in spite of it all. The important thing to remember is that there is an end to every day, clean clothes and a shower are waiting for you, and then you can prop up your feet and embellish the adventures of the day with a libation of your choice in hand. Believe us when we say that it is rather a splendid way to end a day, with your feet propped up, the warm blue Caribbean before you, a gentle breeze on your face, and war stories from the day that will stay with you forever.

