



COUNTRY

OVERVIEW

& PACKING

GUIDELINES

Panama: Marine Ecology & Blue Carbon
Conservation in the Pacific & Caribbean
Summer 2024

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COUNTRY OVERVIEW

GENERAL INFORMATION

Panama celebrated 100 years of independence in 2003, but looks back on a human history that, according to archaeological evidence, stretches back at least 11,000 years, or even more according to recent findings. Colonized by the Spanish in the 16th century, Panama broke with Spain in 1821 and joined a union of Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador, named the Republic of Gran Colombia. When the latter dissolved in 1830, Panama remained part of Gran Colombia.

US presence in Panama started at the middle of the XIX century with the opening of the first transcontinental railroad in 1855, helping to speed up the California Gold Rush

After several unsuccessful attempts to separate from Colombia in the XIX century, Panama finally seceded successfully from Colombia in 1903 and signed a treaty with the US allowing for the construction of a trans-isthmian canal and US control over the area (the future Panama Canal Zone). The Panama Canal was designed by the US Army Corps of Engineers and built by an army of laborers, many of whom came from all over the world (from India, China, the Caribbean, and elsewhere), between 1904 and 1914. Control over the Canal was a source of conflict between Panama and the United States during the last quarter of the 20th Century, until the 1977 Canal Treaty stipulating that the US control of the Canal, as well as US military bases, would be phased out and officially be transferred to Panamanian control on December 31, 1999.

Today Panama is a multicultural melting pot with immigrants from many parts of the world, including prominent Afro-descendent, Indian, Chinese, Middle Eastern, Greek, and Spanish communities, as well as a diverse indigenous population. There is a wide income gap and tremendous inequality, both in urban and rural areas. An ambitious plan to expand the Canal was approved in 2006 and was completed and opened in 2016. Due to the Canal expansion, and other international business presence in the country, economic development is rapidly increasing for those able to get a piece of the pie. These development forces often clash with the expanding recognition of Panama's astounding biodiversity, which is increasingly drawing tourists as well as prospector's intent on exploiting the

wealth of natural resources. One of those instances of natural resource exploitation attempts was stopped last year, amid country-wide protests against one of the biggest open pit copper mines in the Americas. The Panamanian Supreme Court declared the contract between the government of Panamá and the mining company unconstitutional, calling for an organized closure and cleanup of the mining area.

CLIMATE AND GEOGRAPHY

The climate in Panama is tropical and tempered by cooling Caribbean trade winds. Temperatures in the coastal districts range from 85°F to about 96°F. The average temperature of 92°F varies little throughout the year. The summer program coincides with the wet season. Rainfall during the wet season ranges from 1000-5000mm depending on the location. The amount of rainfall, however, also varies widely from north to south of the country, with the amount of rain increasing as one moves north.

Bordered by Costa Rica to the west and Colombia to the east, is important to note that unlike most of the other countries in the Americas, Panamá's main axis is east to west, therefore north of Panama you will find the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean to the south. Panama is approximately a 4-hour flight from Houston or Miami. The Isthmus of Panama is bisected by the Cordillera Central that runs the length of the country dividing into the Pacific and the Caribbean regions. The provinces of Coclé, Herrera, Los Santos, and Veraguas are referred to as "central provinces. There are about 480 rivers in Panama that drain into the Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea, and about 1500 islands off both coasts. There is also Barro Colorado Island in the Panama Canal that is famous for the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute housed there and is one of the most studied places in tropical biology.

DIET

SIT Study Abroad provides experiential learning opportunities where students become embedded in their host community. As such, we strive to accommodate serious food allergies where possible but simply cannot ensure that all dietary restrictions or non-medically mandated diets can be accommodated.

Students are encouraged to participate in the local food culture as a central aspect of daily life. By trying to replicate your diet at home you may miss out on an important part of your host culture. Due to the unique living and learning community central to all SIT programs, we cannot separate food and eating communally (including with your host family) from the program experience. Please consider local diet seriously when selecting your program of choice. Your admissions counselor is a great resource in better understanding the local diet.

Panamanian food reflects its geography and climate, with an abundance of seafood and tropical fruits. There is also a lot of meat, as well as a lot of fried food. As in other Central American countries, rice is the main staple dish and the main source of carbohydrates. You will also find *tortillas*, which are made of cornmeal, somewhat thicker than elsewhere in Central America and are usually fried. *Empanadas* that can be made of flour or corn, chicken, or beef *tamales*, made of moist corn meal, eggs, yuca, cassava, and plantains are other staples. The national dish of Panama is called *sancocho* and is a flavorful chicken-and-vegetable soup which main source of flavor comes from a herb called culantro, not to be confused with cilantro, being this last one, culantro, a very important condiment in most of the Panamanian food. Other dishes include *hojaldras* (fried flour dough), *arroz con pollo* (rice with chicken), plantains (fried and boiled), *patacones* (fried flattened green plantains), *tajadas* (ripe fried plantain), *chicheme* (a milky drink made of boiled whole corn grains with vanilla and cinnamon) *chichas* (fruit juices). You may also encounter dishes such as lobster, sea turtle and turtle's eggs, iguana, and shark, which are all endangered in and around Panama due to overfishing and loss of habitat (so please avoid them!). Food purchased on the street may be of questionable sanitation, so it is wise to avoid it.

Due to local conditions, the program cannot support students with vegan diets. Vegetarians will be able to maintain a healthy diet, though depending on flexibility about meat products (broth, etc.) they may have to maintain a high level of vigilance in order to ensure true meatlessness. Also, “vegetarian” in Latin America is often taken to mean avoidance of *red* meat, so you may be served chicken and fish unless you specify. It will be wise to always emphasize this before ordering your food.

Stricter dietary practices such as veganism or keeping kosher will be extremely difficult to maintain healthfully in Panama. If you choose a meatless diet, please bring supplements with you.

Note: if you have special dietary needs, including allergies, please inform our office prior to the start of your program. We will advise you on realistic expectations about avoiding or incorporating certain foods within the program context.



SAFETY, SECURITY, AND HEALTH

Maintaining good health is essential to having a successful study abroad experience.

SIT recommends doing your own research to stay up to date on [CDC guidelines](#). It will be critical that you educate yourself about the potential health and safety hazards that may exist in your areas of travel, and make informed decisions about what preventative measures to take prior to departure. SIT encourages students to have an informed discussion with your doctor and/or a travel clinician about what vaccines and other prophylactic medication you should receive.

Consider your normal routines for maintaining your physical and mental health & wellbeing. How might your program impact your ability to continue these routines? With this in mind, SIT strongly recommends bringing a full semester's supply of prescription medication(s). Getting a prescription filled outside of one's home country is very difficult, if not impossible. Equally challenging is receiving medication from home by mail. Therefore, students should bring an entire semester's worth of medication with them.

Students are also advised to bring several extra inhalers and/or Epi-pens if prescribed.

Students should speak with their health care provider and/or a travel clinician and consult [CDC guidelines](#) regarding required and recommended immunizations and country regulations. Students participating on programs that require the yellow fever vaccine, will receive a signed and stamped “yellow card” after getting vaccinated, known as the International Certificate of Vaccination or Prophylaxis (ICVP, which can be printed here). It is important to bring this card with you when traveling to the program. SIT recommends that students insert this document into their passport so that it is easily accessible when requested by immigration officials. Even if yellow fever is not a requirement for your program, it is good practice to bring a copy of your immunization record with you, including your Covid 19 immunization card(s).

If you have any questions, please reach out to the [Student Health Office](#).



Panama is a relatively safe country with the same basic big-city petty crime concerns as any country in the world, including the US. You will be expected to take care and responsibility for yourself and the group, and refrain from engaging in behavior that is unsafe and/or culturally inappropriate.

If an area looks unsafe, think that is unsafe and don't go forward, use common sense avoiding dangerous situations especially at night

Especially while in Panama City, you should be aware of your surroundings and belongings, and take care not to “flash” expensive items such as electronics, cell phones, or jewelry. Keep in mind that the belongings you bring for a term are often more than an entire rural family might own, so using

them in an obvious way makes an economic and cultural statement, even if this is not your intention.

Before departure, make two photocopies of all important documents and credit cards; leave one copy at home (and tell someone where it is!) and bring one along with you, carried separately from the originals. Bring a money belt or some other safe means to carry your valuables. For this program, you will also need to bring your passport on excursions, as there are often immigration checkpoints en route.

Excellent healthcare facilities and pharmacies are available in Panama City, and there are also private clinics in many smaller cities and towns. The program staff has information available about healthcare resources for almost any need, including dental, vision, and psychological care. There will be a few times during excursion periods when the group does not have immediate access to care, particularly specialized care. Please be as prepared for this as possible. Preparation might mean bringing an extra pair of glasses/contact lenses or reviewing your coping strategies for an issue affecting your mental health. You should bring enough of any prescription medication to last you through the term and any post-program travel. It is a good idea to bring a small first-aid kit and copies of any prescriptions.

ACCOMMODATIONS

On this program, you will stay at field stations, in rustic cabins, small hotels, and other field site accommodations. In some cases, accommodations will be more modest than what you may be accustomed to. In most cases, field sites will have running water. However, in some sites electricity is not available. During the Field Project period you might stay with a host family or other independent accommodation that best serves the purposes of your project, so please be ready to adapt yourself to more basic conditions.

TRANSPORTATION

Due to the dynamic nature of the program, the group will travel by public and private bus, airplane, boat, and possibly dugout canoe. During the Field Project period (FSP) you may take a bus, a boat, or a plane, in addition to walking a fair amount.

COMMUNICATION

While you may want to be in regular communication with friends and family from home during the term abroad, please bear in mind that different time zones, unreliable phone lines, and changing program activities can complicate communication.

It's important to be clear with family and friends about your availability during the term. **Keep in mind that you will be without Wi-Fi access of much of the time while you are in Panama and you should let your friends and family know this.** Many students recommend making an appointment to call home or to receive a call. You should also consider the impact of constant communication with friends and family at home on your cultural immersion.

PHONES AND E-MAIL

As part of SIT's commitment to student safety and security, all students are required to have a working cell phone capable of making and receiving both local and international calls, including a data plan so that your phone is operational when you are away from Wi-Fi. If needed, during orientation SIT Study Abroad staff can assist students in purchasing a local SIM card, and how to acquire minutes for calls and texting.

Wi-fi access is available often in Panama City at local cafés and homestays but is often not available while the group is on excursion.

MAILINGS

Unlike receiving a package here in the US, receiving a package at your program site is usually **expensive and problematic**. Customs agents must inspect all packages and you, as the recipient, are responsible for duty and storage fees. In addition, there are cases of items being lost in the mail or taking so long to reach the recipient that the recipient is nearly back in the US by the time the items are received. For these reasons, sending packages should be done only for emergency situations. Additionally, sending valuables is highly discouraged.

For this program, if you have an emergency and need to receive a package urgently, packages sent via DHL courier can be received. However, packages sent via the US Postal service do not arrive. DHL services are available in-country. Despite cheaper prices, reliance on the US Postal Service is not advised due to delays and unreliability. When given

the option, it's always a good idea to send packages certified and with a tracking number that allows the sender to track the package. Keep in mind that you will frequently be traveling and will not be able to receive packages throughout most of the program. There is no residential mail delivery in Panama. If a package must be sent, please have it sent via DHL (most reliable service) and consult the local program staff for instructions on how to do so.

MONEY

In addition to tuition, SIT Study Abroad program fees cover room and board throughout the program. When room and/or board are not taken with the group, students will be given a stipend to cover related expenses. SIT will cover daily commuting costs, if any, and excursions that are part of the normal program itinerary. During the FSP period, students will receive a stipend for basic room and board only, based on the cost of living at the program base. **Any domestic travel, interpretation services, or supplies necessary for the FSP are the students' responsibility.** Please plan accordingly.

Panama has adopted the US dollar as its official currency, so you will not need to convert money. You will notice that some locally minted Panamanian coins circulate alongside US coins, but all banknotes will be US dollar bills. The term *balboa* is often used interchangeably with the word *dolar* to refer to the currency.

Most students access funds from their US bank accounts using their VISA or MasterCard debit cards. Any debit card that is linked to the PLUS or CIRRUS networks should also work at ATMs in the country and can be used to pay. Credit cards (VISA, MasterCard) will work in most locations in the capital and the interior of the country, and they can be very useful in emergencies, medical and otherwise. ATMs are accessible throughout urban Panama; however, will not be accessible at program and independent field sites. Travelers' checks are not accepted in Panama.

If using a debit and/or credit card, you should contact your bank and/or credit card companies regarding your travel plans. If you don't inform these companies that you will be away, they will often assume the card has been lost or stolen and will put an immediate hold on the card. You should also check on costs of withdrawal, as these costs vary and can sometimes be very expensive. Renewing and receiving reissued credit and debit cards while

on the program will be an expensive and highly inconvenient process. Before you leave for your program, please check the expiration dates on your cards to ensure that they will not expire while you are abroad. It is also very important that you make photocopies of all your debit/credit card information and leave them with someone you trust in case your card(s) is/are lost or stolen.

Following are suggestions for spending money during the program, including estimates for textbooks, FSP-related expenses, medical expenses, personal spending, and gifts. Figures are based on recent student evaluations, though individual spending habits vary widely and **these costs are averages**.

A suggested total amount of money to budget ranges from **US\$700 to \$1,400**. To determine where you might fall in this range, please examine your spending habits during a typical semester at your home school and consider any exceptional expenditures you may have on the program, including travel costs for your planned FSP or a specific personal expense.

Please budget approximately:

Personal spending (from past student suggestions):	\$200-\$400
COVID-19 Test(s) (may be required for entry; subject to change and costs may vary)	\$100-250
Books, printing, supplies:	\$50
Up-front medical costs:	\$200
Cell phone costs:	\$40
Internet portable modem and service (optional)	\$80
Potential FSP travel expenses:	\$100-\$200
Gifts for family/friends in the US:	\$50-\$100
Typical Internet café usage:	\$1/hour
Estimated total:	\$700-\$1,400

VISITORS AND FREE TIME

SIT strongly discourages and will not provide support for any visitors to students during the term, due to the rigorous nature of the program and the disruption that such visits cause in program flow and group dynamics. Students should be sure that relatives and friends are aware of this policy and that visits are scheduled for dates after the formal conclusion of the program. Students will not be excused from program components to attend to visitors. See the Attendance and Participation section of the [Student Handbook](#).

Please note that any visitors during the course of the program must plan their own independent accommodations.

During the program, students follow an intense schedule of classes and field-based learning assignments, even during the FSP. Free time for pursuing an independent interest or hobby during the program will be limited. Your admissions counselor can advise you about particular interests you may have. For example, if you must keep in shape for your next athletic season, or if you play a musical instrument and want to know whether to bring it, we can help you to understand your



schedule and any concerns or limitations that may exist, especially given that we will be traveling across Panama, so doing it with a musical instrument might be cumbersome at best. Please note that you will not have a long break during the program.

PACKING GUIDELINES

LUGGAGE

Please pack lightly and include only necessary items. You should be able to carry all your luggage significant distances on your own. Try to minimize both the number of bags and weight of your bag(s) since you will likely be acquiring more belongings while abroad.

Due to the nature of this program, please do not bring a traditional suitcase. An internal frame backpack is strongly recommended. We also recommend a small daypack, which will be useful for short excursions when on the program.

If carrying prescription medications, you should carry a letter from your doctor to prevent any concerns at customs or in transit. (Please see the “General Health Tips” section in the [Safety, Security, and Health](#) pre-departure document.)

Please check the current requirements of the Transportation Security Administration (<http://www.tsa.gov>) as well as those of the airline on which you are flying for domestic and international baggage restrictions.

CLOTHING GUIDELINES

Please be aware that dress and appearance in Panama is given far more importance than in the US. The way you dress and your general appearance can greatly enhance your acceptance into society, demonstrate respect toward your host culture, and manifest your desire to observe Panamanian customs to the best of your abilities. At the same time, poor grooming and dress can offend people, send a message of disregard, cause you to feel out of place, and/or put you at a disadvantage in certain situations. Therefore, it is important that you bring and use appropriate clothing to avoid such circumstances, this is especially important when staying with host families. You will be asked to change your clothing if you choose not to dress appropriately.

Most of the program time is spent in the field. For the field, water-repellent clothing with quick-dry type fabric is preferable. Remember, the sun in the tropics is very strong; Panama is quite close to the

equator. Therefore, protective headwear and sunblock are crucial. Finally, **you will have to carry all of your belongings.** Please keep in mind that the group will travel in buses, boats, planes, and other interesting modes of transportation. Also, please be prepared for rain and walking through deep mud with high temperatures.

EQUIPMENT

You may wish to bring equipment that will assist you in your fieldwork, such as binoculars, a digital voice recorder for interviews, special books, or any field equipment in your particular area of interest (these are also mentioned below on the packing list). In many cases specialty equipment and supplies are unavailable in Panama.

You should bring a mosquito net, a good mask and snorkel, rash guard (long-sleeve water shirt) as well as water booties (these are required). Fins and swim pants are options but can be useful. Remember to bring a headlamp or flashlight for when the electricity goes out.

You must bring a self-filtering water bottle (or steripen) that filters out parasites and bacteria. Regular filtered water bottles do not do this. Remember to also bring replacement filters or batteries sufficient for your preferred water intake. ***This is mandatory. Order these items early to make sure you have it before your departure and ensure you have sufficient replacement materials.*** Previous students have brought Lifestraw brand. Grayl brand and Camelbak all clear water bottle. ***We cannot permit your participation on excursions if you do not have a self-filtering water bottle on-hand.***



COMPUTERS AND OTHER ELECTRONICS

It is required that you bring a laptop computer. If you bring a laptop, the computer will be your personal property and responsibility. SIT is not responsible for any duty tax you may have to pay when you enter the country, theft, or loss. Students should be aware of their environment and their belongings throughout the program and take care to protect against theft whenever possible. SIT Study Abroad encourages students to purchase personal property insurance independently to cover any valuables such as computers and other electronic devices in the event of loss or theft.

The program does not provide computers or internet service for students.

If you can, you should bring packets of silica gel or other desiccants to help with the humidity for your electronics. A quick search in Amazon will give you a lot of alternatives, but if you can't find where to buy them, you can usually find them in shoe boxes, luggage, etc.

Be sure to back-up your hard drive before traveling.

Please see the following website for information about electricity, voltage and electrical adapters: <http://www.worldstandards.eu/electricity/>. Electricity in Panama is 110V/60Hz (same as in the US). Almost all electricity outlets in Panama are the standard 3 prong ones. Only on very rare occasions will you find a 2 prong outlet.

WHAT YOU CAN AND CANNOT OBTAIN IN COUNTRY

Most basic supplies you find in the United States are available in Panama City, though they may be a little more expensive. School supplies such as notebooks, pens, etc., are easily obtainable. If you are particularly loyal to a brand, particularly of personal care items, you should bring enough with you to last the program. Definitely plan on purchasing outdoor gear (such as the self-filtering water bottle and replacement filters) in the US before you come; such items are hard to get in Panama.



ALUMNI CONTACTS

If you have further questions, please contact your admissions counselor and/or ask an alumni contact: <https://studyabroad.sit.edu/admissions-aid/application-process/contact-a-former-student/>.

Don't miss the Packing List on the next page!

These packing guidelines are based on suggestions from past students and your academic director.

PACKING LIST

CLOTHING GENERAL

- 2-3 “in the field” outfit sets (consisting of a pair of quick-drying pants and shirts) that are water-resistant materials; pants that zip off into shorts are convenient
- 2-3 pairs athletic shorts
- Pajamas or nightgown
- 1 pair knee-high, durable black rubber boots, alternatively, since they are very heavy, you can buy them in Panama, most hardware stores sell rubber boots
- 4-5 pairs tall socks (soccer type)
- Underwear and socks (complete 2-week supply)
- 1 pair of [water shoes](#) (required) ; significant time will be spent in wet environments
- Waterproof raincoat or rain poncho
- 3 swimsuits
- 2 Long sleeve sunshield/SPF shirt (surfers’ style) for extended sun exposure during marine classes (**required**)

WOMEN

- 2 pairs casual pants or jeans (linen or lightweight fabric)
- 2 shirts (for classroom setting such as short-sleeved blouses)
- Bras (complete 2 week supply)

MEN

- 2 pair pants (khaki-type) or nice jeans
- 2 short-sleeved shirts (for classroom setting such as polo shirts)

TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

- Passport
- 2 photocopies of your passport stored separately from your actual passport
- 2 passport photos
- Paper airline ticket or copy of electronic itinerary
- Student ID

HEALTH/TOILETRIES

- Self-filtering water bottle and replacement filters or batteries sufficient for to your preferred water intake. ***This is mandatory. Order these items early to make sure you have it before your departure and ensure you have sufficient replacement materials.*** We have had good experiences with the Lifestraw brand. You can

also use a Camelbak all clear or Grayl brand water bottle. ***We cannot permit your participation on excursions if you do not have a self-filtering water bottle on-hand.***

- Sunscreen (at least SPF 30) and aloe vera for sunburns
- 2 towels (thin, quick-drying)
- Sunglasses
- Hat/cap (this is crucial)
- Insect repellent
- Adequate supply of any medications you use regularly, including contraceptives.
- Any vitamins you are taking.
- Small first aid kit with band-aids, hydrogen peroxide, moist towelettes, and over the counter drugs for minor pain, diarrhea, anti-itching/bug bites (important), and motion sickness, as approved by your doctor.
- Extra eye glasses or contacts
- Anti-bacterial hand gel

OTHER REQUIRED ITEMS

- Unlocked smart phone.
- Plate, fork, and knife set such as those found on <https://www.campmor.com/>
- Mask and snorkel (good quality)
- 1-2 pair water booties
- Mosquito net (individual)
- Biodegradable multi-purpose soap
- Bed sheet set (for twin bed). You will NOT need a sleeping bag.
- Mid-size day pack (regular school backpack is fine)
- Headlamp or flashlight
- Spanish/English dictionary (the Langenscheidt dictionary is usually very good)
- Zip-top storage bags, various sizes, you can bring a big one to store your laptop.
- Zip drive
- Small pack of degradable laundry detergent for washing clothes in the field
- Small bottle of rubbing alcohol
- If you bring a smart phone, be sure to bring a rugged, waterproof protective cover.

OPTIONAL

- 1 pair sandals (such as Teva or Chacos)
- Computer sleeve (helpful in keeping humidity away from laptops)
- Surge protector for laptop
- Solar charger (such as Waka Waka Power)
- Binoculars
- Digital voice recorder
- Waterproof notebook
- Camera (waterproof recommended)
- Field equipment for your particular area of interest
- Snacks (especially if there are particular things you like or have dietary restrictions)
- Silica gel packets or other desiccants – we highly recommend purchasing inexpensive silica gel packets to use when storing and carrying your computer in your backpack. You and your computer will often be in very humid conditions. Storing your computer with silica gel packets will help keep it dry and avoid problems due to moisture and humidity common in the tropics.

