

We travelled to Panama in February 2014, arriving in Panama City late in the evening. Our accommodation for the first night was at B&B La Estancia, situated on a hill just outside the city. Transfer from the airport and late check-in had all been arranged by Jo Thomas, of Wild About Travel, who organised our holiday package. We were warmly greeted and slept well in comfortable rooms, looking forward to our Panamanian adventure.

Our birding experience began the next morning, over a hearty breakfast, in the garden of La Estancia. We sat at a table on one of the balconies which overlook the wooded hillside, watching the many birds which visit the feeders placed close to the house. We enjoyed great views of many colourful birds such as tanagers, seedeaters and woodpeckers. We were delighted when a group of Geoffroy's Tamarins came really close to the house, to feed on bananas. It was a very enjoyable start to our holiday. We would certainly recommend B&B La Estancia as a great place to stay near Panama City.



Geoffroy's Tamarin



Crimson-backed Tanager

We were picked up at around 10.00am for the two-hour transfer to the Canopy Lodge. It was a pleasant journey and our first experience of the Panamanian countryside. As we crossed the bridge over the Panama Canal we could see the top of the Canopy Tower in the distance, sitting high above the rainforest. Staying at the Tower for our second week was an exciting prospect.

We arrived at the Canopy Lodge shortly before lunch and were met by Tino and the Lodge staff, who escorted us to our rooms, set in small blocks within a beautiful garden. Our room was large and comfortable, with an ensuite bathroom and a balcony looking onto a wooded area of the garden. As we opened the doors to the balcony, we saw a Rufous-tailed Hummingbird sitting on a branch just a few feet away.

Needless to say, cameras were unpacked before anything else. The Canopy Lodge is set in a high valley, surrounded by steep, rainforest-clad slopes. The river runs through the Lodge grounds, which also have pools, wooded and grassy areas. We will never forget the excitement of our first impressions of the Canopy Lodge, which we thought was truly breathtaking.

Lunch was served in the dining area within the Lodge's main building. The room is covered but completely open-sided, maintaining the feeling of contact with the gardens and rainforest. There is also a comfortable lounge area with an extensive library (and WiFi) and a seating area which overlooks the bird tables and feeders. During our week's stay we would spend much time here, enjoying excellent meals, meeting new friends, exchanging highlights of each day and relaxing with a beer and the bird-list.



Rufous-tailed Hummingbird feeding its chick



Rufous-tailed Hummingbird

The food at the Canopy Lodge was varied and very good indeed, all presented in self-service buffet style. Second helpings were irresistible! Breakfast included delicious fruits and fruit juices, porridge, eggs cooked in different ways, bacon, chorizo-style sausages and pancakes. Cereals, toast, cold meats and cheese were always available. Lunch and dinner options included seabass, chicken, pork or beef, accompanied by fresh green salads, stir-fried or roasted vegetables, sweetcorn, plantains and several different dishes of potatoes, rice or pasta. There was always fresh warm bread and hot sauce on the table for those of us who like it spicy. Dessert was usually a selection of fruit and some very nice cakes. Everyone really enjoyed the meals at the Lodge and there was widespread praise for the chefs and dining room staff. Raul and Denise happened to be staying at the Lodge while we were there and they both welcomed us warmly and spent time talking to all guests over dinner on several nights, enhancing the family atmosphere. Denise also took the trouble to provide us with the recipe for the delicious pumpkin souffle.

Our daily routine involved early starts with breakfast at 6.00am, or earlier for the full-day trips. We would then go out with our bird guide in a minibus or in 4x4 vehicles, depending upon the terrain, to one of the well-known birding sites. The half-day trips only involved short 15-30 minute drives, after which we would usually walk on a trail. The lack of any long drives was an aspect of the holiday which really appealed to us. The sites and terrain were very varied, with different birds being seen throughout the week. Our bird guide was Danilo, whose skill in locating and spotting birds was outstanding. As a result, we enjoyed many great views of a wide range of birds.

Sites visited included La Mesa, Cara Iguana, Valle Chiquito and several sites within walking distance of the Canopy Lodge. After each morning's birding, we returned to the Lodge for lunch. We would then have around two hours to relax or take photos in the garden, before heading out again for the afternoon.



Tody Motmot



Spectacled Owls

Pre-dinner drinks were brought out in the early evening. We served ourselves from a choice of spirits, wine and cold beers and noted down our selections in the drinks book, settling up at the end of our stay. The guides regularly topped-up the bird tables with bananas, so we were treated to the sight and sounds of many beautiful birds while we enjoyed our drinks and looked forward to dinner. As the bird tables provided such good photographic opportunities, several of us opted for an afternoon off to spend more time in the garden. Others chose to stay at the Lodge to swim in the natural pool, or simply relax in the beautiful surroundings. Tino and the guides were always extremely helpful in rearranging trips or groups to accommodate our wishes. On my afternoon at the Lodge I was given a large basket of bananas for photographic purposes!



Collared Aracari



Chestnut-headed Oropendola

We took several full-day trips during our stay at the Canopy Lodge, travelling to higher ground or down to the coast. The travelling was always enjoyable, as we made numerous stops with short walks, looking for birds in different areas. We visited Santa Clara, Altos del Maria and several sites on the Caribbean side.

At Santa Clara we enjoyed our lunch at Raul's seaside house and were able to walk on the beach and swim in the sea. At the other sites the guides would set up a picnic table and produce boxes of sandwiches, salads, fruit and cakes. We also had tea & coffee, cold drinks and a very addictive 'Trail Mix' of peanuts, raisins and M&Ms. We were always very well looked after and thoroughly enjoyed our day trips and picnic lunches.

After a great week at the Canopy Lodge, we were transferred to our next stop at the Canopy Tower, where we would spend our second week. The Tower sits within a secure enclosure, on top of a hill, surrounded by dense rainforest. As we walked through the front door there were hummingbirds flying around us, coming to the feeders at the Tower entrance. We were warmly welcomed by Jenn and shown up to our rooms.

We found the rooms comfortable, with en-suite shower/ bathrooms. There are large windows along the length of the rooms, looking out at the forest. We left the window screens open all day to let the breeze into the rooms, as we had no problem with mosquitos. Above the room levels, the kitchen/dining and lounge area occupies the whole floor. Again, there is an extensive library as well as a computer and WiFi. There is a similar system to the Lodge in the form of self-service drinks and record book. The drinks are reasonably-priced, with soft drinks and wine with dinner being complimentary (Yes, you may have more than one glass). Through the large windows that encircle the room the panoramic view of the rainforest canopy is stunning.

From the dining room, a small staircase leads to the observation deck on the top level of the Canopy Tower. Being at forest canopy height, the deck offers excellent views all around. This is where the Canopy Tower birding adventure begins, as the sun rises and the forest awakens.



Sunrise from the Canopy Tower observation deck



Palm Tanager in the early morning light

Tea and coffee are provided on the deck early each morning. The guides then come up to the deck as the light improves and the birds become active. They are highly skilled in spotting birds and setting up telescopes very quickly, ensuring that everyone has a chance to get good views of the birds. We certainly enjoyed some great birding each morning at the Tower.

One of the highlights was on our first morning, when we heard Carlos shout 'Blue Cotinga' and point toward a bird in the distance. Fortunately it flew near to the Tower, so we could all enjoy great views of this stunning bird.

The following morning it was Carlos (again) shouting 'Tamandua, Tamandua', after which we were all treated to an eye-level display of a Tamandua feeding in the treetops. We were delighted, as we particularly wanted to see some Panamanian mammals.



Blue Cotinga



Northern Tamandua

There was always something new to see from the observation deck. Late afternoons proved to be a good time to see raptors, as they came closer to the Tower. In the evenings we could see the distant lights of Panama City as the sun set. Being up on the deck, watching the changing light and listening to the Howler Monkeys and the birds singing was a very rewarding and memorable experience for us.

After early morning birding, breakfast was served at 7.30am, followed by half-day trips to local sites, or earlier for those guests taking full-day trips. Again, the bird guides were excellent (Michael and Domi were our guides), providing us with great views of a long list of birds. Sites visited included Semaphore Hill, Summit Gardens, Ammo Ponds and several different areas along the Chagres River. We took a full-day trip along the Pipeline Road, a very well-known area for birding, where we saw a number of new birds. It was here that we happened upon an enormous ant swarm, accompanied by many attendant birds feeding on insects fleeing from the ants. It was a spectacular sight. While keeping a very wary eye on the ants, we had great views of several different woodcreepers, antshrikes, antbirds and the much sought-after Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo.



Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo



Bicolored Antbird

After a great second-week at the Canopy Tower we had seen around 350 species of birds in our two-week holiday, as well as a number of mammals. We had already seen Agoutis, Squirrels (Red-tailed and Western Pygmy) and Sloths (Two and Three-Toed) at the Canopy Lodge. At the Tower we saw Nine-banded Armadillos and White-nosed Coatis along the roadside on several occasions. We also saw a Kinkajou and a Central American Woolly Opossum while spotlighting on a night drive, along with some nightjars. The guides are happy to organise night drives for groups who wish to see nocturnal species.

As with the Lodge, the food and service at the Tower was very good and appreciated by all the guests. Having read some mixed reviews about noise levels in the Tower, we were delighted that we had no problems whatsoever. Although constructed of metal, the Tower walkways and stairs are well padded to reduce noise. Everyone was in bed early in preparation for early starts, so we had a very comfortable week without disturbance or the need for earplugs.

We were booked in to the Lodge for our first week due to room availability, travelling as a group of four. This proved to be ideal for us as we acclimatised to the hotter temperatures (coming from a UK winter!) very well in the cooler, higher ground at the Lodge. It was warmer at the Tower, but there was always a breeze, so we were very comfortable throughout the holiday.

Thanks to:

- Jo Thomas of Wild About Travel, for arranging all aspects of our holiday so efficiently.
- Tino and all the staff of the Canopy Lodge;
- Carlos, Jenn and all the staff of the Canopy Tower;
- Danilo, Michael and Domi;

Thank you for looking after us and making our stay so enjoyable. Your friendly, informal delivery of excellent service gave us an exceptional holiday experience which we will always remember - a birding holiday of a lifetime.

- Special thanks to Raul and Denise for your warm welcome and for making your dream of the Canopy Family the reality that we all may enjoy.

See you next time.

Kind Regards

David Roach & Rosemary Fielding.

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