



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 top-notch 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.

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 or 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.

Facts & Figures

Capital:	Panama City
Nationality:	Panamanian
Population:	3.6 million
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
Currency:	US Dollar
Time Zone:	UTC/GMT -5 hours

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 <http://travel.state.gov>. Canadian citizens can apply online at www.passport.gc.ca. 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: <http://travel.state.gov/>

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)

REGISTRO MIGRATORIO
TARJETA DE INGRESO / EGRESO

LLÉNAR DE ACUERDO CON EL DOCUMENTO DE VIAJE USANDO LETRA DE MOLDE. FILL OUT IN BLOCK LETTERS ACCORDING TO TRAVEL DOCUMENT

1. APELLIDOS / Surnames: _____ 2. _____

2. NOMBRES / First Names: _____ 2. _____

3. DOCUMENTO DE VIAJE Nº / Travel document number: _____

PASAPORTE TIPO DE PASAPORTE / Type of passport: ORD OFIC. DIPL. OTRO

CA-4 OTRO

4. NACIONALIDAD / Nationality: _____ 5. PROFESIÓN U OFICIO / Occupation: _____

6. FECHA DE NACIMIENTO / Date of birth: ____/____/____
DIA MES AÑO / Day Month Year

7. SEXO / Sex: F M

8. PAÍS DE NACIMIENTO / Country of birth: _____ 9. PAÍS DE RESIDENCIA / Country of residence: _____

10. MOTIVO DE VIAJE / Travel purpose: TURISMO OFICIAL RESIDENCIA
 TRANSITO NEGOCIOS OTRO

11. DIRECCIÓN PREVISTA / Foreseen address: _____

12. NUMERO DE VUELO / Flight number: _____

ENTRADA / Entry: _____ SALIDA / Exit: _____

13. PAÍS DE PROCEDENCIA / Departure country: _____ 14. PAÍS DE DESTINO / Destination country: _____

USO OFICIAL / OFFICIAL USE ONLY

ENTRADA

TIPO DE VIAJERO: N NRE ER NR

TIPO DE VISA: _____ NUMERO DE VISA: _____

FECHA: ____/____/____
DIA MES AÑO

DELEGACIÓN/PUESTO: _____

CÓDIGO DE INSPECTOR: _____

SALIDA

TIPO DE VIAJERO: N NRE ER NR

FECHA: ____/____/____
DIA MES AÑO

DELEGACIÓN/PUESTO: _____

CÓDIGO DE INSPECTOR: _____

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.
- [US Department of State](#): 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.
- [Travel Guard](#): 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.



Laundry

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.

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 Chloroquine 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

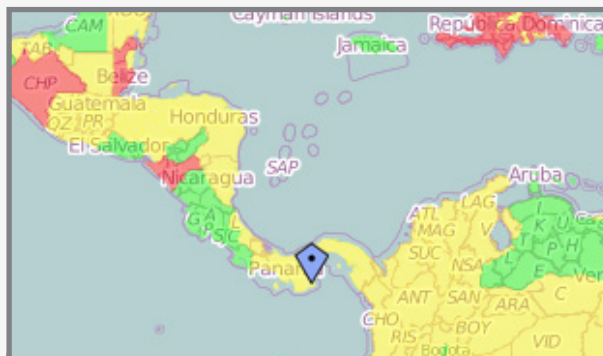
In general, preventative measures are the best way to avoid becoming ill during your time in Panama. Food should be properly washed and cooked. Use only purified water for drinking and brushing your teeth, and avoid ice cubes at restaurants. Wash your hands regularly. Wear sunscreen and mosquito repellent 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, Panama
Telephone: +507 294-2500

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



[CDC Interactive Malaria Map](#)

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