

## Adventure in Panama

By

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We stood, wrapped in orange lifejackets, on the banks of the Chagres River in Panama staring into a motorized dugout canoe with rough plank seats. Our guide, Peter Garcia, assured us this was not the usual Central American tour. Instead, we would experience something truly 'outside the box'. We were to leave civilization behind and spend the next two days in the jungle. As we boarded the tippy canoe, I so wanted to return to my box instead of spending the night with the Embera Indians deep in the Panamanian rainforest.

As our canoe approached the village, music erupted from the riverbank and I spotted the palm-leaf thatched huts of the Indians. Everyone crowded the shoreline to greet us. The men played drums and flutes as the women warmly welcomed us amid the excited cries of the children. Our fears of being 'strangers in a strange land' melted with their smiles. We spoke the greetings Peter had taught us, "Menna" (to women) and "Menna Jaba" (to men). The children said, "Hola" to anyone who glanced their way.

Each woman wore a sarong-like skirt of bright designs in primary colours and necklaces of silver coins. The status of a woman depended on the number of coins she wore and some had 4 or 5 strands ranging from dime-sized coins to quarters. They also had strands of beads looped around their necks.

The Embera men wore loin clothes in solid colours although some of high status wore beaded skirts as well. They also wore bead necklaces and some, silver wrist cuffs. Almost all had their bodies painted in abstract designs created using a fruit dye called Jagua.

These Indians came to Panama from Columbia when the native Panamanians were wiped out by the Spanish. In 1984, the Embera villages became part of the Chagres National Park. Since clearing the forest was forbidden, they were forced to abandon their agricultural way of life and embrace tourism.

Young boys led us from the river and into a large meeting hut where we could view the crafts created by the villagers. Rough tables displayed fine baskets, intricate carvings (tagua nut and cocobolo wood), and beadwork. Unfortunately, there was no time for shopping as we were off to tube the Chagres, one of the cleanest rivers in the Americas.

After changing into swimsuits (there were outhouses and a shower hut for guests), we returned to the dugouts and headed upstream. The wildlife of the park was incredible and I identified herons, egrets, vultures (called the Panamanian airforce), parrots, flycatchers, tanagers, kites, pelicans, kingfishers and turtles. The Chagres empties into a man-made lake where tilapia, caiman and crocodile live. This lake controls the water flowing through the Panama Canal. I was happy to learn no piranha swam the river.

Using both strength and knowledge of the waterway, the Indians poled our dugouts up the river's rapids. Tubing the rapids at my age (over fifty) seemed a rather foolish undertaking and I again longed for the safety of my 'box'.

As our canoe rounded a bend in the river, we came upon a battered dugout high on a rocky beach, its weathered wood a stark contrast to the surrounding green of the jungle.

Peter laughed and told us he was sure his run of bad luck was over. I remained unconvinced.

The next turn in the river brought us to a beach awash with bright yellow tubes. Peter's assistant, Iann Sanchez had spent the morning inflating them. Peter warned us Iann could get nasty after such hot work but he was a man whose quiet confidence eased our fears. He would guide us down the Class 1 rapids and assured us he had not lost a person yet. After adjusting our helmets, we each grabbed a tube and ventured into the river. The water was about 25° C so refreshing after our hot canoe ride. Panama is 8° north of the equator so the sun is fierce.

With arms flailing, our tubes got caught up in the river and bobbed towards the first rapids. What a rush! A couple of men were dunked but young Embera boys helped them back into their tubes. In a quiet pond below the falls, we enjoyed the peace of the rainforest and heard toucans and howler monkeys in the forest canopy above.

Back at the village, Peter introduced us to Miguel Flaco, the village's medicine man or botanical doctor who showed us his medicinal garden and explained the uses of each plant. Trained in Columbia, he was a stately gentleman with a ready smile that charmed us all. He had worked closely with pharmaceutical companies helping them learn the nature of the plants of Panama and showed us his Viagra plant. Miguel was also a talented musician and cocobolo carver.

We ate the diet of the Embera--tilapia fish, rice and plantains although it was supplemented with the tastiest pineapple and watermelon, I have ever had. Tilapia was an introduced species of fish so the park did not restrict its fishing. It is also credited with

keeping the mosquito population down. The village women who cooked for us also made an incredible fried bread reminiscent of the beignets of New Orleans.

After lunch, we browsed the village crafts and I had a geometric pattern painted on my arm with Jagua dye. Peter introduced us to the village elders, one of whom had been the jungle trainer for the first U.S. astronauts. The young women then danced two pieces accompanied by drums and flutes.

“This is a National Geographic moment,” someone whispered.

Later, we met our hosts for the night. My husband and I were to share the ‘7/11 hut’ with two other men. Embera homes are on stilts (away from poisonous snakes and other nasty creatures) but ours had a small shop beneath that sold pop and goodies. After scrambling up a notched log ladder, we laid out our sleeping mat on the thatched-covered deck of the house.

As darkness fell, we enjoyed some of Peter’s tales of his jungle adventures. As I listened, I became aware of the chink of coins beside me. A young Embera girl of about 14 sat next to us. I smiled at her, desperately wishing I could say something she’d understand. Using sign language, she asked me my name. She then told us hers. She was as curious about our lives as we were of hers.

Without electricity, the Panamanian night is truly black. As the Embera came and went, their flashlights were little haloes of light in the darkness. Kerosene lanterns or pop bottle filled with kerosene and a wick were soft beacons warming the night. Fireflies flitting about made the jungle village seem like it was in a fairy tale.

This romantic notion died at four in the next morning when the chief rooster crowed. Before we could throttle the creature, Peter told us the bird kept the snakes away

so we forgave his inability to tell time. Not much later, men left to fish for our breakfast and by six, all the birds in the rainforest woke and greeted each other. Sleeping in was not an option.

After breakfast, we visited the village school. It was a two-room hut (school and lunch rooms) housing grades 1 to 6. When Panama took over the Canal from the U.S. in 1999, they pledged the funds from the transiting ships would go into universal education and health care. This meant every child attends school and a teacher, sent from Panama City, ensures they receive the proper curriculum. However, the village must provide the school's materials so we donated the pencils, crayons, chalk, etc that we had brought to the president of the 'PTA'.

We ended our time among the Indians enjoying a jungle waterfall and lagoon. There were tears at our farewell but since the Embera have no word for good-bye, we all knew we would meet again. I was happy to add this little Panamanian village to my much expanded 'box'.

If you go:

Visit during the dry season, mid December to mid March. Panama has a tropical climate with high temperatures and humidity. Daytime average temperatures are 30° C. Bring waterproof sunscreen, the higher the SPF number the better. Insect repellent can be used but Peter told us its smell offended the Embera. If there is a concern about tropical diseases, a visit to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website ([www.cdc.gov/](http://www.cdc.gov/)) can alleviate any fears.

The U.S. dollar is on par with the Panamanian balaboa and accepted by the Embera.

They charge \$1US per day for the work they do.

Adventures in Panama ([www.adventuresinpanama.com](http://www.adventuresinpanama.com)) -- founded in 1990 by Peter Garcia, has a variety of adventure tourism packages. "No Tours just Adventures"

To view photographs of my adventure, go to [www.vashti.com/panama](http://www.vashti.com/panama)