



The Land Between': Discovering Amazing Wildlife Along the Panama Canal

Panama's location between two continents and two oceans explains why it's a geopolitical hot spot, and why it has so many stunning birds.

By Jeffrey Gettleman Photographs by Toh Gouttenoire

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"Follow me," Nando said. "I know where it lives."

It was late morning, hot, humid and quiet. Shafts of sunlight cut through the jungle as we followed a path through the latticed shade. A few hundred yards away, gigantic cargo ships stacked with containers chugged along the Panama Canal. But that was another world.

Where we were walking was a strip of loamy-smelling rainforest that lines the canal banks and serves as home to hundreds of species of birds. We were looking for a specific one.

At an overgrown spot in the forest that to me looked like any other, Nando, our guide, stopped.



The Panamanian birding guide Nando, whose full name is Ismael Hernando Quiroz Miranda, led the author and his family around the bird-rich Canal Zone in Panama. Above, Nando, left, calls out to a streak-chested antpitta. Accompanying him is his son, Ismael, who works with Nando.

“*Whoit, whoit, whoit,*” he gently whistled. Then he listened.

“You can’t just use your eyes,” he whispered. “You have to use your ears.”

The third time he called, I heard, faintly calling back, “*Whoit, whoit, whoit.*”

It was remarkable. Nando was speaking bird.

A plump little streak-chested antpitta fluttered down onto a stick, a few feet away. I stood, awe-struck, as man and bird softly called back and forth.



The streak-chested antpitta is among the hundreds of species of birds that can be found in Panama. This specific one has been communicating with Nando for years.

“This is the same bird I’ve been calling for years,” Nando said, happiness lacing his voice.

“You mean the same species of bird?” I asked.

“No, no,” he smiled. “The same individual. That bird has become quite special to me.”

It was a moment of connection between a person and a tiny animal, lasting only a few minutes. But memorable trips are made of moments like these and our recent trip to Panama was full of them.

The Other Panama



The author started his trip in Panama City, which was founded more than 500 years ago.

This past December, my family and I went bird-watching in Panama. It's a country rapidly building up its ecotourism industry. It lies in the same time zone as Chicago, thus no jet lag for most Americans, and boasts a rich, cosmopolitan history because of the canal. And Panama is home to a thousand species of birds, both migrant and native, from the magnificent frigate bird that soars on air currents for thousands of miles, to a dizzying variety of small, charismatic forest birds like the streak-chested antpitta that Nando so delicately summoned.

The same reason that the Panama Canal was created in the early 20th century, revolutionizing world trade, explains why so many birds can be spotted here. This is a land between — between two continents, North and South America; between the world's biggest oceans, the Pacific and the Atlantic; and between dramatically different elevations and climates, from flat sunny beaches to cool, rainforest-covered mountains rising more than 10,000 feet.

We planned our one-week trip months before President Trump came into office and began thundering about the United States taking back the canal. The topic didn't come up much at the three bird-watching sites we visited. Fellow guests were too obsessed with their bird lists, and the Panamanians we met tended to dismiss the threats as bombastic and didn't seem too worried.

And, as Nando said, “Everyone knows the country for one thing, but actually there is so much more.”

I second that.



Hotel la Compañía, in Panama City’s historic district, is housed in a former convent.



The Villa Ana speakeasy, where the author hung out and listened to jazz before his birding adventures.

We started in Panama City, which was founded more than 500 years ago and became one of the most vibrant trading hubs in the Americas. The old town is undergoing a renaissance, and tucked down its red brick streets are some spectacularly renovated hotels like La Compañía, which used to be a convent, and drinking holes that ooze a sweaty, romantic, old-fashioned tropical vibe where people sit at long bars under slowly swirling ceiling fans and down cocktails gleaming with condensation. We took in some excellent jazz at a speakeasy, Villa Ana, that reminded me of a classy old house in Savannah, Ga.

Wildlife Next to Cargo Ships



Nando and Ismael take birding enthusiasts to the Pipeline Road area in the Canal Zone, not far from Panama City.

Our first morning we hooked up with Nando, whose full name is Ismael Hernando Quiroz Miranda. He started his own bird-watching operation a few years ago and was recommended by someone I know in the hotel business. As we made the hour-or-so drive from town to the Canal Zone, he shared a little of his life story.

“I was part of the people who had no chance,” he said.

He explained how he grew up in a village picking crops and sawing wood after someone swindled his father out of the family farm. The outdoor world was his milieu and over the years, as he worked a string of hard jobs, he taught himself about birds, trees, habitats, climate change and Panama’s fecund ecosystem.

Within minutes of arriving in the Canal Zone, he and his son Ismael who works with him, helped us spot red lory parrots swooping across the sky; a keel-billed toucan that croaked like a frog; a whooping motmot with a long iridescent tail; and a social flycatcher, a pipsqueak of a bird with a puffed-out chest and bright yellow

feathers. Nando walked with his head slightly cocked to listen — he was always listening. When he found a bird, he used a laser pointer to guide our eyes up the tree trunks. We started around 6 a.m., as a muddy sunrise spread over the canal. By 9, we had spotted more than 55 kinds of birds.







Creatures of Panama: from top, a blue-chested hummingbird, a Panamanian night monkey and a wattled jacana.

But it wasn't just birds. My family are bird nerds and I've learned to appreciate that birding is a gateway to seeing a whole bunch of other things. While we scurried behind Nando, we saw spectacular blue morpho butterflies, lumpy rodents called agouti and leaf-cutter ants that moved across the jungle floor by the thousands, a writhing red carpet. In the distance, we heard howler monkeys, well, howling. They were incredibly loud and eerie but we couldn't ever see them, just a wall of trees: cedar trees, ficus trees, giant figs and towering stalks of bamboo.

"Whoa, look at that thing," my wife, Courtenay, said, ducking a dragon fly that buzzed past, whirling its wings like a helicopter.

"Helicopter dance fly," Nando proclaimed. "Probably female."

His knowledge stunned me.

The Magic Valley



The Canopy Lodge, in El Valle de Antón, is a small hotel created by a bird-watcher for bird-watchers.

After our fruitful day with Nando, we drove two hours from the Canal Zone to a town called El Valle de Antón. As we reached the outskirts, I noticed the houses getting bigger and the gardens becoming more gorgeous. I spotted travelers with nice backpacks strolling down the main road; a few rode bikes.

El Valle looks like something out of a fairy tale — a perfect little town of red-roofed haciendas enclosed by deep green mountains. At 2,000 feet higher than Panama City, it is substantially cooler and less humid, making it a magnet for travelers and wealthy Panamanians. New cafes with brightly painted tables line the sidewalks; we sampled empanadas at several and just thinking about those perfect crusts and gooey insides is making me hungry. El Valle had the feeling of Ubud, Bali, 25 years ago: on the verge of going big time.



Birders train their cameras and binoculars on a bird-feeding station set up by a local family in El Valle de Antón.

We spent two days at the Canopy Lodge, a cozy retreat created by a bird-watcher for bird-watchers. The first morning I woke up early, grabbed my laptop and crept to the dining room.

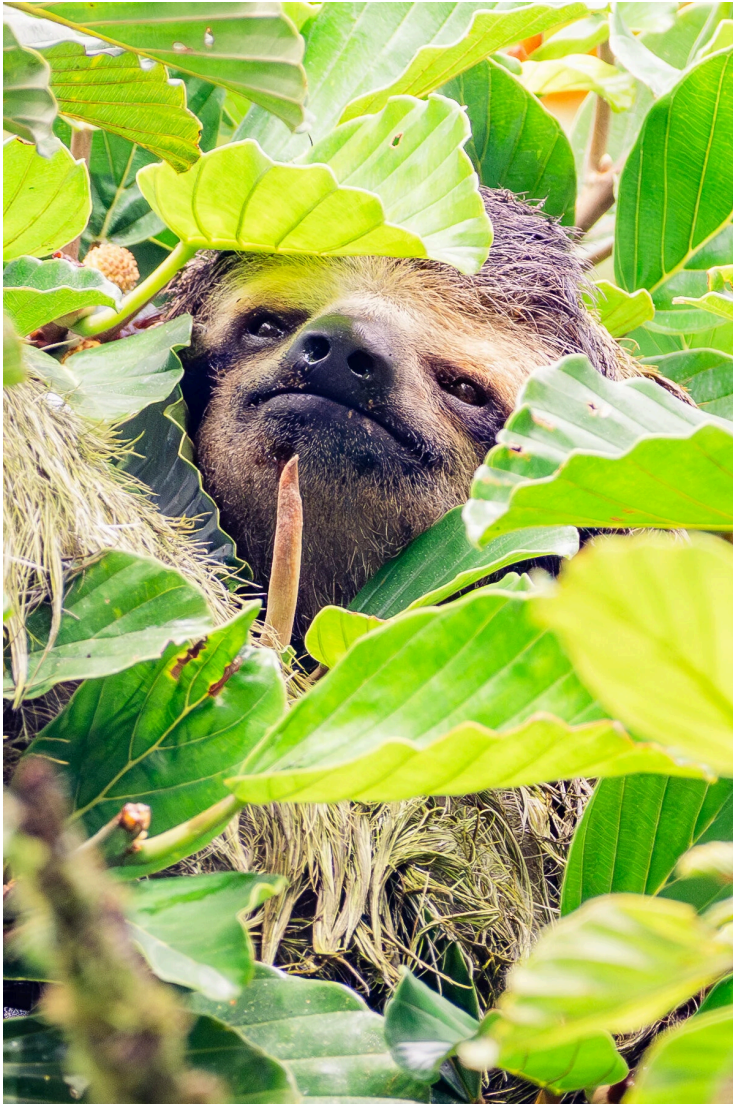
“Hey!” a tall guy said to me, popping out of nowhere. “Did you see the rufous motmot?”

It was 6:30 a.m. and I was just trying to check my email.

“It’s a gorgeous bird,” he said.



A rufous motmot, spotted during a birding tour in El Valle de Antón. On his trip, the author found one perched on a bush outside the kitchen of the Canopy Lodge, where he stayed.





More creatures of Panama: clockwise, from top left, a three-toed sloth, a lesson's motmot, an agouti and a collared trogon. He had a three-foot-long camera outfit with a camouflage hood and a lens as big as a howitzer.

Email, upon reflection, seemed stupid. So I followed his directions to a bush behind the kitchen where the rufous motmot sat in all of its splendor: marvelous deep colors — green, yellow and blue feathers — and a long delicate racket tail swinging like a metronome.

Canopy Lodge is part of a network of nature lodges founded by Raúl Arias de Para, an economist from one of Panama's better-known families. "Panama," he told me, "is a beautiful country, very different from the unfortunate image that has been created of a tax haven, money laundering and corrupt banana republic."



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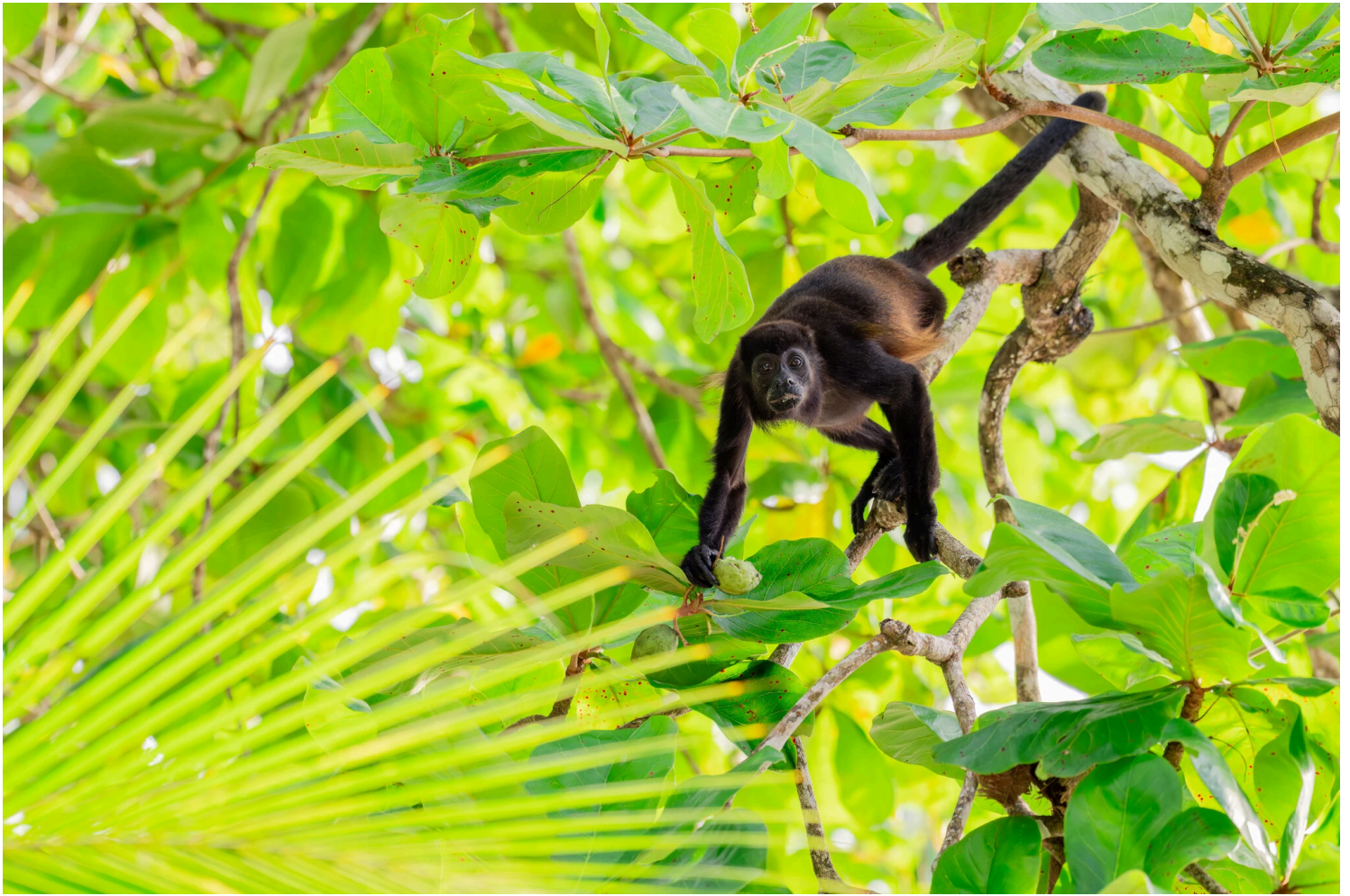
Raúl has partnered with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and set up a 24-7 bird camera behind the dining area. We spent our meals talking about birds and watching tanagers, aracarís, woodpeckers and barbets swoop in. Afterward, we searched the nearby jungles for more birds.

One highlight was visiting a banana farmer who has turned his small, lush backyard into a giant bird feeder. The guy didn't speak much English, and my Spanish is pretty weak. So we sat quietly in plastic chairs on his porch and watched colorful winged creatures come to his feeders and eat pieces of banana. My favorite was a red-legged honeycreeper, the size of a shot glass with an amazing paint job — bright blue body, bright red legs.

Coconut Ice Cream, Caimans and Owls







Scenes from Isla Palenque, in western Panama, and, bottom, a howler monkey in an almond tree.

Our last stop was Isla Palenque, a luxury resort in western Panama, on the Pacific. For this, we drove back to Panama City and took a short flight to a town called David. We came here with my extended family and there was a lot of chilling by the pool, throwing the football on the beach and pigging out at dinner (beef tenderloin soaked in delicious coffee sauce, pasta loaded with fresh seafood, lemon tarts, coconut ice cream, to give you an idea.)

Beyond our villa, wildlife lurked in the forest, and several members of the resort's staff were, like Nando, natural naturalists. So we continued to explore.

One evening, a young man named Francis took us on a walk and found rainbow beetles, scorpions, a possum and a three-foot-long caiman. At dawn, he brought us to a palm grove where a flock of crested oropendolas floated through the air carrying long vines in their beaks, building their nests. The nests hung from the trees like socks. I spent 15 happy minutes watching them.

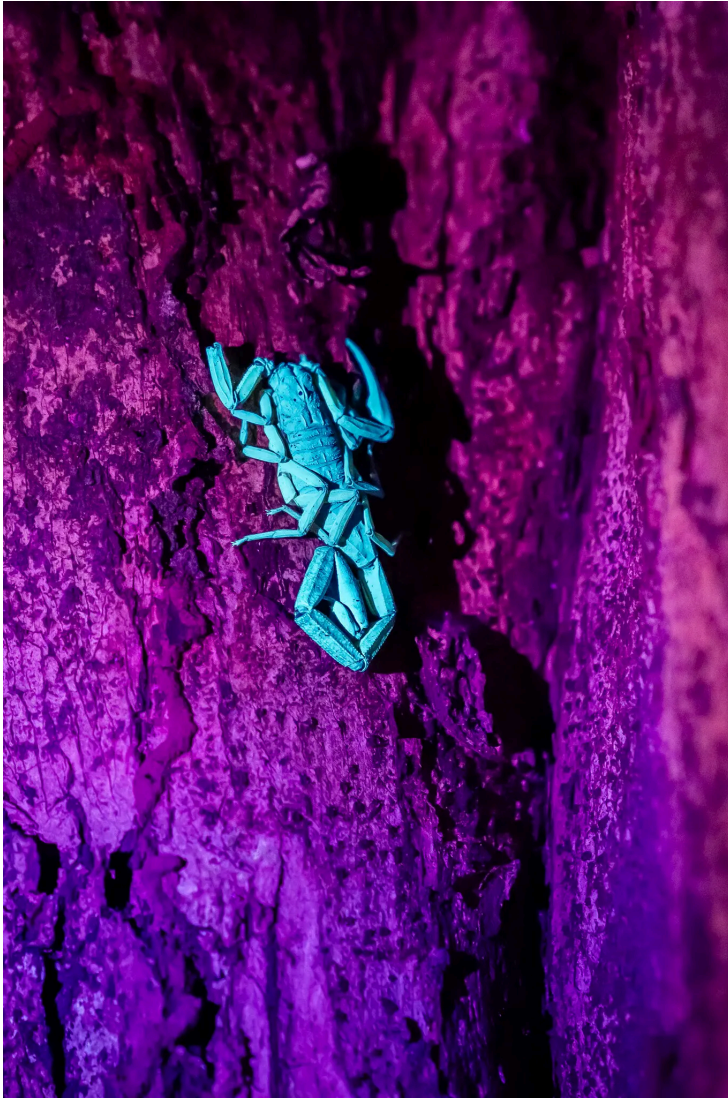


Edgar Francis Chavarria Espinosa, who goes by Francis, is a self-trained nature guide. During a recent night tour, he points out an orb-weaver spider and its web.

Francis made the mistake of telling my 15-year-old son, Apollo, our family's top birder (he's the one who got us into this), about an elusive spectacled owl that lives in the jungle. Apollo was constantly asking the resort staff if and where they had seen it. On our final day, with just a few hours to go, we made a last stab of finding it.

A few minutes' walk from our villa it felt as if we had entered a remote jungle. We could hear birds but not see them. We were covered in bugs and dripping with sweat.

As we plodded down a path, Francis held up a tight fist. I had seen U.S. marines do this on the battlefield. It means stop, immediately.



A scorpion in the jungles of western Panama.



A well-hidden American crocodile.

We stopped, immediately. He motioned. I listened.

On a branch in a patch of sunlight, the owl landed and stared at us with big, bright, curious yellow eyes.

We had come face to face with one of the most magnificent creatures in the forest and it was the listening that had guided us, just like Nando had taught us that first day.

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