

DARIEN GAP



The almost impenetrably dense rainforests of the Darien Gap are the one missing link in the Pan-American highway. Home only to a handful of lost civilisations, a myriad of unique species and mist-shrouded mountains – its humid depths and 5,000 year old Petroglyphs have lured intrepid souls for centuries. Take on this pioneering jungle expedition to be one of the few explorers to cross the Darien Gap on foot.

Aim

The aim of this epic jungle trekking expedition is to cross the infamous Darien Gap on foot from Puerto Quimba to Playa Muerto on the Pacific coast.

Forging a route through the humid, mostly uninhabited rainforests, which divide North America from South, you'll uncover hidden, 5,000-year-old stone carvings – seen only by a privileged handful of explorers for generations.

In the company of renowned naturalist and local expert Rick Morales, you'll meet Embera Indians en route (an autonomous indigenous Indian group living in the Darien). At night, you'll wild camp in hammocks near isolated village communities. Cross the Gap to break through one of adventure travel's final frontiers.

Highlights

- Explore the legendary jungles that separate the Americas.
- Learn jungle survival skills from expert guides.
- Test your grit and perseverance in a merciless environment.
- Meet local villagers including Embera Indians.
- See the mysterious petroglyphs, remnants of an ancient culture.
- Explore the jungle rivers by boat.

What our teams say

“This expedition went off flawlessly. Rick’s solid knowledge of the area, inhabitants, wildlife, flora and fauna contributed to a remarkable experience. This is a strenuous trip – but well worth the effort. Highly recommended.”
– Randall Peeters, 2018 teammate.

Why go

The Darien Gap

The Darien Gap is a geographical challenge; its near impenetrable jungles the only interruption in the otherwise complete, 30,000-mile-long Pan-American Highway. For centuries its mystery lured and seemingly swallowed up ill-prepared explorers in its canopied, labyrinthine jungles. Travel writer, Hilary Bradt, describes it as a ‘swampy wasteland crawling with venomous creatures, ready at a moment’s notice to suck unsuspecting explorers into its oozing depths’.

This reputation warned off many would-be adventurers away. Even today, crossing the gap remains a pioneering achievement for those who succeed. Of the handful of successful crossings in the last 50 years (Secret Compass teams aside), the most well documented is possibly the 1975 motorised crossing undertaken by the British explorer, Col. John Blashford-Snell.

The Embera Indians

The Embera are one of Panama’s indigenous Indian groups, living in the Darien along the shores of the Chucunaque, Sambu and Tuira rivers. They live in small villages of five to 20 houses and have their own form of autonomous government and rules, separate from the Panamanian government. Some still live off the land hunting wild fish and game using traditional methods. While the Embera have long been known for their distinctive appearance – wearing brightly coloured skirts and painting their bodies in intricate geometric patterns – they’re just as likely to be wearing normal western clothes these days. Smartphones and satellite TV too have found their way into the jungle’s remotest reaches. Teammates keen to learn from a ‘host and guest’ experience when staying near villages (rather than expecting to observe contrived displays of traditional culture) will leave feeling rewarded.

The Petroglyphs

Petroglyphs are rock engravings, often associated with prehistoric peoples. The ‘Yarre Mongara’ or Monkey Stone was documented by Robert Hyman (an American photographer-explorer) and Daniel Castaneda (a local Embera Indian) in 1995. Previously only known to the local Embera Indians who inhabit the area, the petroglyphs were dated to 3000-5000 BC. Hyman returned in 2005 to discover other sites though the area remains largely unexplored with more sites potentially remaining undiscovered.

Escaping colonisation

Arriving in what are now the Americas, the Spanish first settled in the Darien region in 1510. Their initial efforts to colonise were torched by indigenous tribes a few years later. Later came the Scottish, who founded a coastal trading colony. They ultimately failed too, with settlers perishing from disease and attack and a loss of wealth so significant that Scotland was all but bankrupted. If history had played out here as elsewhere in the world during this period, the Darien would be today one of the most populated regions in the Americas. Instead, it remains as wild today as it was during the days of the attempted conquests.

Your guide

Rick Morales is one of Panama’s most respected naturalists and guides having worked there since 1998. In recent years he has been directly involved with the rediscovery of the colonial trail, Camino Real Colonial. Rick is frequently quoted in articles and literature concerning the Darien Gap and its people, flora and fauna. Feedback for Rick is consistently of the ‘embarrassingly good’ variety. His local connections and knowledge ensure that the

team is kept best informed at all times, with teammates always keen to pick his brains on topics from the jungle and its inhabitants to the current or historical political situation in the region. In 2011 Rick became the first person to walk the Panama Trail, a thru-hike from the Colombian border to Costa Rica. This is part of the Trans-Panama project which aims to develop and map sections of trail connecting regions and people throughout Panama.

Wildlife in the Darien

There is a staggering range of bird life in the Darien including the harpy eagle, four species of macaw, kingfishers and tropical toucans. The region is also home to jaguars, tapirs, anteaters, monkeys, iguanas, snakes, frogs and caimans. Despite its natural riches, expedition leader Rick is keen for teammates to arrive with sensible expectations about bird and animal spotting. This expedition is a challenging trek in a region known for its wildlife, rather than a staged safari with guaranteed sightings. He's recently seen all manner of creatures from troops of monkeys to a stealthy puma... so fingers crossed the forest is on your side!

The plan

Secret Compass runs expeditions with framework itineraries, rather than guided tours with set daily plans. Read more about Our Approach here. The following is the outline plan for this epic expedition – the 'substance' rather than the specifics. A fuller itinerary is provided in the Expedition Handbook, available on request or upon application to join the team.

Teammates arrive

All teammates will arrive into Panama city at or before 1600 on 16 March 2019. Teammates will then make their own way to the downtown hotel where your Secret Compass leader Rick Morales will welcome you. The expedition officially begins this early evening, with an expedition briefing and team dinner. Undertake a training and acclimatisation trek the next day on the historic Camino de Cruces, in Soberania National Park. This will help iron out kit niggles and make sure that all teammates are happy with their equipment before this epic jungle adventure truly gets underway.

On expedition

The action begins with a motorised boat journey to the start of the trek. As a team, led by Rick and with his robust support team, you will then set forth into the jungle, trekking deep into the heart of the Darien National Park. For the next nine days you will chop through overgrown wild jungle; pick up little-used paths now and then; wade through rivers; and sometimes navigate waterways in dug-out canoes or other vessels. You will sleep in hammocks at night, eating local food and fresh fish.

This trekking section of the expedition also includes an adventure out to find the ancient petroglyphs, lost to most in the heart of the overgrown Darien. Exit the jungle at last onto the welcome openness of the ocean shore safe in the knowledge that you're one of the few people to have crossed the notorious Darien Gap.

Goal achieved

Once out of the jungle, the team will await the return motorised boat journey to Porto Quimba. It's then a drive back into Panama City for a celebratory team meal and a hotel night. Teammates are free to depart on flights or onward travel at any time on 29 March 2019.

Fitness

Secret Compass expeditions are achievable by anyone with a healthy lifestyle and a good level of general fitness. Team members should be willing to be part of a team working together to achieve the goal of the expedition. The biggest challenge on this expedition will be trekking through the dense vegetation.

Teammates who arrive without meeting the agreed minimum fitness requirements can jeopardise themselves and

the expedition's goal so do take training seriously, prepare as appropriate and arrive fit and ready to go.

Applicants will receive a Handbook with further expedition information. Get in touch with any fitness, health, training or kit questions that remain. Expedition leader Rick also prefers a Skype conversation with teammates in advance to ensure that fitness expectations and kit needs are met. Teammates must be comfortable with the following.

Minimum fitness requirements

- Trek: up to 15km per day (the going is very slow in the jungle).
- Daily activity: from six to ten hours' trekking.
- Carry: up to 15kg per person in a rucksack.
- Terrain: expect boggy, wet and close tropical rainforest and river crossings. It can be hilly with a maximum elevation of 600m.
- Climate: a hot, humid jungle environment.
- Swim: a return boat journey and river crossings and journeys (wading and in dug-out canoes) are essential parts of this expedition. Being 100% comfortable around water is required and being able to swim will be very beneficial.
- Age: 21+

Included

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- Secret Compass leader with full communications kit and medical kit.
- Specialist guides and instructors.
- Accommodation throughout (hammocks and twin-share hotels).
- All food (snacks and meals) and soft drinks.
- Internal transport as outlined in itinerary.
- Special permits and permissions within Panama's Darien Gap.

Not included

- International [flights](#)/ travel to and from Panama City.
- [Travel insurance](#) (obligatory).
- Tips to local guides (discretionary but expected by the local guides in Panama. Your leader will discuss this in country and consider bring small denominations of US\$ to enable this).
- Alcohol unless provided by hosts with meals.
- Personal equipment (full kit list in the Handbook).
- Any activities, accommodation or arrangements outside of the Secret Compass itinerary.

Exped FAQ

On application to join this epic expedition to Panama, potential teammates will receive a detailed Expedition Handbook. Here are some expedition-specific questions and our general [FAQ](#) will answer many other questions. Get in touch if your question remains unanswered.

Can you recommend any jungle kit?

The Secret Compass Journal (The Compass) contains advice on boots, shirts and trousers for jungle treks; read [The Essential Guide to Jungle Footwear](#) or get tips on [Jungle Survival](#). Teammates will receive a full kit list which will answer most kit questions.

Can I check I'm bringing the right kit?

Our Darien expedition leader is very happy to have individual kit conversations via Skype with those booked onto this team in the build-up to departure to ensure everyone is prepared and has the right kit.

Will there be phone signal in the Darien?

There will be mobile phone coverage in Panama City at the beginning and end of the expedition. Signal in the jungle is unlikely. Joining this expedition with the mindset of escaping technology and the day-to-day routine is advisable.

Can I charge my gadgets?

Power sources are infrequent in the Darien. Each teammate is advised to bring their own spare batteries or power packs. Due to the shade of the jungle, solar packs might not work as well as usual.

Can you cater for vegetarians?

This expedition can accept people with some dietary requirements. Outline your specific needs on the Application Form to help us best provision the team and we'll go from there.

Could local activity affect us?

Secret Compass has operated successfully in this challenging region for many years on TV and film projects, working with the very best in-country partners. If any local developments affected the planned expedition region, robust contingency plans would come into play as with all Secret Compass expeditions. In the case of the Darien expedition specifically, the team would undertake a challenging and equally adventurous jungle expedition in a different part of the Panamanian jungle.