

# Panama Country Packet

Updated November 2014



# Maranatha in Panama

Maranatha's history in Panama began in 1980, when a group of 40 volunteers built a dormitory on the campus of the Panama Seventh-day Adventist Institute (IAP) in La Concepción. In 1996, Maranatha volunteers returned to Panama to build 35 new churches and eight schools. In addition, volunteers finished 20 church projects that local congregations had started on their own.

Adventist missionaries visited Panama even before the country existed. In the 1890's the land was still a part of neighboring Colombia when missionaries from Honduras visited for the first time. The Panama mission was organized in 1903 with three churches and 129 members. There are now more than 95,000 Adventists in the country.

# **Volunteer Opportunities**

In Panama, Maranatha has already completed many churches throughout the country as well as a large Education and Evangelism Center in Santiago, Panama. Future Maranatha projects will focus on One-Day Churches, most of them completed with cement block walls.

Volunteers also typically combine construction work with community outreach in the form of medical clinics, evangelism, children's programs, painting, and other community outreach endeavors. However, the details of each project vary, depending on the volunteers, availability of opportunities, and needs of the local church.

# **Project Funding**

The local church is responsible for providing the land and labor to excavate the site. Maranatha has agreed to raise funds for each church they provide in Panama. These funds are provided by donations from individuals, churches and school groups, and businesses. If you or your team is interested in helping to sponsor a church in Panama, please speak with Maranatha for more information.

# Panama Overview

Panama, meaning "Abundance of Fish," is a skinny sliver of land bridging North and South America and separating the Caribbean Sea from the Pacific Ocean. At its narrowest point, the land is about 30 miles across. More than 100 years ago, the world decided to cut through the isthmus to shorten shipping routes. The building of the Panama Canal, as the project came to be called, is an epic tale fraught with much political and human drama. After more than thirty years of construction, the Panama Canal was finally completed in 1914. Today, the canal is considered one of the seven wonders of the modern world, and it has seen the passage of more than 800,000 vessels in its lifetime.

The Panama Canal revolutionized trade and global economy and also catapulted Panama to worldwide fame and a new level of modernization. But beyond the canal, Panama is also a country rich with natural beauty and resources. Protected areas and national parks make up a third of Panama, and indigenous groups have

survived with their cultures mostly in tact. While not as famous as its neighbor to the west (Costa Rica), Panama has much to offer with its many pristine beaches and verdant rainforests. The country boasts a vast biodiversity with 218 mammal species and the largest number of avian species in Central America, including large populations of macaws, quetzals, parrots, and toucans.

Panama is a fast-growing country with 3.6 million people. Strong progress has been made in education, as access has been broadened to reach rural areas, and the literacy rate is 94%. Interestingly, female enrollment at secondary schools is dominant and in 1999, Panama elected its first female president.

Unfortunately, Panama still struggles with socioeconomic disparities. Poverty is great, particularly among the indigenous people. While the government has implemented social programs the problem is still widespread.

### **Culture**

Panamanian culture is a hybrid of Spanish influences and indigenous traditions. This diversity is reflected in the country's art, music, food, and people. In modern Panama City, you'll find topnotch restaurants and entertainment that matches big cities around the world. In the metropolitan areas, it's fairly easy to meet people who speak English, although Spanish is the official language of Panama.

# Facts & Figures

Capital: **Panama City** Nationality: **Panamanian** 3.6 million **Population:** Poverty: 26%

Unemployment: 14.6% Languages: Spanish, limited

**English** 

**Education:** 94% literacy Life Expectancy: 78.3 years old **Work Force:** 1.5 million Religion: 85% Catholic. 15% Protestant

**Economy:** Industry:

> construction, brewing, agriculture; Exports: gold, bananas, shrimp

**US Dollar Currency:** Time Zone: **UTC/GMT** 

-5 hours

The arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century has had a long-lasting impact on culture in Panama. Catholicism is still a huge part of life as 77% of the population claims this faith. There are Roman Catholic festivals and other celebrations related to the church along with cathedrals dotted through the country.

As for food, much of Panama's cuisine may sound familiar to those acquainted with Latin food. However, everything comes with a Panamanian twist. A typical Panama meal includes meat, rice, beans, and a local fruit or vegetable. Yucca and plantains are abundant. They are often served cut and fried into yucca fries of patacones (known in other countries as tostones). Another specialty in Panama is hojaldres, a type of fry-bread. Tortillas are also on the menu, although they don't always resemble the large, flat ones used for burritos or tacos in North America; in Panama, "tortillas" are often fried. Empanadas are also a popular dish, and they are filled with meat and cheese and sometimes sweets. Given the country's proximity to the ocean, seafood is also commonly offered.

# **Geography and Climate**

Panama's tropical environment supports an abundance of plants. Forests and jungles dominate the rugged landscape, interrupted occasionally by grasslands and fields of crops. Both coasts are home to mangrove swamps, and banana plantations are located along the deltas near Costa Rica. A central strip of mountains and hills divides the country in half.

On the Pacific slope of these hills, the weather is dry from mid-December to mid-April. For outdoor activities, like hiking, this is the optimal time to visit. But it's also tourist season, and hotel and airfare prices will generally be higher at this time of year.

On the Caribbean side of Panama, the weather can be rainy throughout the year. In the lowlands, the climate is hot and steamy during rainy season, making the heat oppressive. But as with all tropical regions, the rain is intermittent and usually followed by sunshine.

# **Cultural Sensitivity**

Maranatha's volunteer experience includes meeting new people and learning how to serve them. Every culture has a unique view of the world. It is important to enter another culture with humility, respect, and understanding of their traditions. Sometimes you may observe something in Panama that will be very different from what you're accustomed to. It does not make it wrong—just different. Be respectful and consider their perspective.

Being sensitive to a culture also means being respectful to micro cultures, such as Adventism, within a larger culture. Adventists in Panama tend to be more conservative than Adventists in the United States or Canada. We try to be sensitive to this by dressing as modestly as possible. Pants and cap sleeves are preferred to shorts and tank tops. For church activities, women need to have skirts or dresses reaching past the knees, and men need to wear ties and closed-toe shoes, especially if they are involved in platform activities.

# **Travel**

The main international airport in Panama is the Tocumen International Airport in Panama City (airport code PTY). A variety of direct flights connect to this airport through hubs in the United States and Central America. Popular airline carriers connecting to Panama City include American, United, Delta, Copa, Jet Blue, and Spirit.

### **Entry and Exit**

### **Passport**

All U.S. and Canadian citizens must present a passport valid for at least six months from your scheduled return date. If you do not have a passport, U.S. citizens can apply at any U.S. post office or online at <a href="http://travel.state.gov">http://travel.state.gov</a>. Canadian citizens can apply online at <a href="http://travel.state.gov">http://travel.state.gov</a>. It can take up to two months to complete the entire process; plan accordingly to give yourself enough time to receive your passport. You can expedite the process for an additional fee. Passport photos can be taken at the post office, FedEx office, Costco, or Walgreens.

Tourists are permitted to travel in Panama for up to 180 days without a formal visa. Those planning on spending more than 180 days in the country should contact the Panamanian embassy for more information.

Citizens of other countries should consult the Panamanian embassy or consulate in your home country for entrance requirements.

For additional information regarding U.S. entrance procedures in Panama, visit: <a href="http://travel.state.gov/">http://travel.state.gov/</a>

# **Immigration and Customs Process**

On the airplane to Panama, you will receive two forms that need to be filled out for processing at the airport. The immigration card will ask for information such as your name (use name on your passport), passport number, flight number, and address where you will be staying in Panama. Be sure to consult your project packet or your group leader for this address, prior to departure. You will also receive a customs form requiring much of the same information.

After you exit the plane in Panama, you will follow signs to "migración" or immigration. You will need to present your entrance forms and passport. They may ask you a few

# **Entry Requirements**

Valid Passport

SISTEMA DE LA INTEGRACIÓN CENTROAMERICANA (SICA) COMISION CENTROAMERICANA DE DIRECTORES DE MIGRACION (OCAM)
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8 PAIS DE NACIMIENTO 9. PAIS DE RESIDENCIA Country of birth Country of residence
10 MOTIVO DE VIAJE TURISMO OFICIAL RESIDENCIA Residence
TRANSITO NEGOCIOS OTRO Other
11 DIRECCIÓN PREVISTA Forseen addrass
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questions regarding your trip to Panama. Make sure you say that you are a tourist. If you say you are coming to "work" on a Maranatha trip, it can cause confusion, and they may believe you need a work or business visa for your travel in the country. At immigration, they may stamp your passport or give you a slip of paper. Make sure you keep whatever they give to you with your passport for the duration of your time in Panama.

After passing through immigration, head to the baggage claim, gather your bags, and go through customs, where they will take your customs form. They may put your bags through an x-ray, do a randomly selected bag check, or manually search your bag. Don't worry about this process as they are primarily looking for fruits, vegetables, animals, and drugs. After passing through customs, proceed to the arrivals area of the airport. You can meet up with the rest of the group at this point.

# **In-Country Transportation in Panama**

If you are leading a group project with Maranatha, we can help your group reserve a private school bus, coaster bus, or tourist coach for your transportation needs.

Taxis in Panama are relatively cheap, but some can be unreliable and unsafe. We recommend that when traveling by taxi in large cities, you look for "tourist taxis" outside hotels and the airport. They can be a little more expensive, but they will respect international driving standards better. Taxis do not have meters; instead they have a preset fare to your destination. Make sure you agree on the fare before entering the taxi and request that the driver does not pick up additional passengers during the trip.

Many international rental companies have a presence in Panama. You can reserve and pick up rental cars, trucks, and vans at the Panama City airport through rental agencies such as Avis, Expedia, Budget, Hertz, and Alamo. However, many times vehicles are given on a first come first serve basis, regardless of reservations.

The roads around major cities are usually good, but take care with merging traffic and watch for potholes. Before driving, familiarize yourself with local laws and traffic norms. Roads between smaller towns are not usually paved. It is not recommended to drive at night. Traffic in Panama City can be horrendous. It is advised that you plan extra time for traveling through the city, as it can take anywhere from 60-120 minutes to go across. If you plan to drive yourself, Maranatha recommends obtaining an International Drivers Permit before traveling.

# **Travel Safety**

Maranatha will not knowingly send volunteers to an area that is of elevated risk. We consistently monitor security alerts from the areas where we are working and we consciously avoid high-risk regions. However, it is important for you to

# REPUBLICA DE PANAMA **AUTORIDAD NACIONAL DE ADUANAS** DECLARACION JURADA DEL VIAJERO CUSTOMS DECLARATION Número de pasaporte (Passport number) 2. Identificación del viajero o jefe de familia (traveler identification or head of the family) Nacimiento / Birthday Nombre / Name D Apellido / Last Name D Número de familiares que viajan con usted (Number of family members traveling with you) 4. Linea aérea y número de vuelo (Airline and flight number) 5. Lugar de Abordaje (Boarded on) 6. Es usted ciudadano de la República de Panamá (Are you a Panamenian citizen?) SI/YES NO 6.1 Nacionalidad (Citizenship) 7. Dirección en la Republica de Panamá (Address in Panama) 9. Propósito del Viaje (The purpose of my travel is) Estudias Placer (Pleasure) (Business) (Other) 10. Trae frutas, plantas, carnes, comidas o animales vivos (Are you bringing fruits, plants, meats, foods, soil, birds, snail, other live animals, styres NO farm products, or have been on a farm or ranch outside Panama?) 11. Tiene usted algún bien que declarar SI/YES NO (Any goods to declare) 12. Todo viajero puede introducir libre de impuesto artículos por un valor aduanero que no exceda los 8/.2,000.00 "US\$). En caso de que exceda esta suma deberá pagar los impuestos. (All travelers arriving to Panama may introduce tax free articles and gifst not exceeding 8/.2,000.00 (US\$). In the event that you exceed this amount, such articles must pay the taxes contemplated by law). Descripción / Description of TOTAL Trae dinero en efectivo o documentos negociables por más de B/. 10,000.00 o su equivalente (I am/we are carrying currency or monetary instruments over US\$ 10,000 or other currency) SI/ YES NO Si la respuesta es NO pase al número 17 (if the answer is NO proceed to number 17) cedencia del dinero (Procedence of money) Negocios (Business) Juegos de Azar Otros Explique (Chance Games) (Other) (Explain) 15. Tipos y cantidades de monedas o instrumentos monetarios. Valor en Balboas o Dólares (Types and amounts of currency or monetary instruments. Value in Balboas or Dollars). A. Dólares (Dollars) ..... ...... US\$ C. Otros instrumentos (Other monetary instruments) USS Especifique el tipo (Specify the type) CANTIDAD TOTAL: US\$ TOTAL AMOUNT: US\$ 16. De haber alguna otra moneda que no sea Balboa o Dólar, sírvase llenar las casillas siguientes some other monetary instrument that is not Balboa or Dollar, please fill in the following spac Nombre de la Moneda (Name of the monetary instrument) País (Country) 17. Declaro bajo la gravedad del juramento, que la informacion suministrada aqui es verdadera y conozco que Dectato upon is graved by partiertor, deep an interest of the partier of the part DIA / MES / AÑO DAY / MONTH / YEAR Firma / Signature El transporte de moneda o instrumentos monetarios, sea cual fuera su cantidad, es lícito; no ob traiga, o intente ingresar, a la República de Panamá una cantidad que exceda \$\frac{1}{10.000}\$ (en moneda Balboas o Dólares de curso legal en la República de Panamá o su equivalente en moneda extranjera, o en combinación de ambas), chegue de viajero o instrumentos al portador, tales como giros bancarios, acciones o bonos, está obligado a declarar ante la Autoridad Nacional de Aduanas de la República de Panamá. EL NO HACER LA DECLARACION EXIGIDA O HACER DECLARACIONES FALSAS PUEDE OCASIONAR LA INCAUTACION DE LA MONEDA O LOS INSTRUMENTOS MONETARIOS Y LA IMPOSICION DE he introduction of a legal currency or monetary values exceeding US\$10,000 must be declared by filling this rm of the Customs Service Office of the Republic of Panama, by the person in that in any way represents other Person or Corporation for this matter). (NON COMPLIANCE WITH THE OBLIGATION OF MAKING THE PRESENT DECLARATION OR THE DECLARATION OF FALSE STATEMENTS MIGHT CAUSE THE SEIZURE OF CURRENCY OR THE MONETARY VALUES AND SUBJECT THE OFFENDING PARTY MIGHT BE SUBJECT TO CUSTOMS SANCTIONS). SELLO DE ADUANAS (SEAL OF CUSTOMS) Firma del Inspector de Aduanas Nº de Cédula

take responsibility for your own personal safety while traveling. Here are some ways you can start. For a more detailed list of tips and Maranatha insurance information, be sure to read our International Traveler's Guide. While we do take precautions, there is nothing we can do to guarantee safety. We can only place our trust in God's hands.

- ·Avoid traveling at night or alone.
- •Dress conservatively and keep a low profile.
- •Avoid marginal areas of cities, alleyways, and crowds of people.
- •Use caution if you are approached on the street by strangers, including vendors.
- •Leave valuables, both expensive and sentimental, at home.
- •Don't leave your personal belongings unattended, especially in open sight. Consider using a money belt or concealed pouch for passports, credit cards, and cash. Keep your purse or bag in front of you, held with a tight grip.
- •<u>US Department of State</u>: Register your travel with the U.S. Department of State by enrolling with the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program. The U.S. government will then contact you in case of an emergency, natural disaster, or civil unrest. They can also be a point of contact for family emergencies. You can also check for security updates prior to your departure.
- •<u>Travel Guard</u>: The AIG accident insurance provided to Maranatha volunteers provides access to security updates and other resources. You can access this resource by using the policy number provided to you in your information packet or by a Maranatha representative once your volunteer group is confirmed.

# **Traveling with Minors**

Minors under the age of 18 are welcome to join projects to Panama. Maranatha requires that at least one adult travel with every three minors, ages 14-17, and that an adult travel with every minor, age 13 and under. Minors traveling without both parents or legal guardians must carry a notarized consent form. You can find this form and complete instructions on the Maranatha website, under Volunteer Opportunities and Resources. Panama does not have any additional entrance requirements for minors.

# **Excursion Options**

From historical sights and canal cruises to rainforest zip lines and gorgeous beaches, Panama has a variety of excursions to explore. To find the best excursion for your trip, try searching online. Look for peer ratings on various activities through sites like Trip Advisor. Guidebooks published by Lonely Planet or Frommer's are also good places to start.

### **Attractions**

**Bocas del Toro** | The Archipelago de Bocas de Toro is Panama's number one vacation destination. Turquoise waters, pristine beaches, swaying palm trees, and dazzling corals make these islands the premier spot for tourists, year round.

**Boquete** | The highlands of the central mountain range provide great excursion options for the adventuresome. Hiking through the cloud forests provides a peaceful way to enjoy the landscape. Others choose to ride horseback up the trails, kayak through the rivers, or zip line through the trees.

**Coiba National Park** | This marine park is made up of a group of 38 islands off Panama's Pacific coast, including the island of Coiba. Visitors can fish, scuba dive, swim, or take a tour of the park's incredible collection of wildlife.

**Panama Canal** | The Panama Canal remains one of the most popular attractions in all of Panama. There is a small visitors center that explain the canal's history, and if seeing the massive ships pass through the locks isn't enough, there are also half-day and full-day cruises taking you through the locks and giving you great views of the jungles on either side of the canal.

**Panama City** | Named the most cosmopolitan city in Central America, Panama City is a sea of high rises and freeways. But tucked between the modern sites, the capital also has relics from the past, including old world architecture and trails of rainforest, just fifteen minutes from the downtown.

### **Accommodations**

Most leaders of Maranatha projects in Panama choose to have the group stay in a local hotel. While there are many places with varying comfort and price levels, you should expect a rather simple hotel.

Check with the project packet or your group leader for specific information regarding bed linens, towels and washcloths, hot water, air-conditioning, Wi-Fi availability, and eating facilities.

# Miscellaneous

# Foreign Cash and Money Exchange

Panama uses the U.S. dollar; so exchanging money isn't a problem for volunteers from the US. People coming from Canada or other countries can exchange money in the airport or at a bank or exchange houses; however, bringing U.S. dollars is encouraged. Any cash you bring should be in new, unmarked U.S. dollar bills.

There are ATMs in the airport, but they can be hard to find and unreliable outside of Panama City.

### **Credit/Debit Cards**

While some establishments accept credit and debit cards, it might be easier to use cash while traveling through the country. If you do use a credit or debit card, expect a 5% - 12% surcharge for international use. Be careful when using your credit card in public; never let it out of your sight. It is wise to let your credit card company know in advance the dates you will be in Panama so they don't block your card when you use it in a foreign country.

### Traveler's Checks

Traveler checks are not widely accepted, and commissions can be high.

# **Electricity**

The standard current in Panama is 110-120 volt AC (same as the United States and Canada). The standard outlets have two vertical prongs of the same height (Type A). Three prong plugs, with the ground prong, are uncommon. Plug adapters, from three-prong to two-prong, can be found at many stores like Walmart or Home Depot for about one dollar. Electrical surges and outages can be common. You should use a surge protector for expensive appliances and computers.



Most cities and large towns have full service laundromats. Many hotels also provide laundry service but often charge per item of clothing, which adds up pretty fast. You can also choose to do your laundry by hand at no additional cost.





### Communication

Cell phone service is available in Panama, but rural areas often experience limited service. Local cell phones can be purchased for about \$60-80 USD and you can reload minutes to call locally and internationally for reasonable rates. You can also buy a SIM card for your unlocked device. If you choose to use your own phone service, check international rates and service areas since international roaming and data charges can be very expensive.

To call Panama from the U.S., enter the international access code (011) plus the Panamanian country code (507) plus the local number.

To call the U.S. from Panama, enter the U.S. country code (001) plus the local area code and phone number. For example, to call the Maranatha office you would dial 1 (916) 774-7700.

You can also communicate with loved ones at home through free smart phone and computer apps such as WhatsApp, Viber, FaceTime, and Skype. WiFi is available at hotels and restaurants throughout the country and Internet cafes are also popular.

### Restrooms

Public restrooms are few and far between in Panama. so you should take breaks at your hotel or restaurants. Western-style flush toilets are the norm in most places. But toilet paper usually goes in the wastebasket, not down the toilet.

# Weights & Measures

Panama officially uses the metric system, but in some areas you will find pounds and gallons used as well.

# Health in Panama

For more detailed health guidelines for international travel, see our first time traveler's guide.

# **CDC Interactive Malaria Map**

Red = malaria present everywhere. Yellow = presence of malaria varies. Green = area with no known malaria.

### Vaccines and Medications

The only vaccine required by Maranatha is a current tetanus vaccine. In addition, the Centers for Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends many other vaccines such as hepatitis A and B, typhoid, and an oral antimalarial drug other than Chloroquine. More information is available at http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/. Maranatha recommends that you schedule a consultation with a travel clinic doctor, prior to travel, to talk about medical precautions for your trip to Panama

### Malaria, Yellow Fever, and Mosquitoes

When many people think of Panama, they recall stories of malaria and yellow fever deaths during the construction of the Panama Canal. Many of these disease-carrying mosquitoes have since been eradicated through aggressive interventions. Currently the CDC states that there is no malaria in the urban areas surrounding Panama City, and it does not have advisories for malaria or yellow fever for any regions west of the capital. However, the CDC does recommend yellow fever vaccines and antimalarial medication for those traveling east of the Canal Zone.

Maranatha suggests you speak with a medical professional regarding malaria and yellow fever prevention. There are different oral medications that can lower your risk of contracting malaria. Each has different side effects and dosages, so speak with a travel clinic doctor before making a decision on whether to take a certain medication. When considering preventative medications for malaria, keep in mind that Chloroguine is NOT effective in Panama. The malaria strain present in the country is considered to be Chloroquine-resistant. Malaria can be treated effectively early in the course of the disease, but we recommend that you avoid it altogether. For more information regarding malaria and yellow fever in Panama visit the CDC at http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/.

Mosquitoes and other flying insects can also carry a variety of others diseases, such as dengue. Personal precautions are strongly recommended to lower the risk of being bitten. Bring a bug repellent with a 30%-50% concentration of DEET. Wear long sleeves, long pants, and closed-toe footwear when possible. Avoid areas of standing water and do not spend a lot of time outside during dusk and dawn.

### **Preventative Health**

In general, preventative measures are the best way to avoid becoming ill during your time in Panama. Food should be properly washed and cooked. Use only purified water for drinking and brushing your teeth, and avoid ice cubes at restaurants. Wash your hands regularly. Wear sunscreen and mosquito repellent while outdoors.

# **Contact Information**

**United States Embassy:** Building 783 Demetrio Basilio

Lakas Avenue Clayton, Panama Telephone: +507 317-5000 Canadian Consulate:

Torres de las Americas Tower A, Piso 11 Punta Pacifica, Panima Telephone: +507 294-2500 **Maranatha Volunteers International:** 

990 Reserve Drive. Suite 100 Roseville, CA 95678 Telephone: (916) 774-7700 Fax: (916) 774-7701