Panama: Tropical Ecology, Marine Ecosystems, and Biodiversity Conservation

Country Overview & Packing Guidelines

Spring 2027

Country Overview

GENERAL INFORMATION

Panama is a significant biodiversity hotspot, with a broad spectrum of ecosystems due to its unique geographical location as a bridge between North and South America. The isthmus is home to over 10,000 plant species, 1,400 bird species, and countless other animals, making it one of the most biologically diverse countries in the world. The varied landscapes, including cloud forests, mangroves, and coral reefs, provide vital habitats for both endemic and migratory species. Panama is a critical corridor for wildlife, facilitating the movement of species and enhancing genetic diversity across the continents. In addition to its rich flora and fauna, Panama's biodiversity plays a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance and supporting local communities. The country's ecological wealth is vital to agriculture, medicine, and tourism, making conservation efforts essential for sustainable development.



CLIMATE AND GEOGRAPHY

The climate in Panama is tropical and at times tempered by cooling Caribbean trade winds. The average temperature of 92˚F varies little throughout the year. The dry season (which coincides with the spring semester) generally lasts from mid-December to mid-May. The wet

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season coincides with the summer and fall semesters. In the Tropics it is not unusual to have rain in the dry season, just in shorter spurts. 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.

Panama City: AVERAGE HIGH/LOW TEMPERATURES (°F)				
JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY
94/85	95/80	95/80	94/80	94/80
SEPT	OCT	NOV	DEC	
95/80	94/80	94/80	85/75	

Bordered by Costa Rica to the west and Colombia to the east, 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 it into the Pacific and the Caribbean regions. The provinces of Coclé, Herrera, Los Santos, and Veraguas are referred to as the “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.

LOCAL CUSTOMS

Panamanian customs are a vibrant tapestry woven from diverse cultural threads, reflecting the country's unique history as a multi-cultural melting pot. One of the most notable traditions are national celebrations which are days long and feature parades, music, and colorful displays of national and cultural pride. The local cuisine plays a significant role in social life, with dishes like ceviche and patacones (fried green plantains) often enjoyed during gatherings. Traditional dances, such as the tamborito and tipico, bring communities together, showcasing lively rhythms and colorful attire. Family is central to Panamanian life, with gatherings often revolving around shared meals, storytelling, and parties emphasizing strong bonds and cultural heritage. This rich blend of customs highlights Panama's identity and the warmth of its people. Greetings among friends and acquaintances are often expressed boisterously with a kiss on one cheek. Given the high-context nature of Panamanian culture, making time for casual greetings and social interactions are essential to daily life.

LOCAL DIET

Participating in the local food culture is a central aspect of daily life in country. Special or restricted diets may not always be fully understood by your host family, although they may have previously hosted a student with similar dietary restrictions. By trying to replicate your diet at home you may miss out on an important part of your host culture.



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 and beans is a staple dish. Empanadas, chicken or beef tamales, cassava, and plantains are other staples. The national dish of Panama is called sancocho and is a somewhat spicy chicken-and-vegetable stew that can vary greatly according to region. Other dishes include hojaldras (fried flour dough), arroz con pollo (rice with chicken), patacones (fried flattened green plantains), and 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. The program will always notify the hotels, restaurants, and families where students will be eating of dietary restrictions and allergies. Stricter dietary practices such as keeping kosher will be extremely difficult to maintain healthfully in Panama. If you choose a meatless or gluten-free diet, please bring supplements with you.

Note: if you have special dietary needs, including allergies, please inform the office of Student Health, Safety & Wellbeing prior to the start of your program (studentwellbeing@sit.edu). We will advise you on realistic expectations about avoiding or incorporating certain foods within the program context.

MEAL PLANNING

Homestay families generally provide breakfast and dinner. The estimated cost for meals that are not provided is based on modest eating out and buying groceries to make your own meals when facilities are available for the meals that are not provided during program activities. If you plan on eating out regularly, you should budget more money.

Please remember to budget at least $630 for your meals not provided during the semester. For a breakdown of your program's estimated out-of-pocket expenses, please see the table in the **Money** section of this document.



SAFETY, SECURITY, AND HEALTH

Maintaining good health is essential to having a successful study abroad experience. SIT recommends you do research prior to departure about the health, safety, and security specifics of the country(ies) you plan to visit. Consult the U.S. Department of State website and search their Countries and Areas Archive for international travel information and current travel advisories for each country. Search the Center for Disease Control Traveler's Health page to see travel health notices and vaccine requirements and recommendations for any country(ies) you plan to visit. 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. You should also reference the Health, Access, and Identity information on your program's webpage.

If you have any questions, please reach out to the Student Health, Safety, & Wellbeing Team.

Students are thoroughly briefed on safety considerations during in-country orientation and are updated throughout the semester if and when circumstances change. For information regarding safety and security, emergency communications, SIT policies, health and personal property insurance, and general program tips, please read the Safety, Security, and Health document and Student Handbook on your program's predeparture page.

HOUSING

As many SIT Study Abroad alumni will tell you, the homestay experience can be one of the most rewarding and most challenging aspects of the program. We hope you will come prepared for the experience and committed to moving beyond cultural immersion as you begin to question, distinguish, and analyze the host culture vis-à-vis your own culture and come to a deeper understanding of both.



Family structures vary in every culture. SIT Study Abroad values the diversity of homestay families, and your family may include a single mother of two small children or a large extended family with many people coming and going all the time. Additionally, please bear in mind that, in many countries, the idea of what constitutes a "home" may be different from what you expect. You will need to be prepared to adapt to a new life with a new diet, a new schedule, new people, and new priorities, and expectations.

Each program's homestay coordinator will be responsible for placing students in homestays. These placements are made first based on health concerns, including any allergies or dietary needs, to the extent possible. **Please note: in order to ensure the best fit for students and families, SIT may make final adjustments to homestay placements after student arrival in country. Therefore, SIT will not provide information about your homestay family before you depart for the program.**

We seek to foster increased cross-cultural understanding in students by immersing them in local culture through daily life in a new family and community. Students are expected to

assume roles as family members, respecting and following host family norms around communications, visitors, and activities of daily living.

On this program, you will be staying in four homestays. In the Panama City homestay, students will have their own room and a shared bathroom. Bedrooms include a ceiling fan, study space for students, and access to wifi and cell service. The other three homestays are in rural areas in Panama and Costa Rica. In these homestays, students will share a room with one or more of their classmates. Two of these homestays has indoor toilets while one does not. None of the rural homestays have wifi. Each rural homestay lasts 3-6 days and occurs at different times during the semester, not consecutively.

OTHER ACCOMMODATIONS

Students should expect to share a room with one or more students during orientation and while on excursions. In addition to homestays, other types of housing include small hostels, lodges, and field sites for the majority of the program. Housing options during your Independent Study Project will be worked on together with program staff and must be approved by your academic director.



TRANSPORTATION

The group will use public and private buses for group travel within Panama City, and for longer excursions you will use private buses and marine transport. During the ISP period you may take buses or boats for travel, 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, occasional connectivity gaps, and changing program activities can complicate communication. It's important to be clear with family and friends about your availability during the term. 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. Visit our Contact & Communication page for practices on program communication, emergency communication, and home institution communication.

PHONES AND INTERNET

Cell Phone Policy

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 staff can assist students in purchasing a local SIM card and acquiring minutes for calls and texting**. Failure to maintain a working phone capable of making and receiving calls/texts will be considered a conduct violation and a breach of our student code.

We recommend you bring an OPEN smart phone from the U.S that enables you to insert a local SIM card into your U.S. phone upon arrival or to bring along a dual SIM card smartphone. **If needed, your local SIT Panama staff can assist you during orientation to purchase an appropriate local SIM card and minimum minutes for calls and texting.** With an open smartphone, students can purchase a $3 SIM card with a local number. Data and phone minutes can be purchased as "pay-as-you-go." No local phone plan is necessary. Smartphones enable students to use Uber easily in the city and communicate with one another and the U.S. via WhatsApp. In Panama, phone communications are fairly reliable in the capital, and you should be able to communicate with your loved ones using your local SIM card, except when the group is in remote areas. Wifi access is available often in Panama City at local cafés and homestays but at times is not available while the group is on excursion.



MAILINGS



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. Mailing prescription medication abroad is illegal.

DHL, FedEx, UPS services are available in country. Do not use the US Postal Service, there is no residential mail in Panama. Therefore, US Postal Service mail will not be delivered in Panama. If it is necessary for someone to send you mail when you are in Panama, it is only possible to do so via DHL, FedEx, or UPS. To do so, please discuss with the program staff when you are in Panama.

MONEY

Panama uses 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. Panamanian currency is officially called the “Balboa.” The term *balboa* is often used interchangeably with the word *dolar* to refer to the currency.

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 withdrawal costs, 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.

We suggest that you budget between US $2,200 - 2,500 for out-of-pocket costs not covered by the Tuition and Housing Fees. 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. Please carefully consider your personal spending habits when creating your out-of-pocket expense budget. Some items to consider are meals not provided by the program, textbooks, Independent Study Project or Internship-related expenses not covered by the program, interpretation services, medical expenses, personal spending, and gifts. Use the average estimates below as a guide to help you plan for out-of-pocket expenses.

Please budget approximately:

Personal spending (from past student suggestions):	950 USD
Meals not provided	630 USD
Books, printing, supplies:	50 USD
Up-front medical costs:	500 USD
Potential ISP travel expenses:	175 USD
Estimated total:	2,305 USD

Please note that up-front medical costs can vary widely. Though you are completely covered by SIT's travel insurance Blue Cross Blue Shield Global Solutions (BCBS), which you can read more about on our Participant Insurance page, you still may need to pay up-front for medical care and then file for reimbursement.

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 Policy.



If a visitor does come while a program is in progress, they must plan their own independent accommodations. SIT Study Abroad homestay families can accommodate only their assigned student and, due to cultural and contractual understandings with SIT, should not be asked to host students' guests.

INDEPENDENT TRAVEL

Please read our full Independent Travel policy for our definition, guidelines and how to access our independent travel notification form. Please note that independent travel is only allowed during program free time and students will not be excused from program activities to travel. SIT is not responsible for any costs of student independent travel including logistics, preparations, cancelation fees, change fees, and any other costs associated with independent travel. We highly recommend you wait to book any independent travel until AFTER arriving on program and receiving the final academic schedule from your program.

During the program, students follow an intense schedule of classes and field-based learning assignments, even during the ISP. 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.

CODE OF CONDUCT AND POLICIES

SIT maintains a Code of Conduct and clear institutional policies regarding student behavior through a commitment to mutual learning and respect for others. Visit the policy page for detailed policies around academic integrity, alcohol and drug use, anti-harassment and non-discrimination, attendance and participation, credit hours, equal education opportunities, grading, housing, independent travel, prohibited activities, religious holiday observance, sexual harassment and misconduct, and withdrawal among others.

Packing Guidelines

LUGGAGE

Please pack lightly and include only necessary items. You should be able to carry all your luggage on your own. Try to minimize both the number of bags and weight of your bag(s) since you may be acquiring more belongings while abroad. We recommend taking a regular daypack 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 generally given more importance than in the US. The way you dress and your hygiene 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. You will be asked to change your clothing if you choose not to dress appropriately. You need to bring another type of shoe (formal) aside from Tevas or Chacos, such a nice sandals, or close-toed shoes.

During the beginning of the semester, you will spend about two weeks taking Spanish classes and visiting different places in Panama City. During this period, you will need to dress appropriately. This includes nice jeans or pants, a nice shirt, summer dress, skirt, nice sandals, button-down shirt, or similar (no shorts, no t-shirts, no ripped jeans, no cropped shirts).

During the rest of the semester, most of the time is spent in the field. For the field, water-repellent clothing with quick-dry type fabric is preferable. A good pair of water-resistant, lightweight hiking boots is important. Remember, the sun in the tropics is very strong; Panama is quite close to the equator (9 degrees). Therefore, protective headwear and sunblock are crucial. **You need a good hat**; sunstroke is real. Again, you will have to carry all of your belongings. Please keep in mind that the group will hike and travel in buses, dugout canoes, and other interesting modes of transportation. Also, please be prepared for rain and walking through mud in the fall, and drier weather with high temperatures in the spring.

EQUIPMENT

You may wish to bring equipment that will assist you in your fieldwork, such as binoculars, special books, or any field equipment in your particular area of interest. In many cases, specialty equipment and supplies are unavailable in Panama.

It is mandatory to bring a self-filtering water bottle with sufficient replacement materials for four months as well as a fork, knife, and plate set to reduce your footprint. See packing list below for further information. Students should not spend a lot of money on this, but this is a way to decrease our footprint.

COMPUTERS AND OTHER ELECTRONICS

Please bring a laptop computer. The laptop will be your personal property and responsibility. It is recommended that you insure your computer, smartphone, and other valuables for full coverage in the event of loss or theft (SIT insurance does not cover personal property).

Please see the following website for information about electricity, voltage and electrical adapters. http://www.worldstandards.eu/electricity/. The program does not provide computers or internet service for students. Bring packets of silica gel to help with the humidity for your electronics. If you can´t find where to buy them, you can usually find them in shoe boxes, luggage, etc.

HOMESTAY GIFTS

As you might imagine, it is best to be prepared with a gift to offer your homestay family in gratitude for their hospitality and as a means to share a part of your culture with them. We suggest one or two gifts that the whole family can enjoy. You may also wish to consider gifts for people outside your homestay family. Try to choose gifts that represent you or the part of the country and/or community you live in. Think about what your city, state, or local artisans produce. Draw upon your personal interests or hobbies for ideas. Pack a couple of small gifts for children, such as small games, bubbles, or a Frisbee. Even if your homestay family does not have small children, chances are that you will engage with children in your homestay community. Once you are on the program and learn more about the local culture, you will discover other ways to thank your family. Remember to bring pictures of your friends and family to share. You will be staying with four homestay families during the semester.

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 personal care items, you should bring enough with you to last the semester. 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. Self-filtering water bottles are not available in Panama; Amazon does not deliver to 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!

Packing List

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

Packing List sample:

GENERAL

- 1 dressy outfit, suitable for an important meeting
- 3–4 “in the field” outfits (quick-drying pants and shirts) that are water-resistant materials; pants that zip off into shorts are convenient
- 2-3 pairs casual pants/jeans/maxi-skirt (linen or lightweight fabric)
- 5 shirts (for classroom setting such as short-sleeved blouses or polo shirts). No crop tops.
- 2-3 pairs athletic shorts
- Pajamas
- 1 pair lightweight *waterproof* hiking boots
- 1 pair durable, field rubber boots for working in the mud (not rain boots) such as Tingley brand rubber boots. Rubber boots must be knee high not calf high or mud shoes.
- 3-4 pairs tall socks (soccer type) for working in the field
- Underwear/bras and socks (2 week supply)
- 1 pair of water booties (required) ; significant time will be spent in wet environments
- Sandals (such as Teva or Chacos)
- 1 pair nice shoes can be sandals or sneakers
- 1 lightweight fleece
- Rain gear (jacket and pants) Ex: https://www.froggtoggs.com/products/women-s-ultra-lite2-suit
- 2-3 swimsuits
- Long sleeve sunshield/SPF swim shirt for extended sun exposure during marine classes (this is **required, you will not be allowed to participate in the marine courses if you don’t use a swim shirt**)
- Swim long pants (**Use of swimming pants are required during the marine modules. The requirement is aimed at reducing student use of sunblock and consequent contamination of the coral reefs as well as discomfort from fire coral and jellyfish stings**.). Swim pants can be regular leggings, yoga pants, running tights, etc.

TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

- Passport
- Paper airline ticket or copy of electronic itinerary. Immigration authorities will ask to see proof of your return ticket when you enter the country.
- Student ID
- Any relevant vaccine records/documents

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 them before your departure and ensure you have sufficient replacement materials.*** We have had good experiences with the Lifestraw brand (http://lifestraw.com/). You can also use a Camelbak all clear 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 50) and aloe vera for sunburns (Please do not bring aerosol sunblock.)
- 1 towel (thin, quick-drying)
- Hat/cap (this is crucial; sunstroke is real)
- Insect repellent (Please do not bring aerosol 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, cold and flu, diarrhea, anti-itching/bug bites, and motion sickness, as approved by your doctor
- Extra eye glasses or contacts
- Hand sanitizer
- Small bottle of rubbing alcohol for daily use when working in the forest
- Head bug net
- Ear plugs

OTHER REQUIRED ITEMS

- Internal frame backpack
- An open, unlocked smart phone (see Phones section for more details)
- Plate, fork, and knife set such as sold on REI or Campmor.com
- Personal mosquito net that doesn't hang from the ceiling like this one
- Very lightweight sheet sack (like this one) – not a sleeping bag

- Mask and snorkel for marine modules
- Short swimming fins/flippers. Please bring short fins. Long fins kick up sediment and damage the reefs as well as visibility.
- Backpack rain cover (fall semester only)
- Biodegradable shampoo, conditioner, and soap. We will be staying in fragile environments with septic systems. Biodegradable toiletries reduce our footprint.
- Day pack (regular everyday backpack)
- Headlamp (with red light)
- Spanish/English dictionary (travel size)
- Dry bag large enough for your laptop
- Laundry bag
- Flash drive (essential to submit homework when wifi is not available)
- Small surge protector for laptop and other electronic devices. Power outages can damage your devices. Be sure to bring this.
- Students are encouraged to bring a battery-operated carbon monoxide detector

OPTIONAL

- Computer sleeve (helpful in keeping humidity away from laptops)
- Silica gel packets – we highly recommend purchasing inexpensive silica gel packets to use when storing and carrying your computer and other electronic devices 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 computer damage due to moisture and humidity common in the tropics.
- Solar charger (such as Waka Waka Power)
- Binoculars
- Camera (waterproof recommended)
- Field equipment for your particular area of interest