

Panama - Canopy Tower

Bargain Birdwatching Tour

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	<u>In flight, Canopy Tower</u>
Day 2	<u>Semaphore Hill & Ammo Pond</u>
Day 3	<u>Pipeline Road</u>
Day 4	<u>Summit Pond and Old Gamboa</u>
Day 5	<u>Plantation Road & Chagres River</u>
Day 6	<u>Cerro Azul & Costa del Este</u>
Day 7	<u>Canopy Tower</u>
Day 8	<u>Canopy Tower, in flight</u>
Day 9	<u>Arrive London</u>

Departs

March/April & October/November (see website for details)

Focus

Mainly birds, although mammals, reptiles and butterflies are also enjoyed.

Grading

A. A traditional lodge based birding tour with no strenuous walking involved, although some trails at El Valle are steep and can be slippery.

Dates & Prices

See website (tour code PAN01) or brochure

Highlights

- Millions of birds flying through Panama on autumn migration
- Sloths, spider monkeys, howlers & Kinkajou among mammals possible
- Watch Blue Cotinga & other canopy birds just metres from bedroom windows



Crimson-backed Tanager



Panama rainforest



Canopy Tower



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NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

Panama forms the narrowest part of the Meso-American Isthmus, which is not only of huge historical importance linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans by rail and canal, but also of considerable biogeographical importance as the land bridge between North and South America. Panama offers some of the best birdwatching in Central America, harbouring nearly one thousand bird species in only 80,000 square kilometers (slightly larger than Ireland) and offering prime locations to witness the spectacular spring and autumn migrations. It also contains large tracts of avian-rich tropical rainforest, of which the Soberanía National Park extends right down to the suburbs of Panama City and the famous Panama Canal. Here we will spend an entire week residing in the canopy itself at the world famous Canopy Tower in the hands of expert ornithological guides.



The Canopy Tower, originally a US Air Force radar station, was converted into a birdwatcher's paradise in 1999 by a Panamanian birdwatcher and entrepreneur. Here, with bedrooms at treetop level, there could be no better place to wake to the sounds of Panama's great rainforest. Canopy birds such as Blue Cotinga and Green Shrike-Vireo will often perch just 15 metres from the bedroom windows. The main viewing deck offers superb 360° views over the canopy and the chance to observe exciting and otherwise difficult-to-

see canopy birds and mammals.

Visiting in the second half of April we hope to combine our tours with the end of the spring migration and the beginning of the breeding season when birds are vocalizing more than in the dry season. The weather in April is still largely sunny, with daily tropical showers that help to reduce the mid-day heat. Although canopy birdwatching from the tower is an obvious highlight, the surrounding rainforest offers a variety of habitats and superb neotropical birdwatching including various trogons, motmots, jacamars, puffbirds, woodcreepers, manakins, antbirds and tanagers.

The November tour should coincide with the incredible spectacle of the autumn hawk migration. Every year from the beginning of October till mid-November nearly 2 million Broad-winged Hawks, Swainson's Hawks and Turkey Vultures fly south from North America and are funneled through Panama. Within this period, activity can vary from no birds recorded to a staggering half a million in just one day when the skies are filled with kettles of these birds riding the thermals! The Canopy Tower is indeed one of the locations used to count the migration, along with locations on the Pacific and Atlantic coasts. Climatic conditions will determine how many birds pass on a given day and on which side of the isthmus. We hope to be lucky enough to see this spectacular sight and to catch some of the other migrants passing through

at this time of the year. November is at the end of the rainy season, but rains are mostly in mid-afternoon and rarely disturb birding completely.

Day 1

Canopy Tower

We depart this morning on a scheduled flight from London (usually Heathrow via Amsterdam, Madrid or Paris) to Panama City. On arrival this evening, we will be met by our guide and drive just one hour to the Canopy Tower, which will be our home for the next 7 nights. After a delicious dinner- the first of many! (although, if we arrive after 8pm a light meal/snack will be served), we will have an introductory talk, before we settle into our segment-shaped rooms for a good nights' sleep before the excitement of our first dawn in the canopy.

Day 2

Semaphore Hill & Ammo Pond

At dawn, as the morning lightens, we will climb the stairs to the observation deck, which affords superb views over miles of rainforest with the famous canal 3 kms away and Panama City and the Pacific Ocean in the distance. As the sun rises over the misty treetops we will get to see our first birds; maybe a Green or Red-legged Honeycreeper, Violaceous Trogon, Green Shrike-Vireo, Blue Cotinga, Scaled Pigeon, Mealy or Red-ored Amazon, Keel-billed or a Chestnut-mandibled Toucan. Our local guides are excellent locators and will lead the search for beautiful and rarely seen (from the ground) birds, whilst the fresh coffee served on deck will ensure a full state of alertness! After our first exciting early morning on the tower, we will have to tear ourselves away from the viewing deck and down a level for breakfast in the tower's restaurant, which has panoramic windows ensuring nothing is to be missed!

After breakfast we will start our walk from the hummingbird feeders located just outside the tower's entrance, where over half a dozen spectacular species can be seen at any visit including White-necked Jacobin, Long-tailed Hermit, Black-throated Mango, White-vented Plumeleteer, Purple-crowned Fairy, Blue-chested, Rufous-tailed and Violet-bellied Hummingbirds.



Violet-headed Hummingbird

Following the paved Semaphore Hill road through Soberania National Park, along which we arrived last night, we will get a nice introduction to the birds and mammals that spend their lives closer to the forest floor, like antbirds and agoutis. The bird list of Semaphore Hill is extensive and includes birds from the forest interior as well as edge dwellers. Olivaceous Flatbill and White-whiskered Puffbird are common, and Slate-coloured Grosbeak, Bay-headed Tanager and Great Jacamar are seen frequently. Great Tinamou and Marbled Wood-Quail are heard often, but to see them requires a

little more work. This road is also great for raptors; White, Tiny and Bicoloured Hawks, as well as for observing birds in migration including raptors and warblers. In April we will be visiting towards the end of

the spring migration, when the last of the northern migrants are on their way north wearing their striking breeding plumages.

After lunch we will have time for a siesta in the heat of the day, making use of the communal area's library and the hammocks. Later this afternoon we will follow our guide out to the Ammo Dump Ponds, located just north of Gamboa, on the way to Pipeline Road. This is the best place to see the elusive White-throated Crane, as well as a host of other waterbirds including Least Grebes, Common Moorhens and Purple Gallinules which are all common. Rufescent Tiger-Heron and American Pygmy-Kingfishers are present too, but are not as easy to find. Sometimes we see Limpkin and maybe even a Least Bittern, and lately a few Snail Kites have been reported. This is also a good spot to watch Capybaras, the largest rodent in the world.

Day 3

Pipeline Road

Today another early start will take us to the Pipeline Road which transects Soberania National Park. This rarely-transited 17 kilometre road follows an old pipeline route that was never actually used and is one of



Spectacled Owl

the best places in Panama to find forest birds, and plenty of them. Our expert guide will show some of the eight species of wrens, five trogons, four puffbirds, three motmots, eighteen antbirds and even more flycatchers! Army-ant swarms are found frequently, attended sometimes by Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo, and there are manakin leks to be staked out alongside the road. Pipeline Road is also a great place for raptors; all three forest-falcons can be heard regularly if not seen and Tiny and Plumbeous Hawks and Ornate Hawk-Eagles have been reported on occasions.

We will have a picnic in the forest and then continue along the second half of the road, which offers the possibility of new species. We will be on the lookout for more ant swarms, White-necked and Black-breasted Puffbirds, Black-crowned and Streak-crested Antpittas, Great Jacamar, Black-tailed Trogon, Crane Hawk, Black Hawk-Eagle, Cinnamon

Woodpecker, Black-striped Woodcreeper or even a Pheasant Cuckoo.

Day 4

Summit Pond and Old Gamboa

Today, after another early canopy-birding session on the tower's viewing deck followed by a delicious breakfast, we will head out to bird the Old Gamboa Road. We shall start from the Summit Pond wetland area, rich in water birds including a variety of heron species such as Rufescent Tiger-Heron, Capped and Green Heron. Wattled Jacanas and Purple Gallinules can be seen around the edges, whilst Lesser Kiskadee, Greater Ani, Squirrel Cuckoo and Yellow-rumped Cacique amongst others are to be seen in the scrub around the marsh. From the summit ponds we will head along the abandoned Old Gamboa Road south, one of the birdiest spots around. This road passes through a variety of habitats, and has plenty of specialties: Blue Ground-Dove, Great Antshrike, Jet Antbird, Black-tailed and Royal Flycatchers, Lance-tailed and Golden-collared Manakins and Rosy Thrush-Tanager are a few highlights. Going north of the ponds we

will find species like White-bellied Antbird, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Yellow-backed Oriole, Boat-billed Flycatcher, Fork-tailed Flycatcher and Yellow-headed Caracara.

Day 5

Plantation Road & Chagres River

Plantation Road, which starts right by the entrance to the tower, is a good, easy graded dirt road that passes through mature forest for about four miles. The road follows a small creek, Río Chico Masambi, where sometimes a Louisiana Waterthrush spends the winter. In most places the forest is clear of undergrowth, which makes it especially suited for observing shy, interior forest birds like tinamous and leaf-tossers. Golden-crowned Spadebills are regular around the creek, and White-breasted Wood-Wrens are very easy to find. When visiting Plantation Road you also have a good chance to find an army ant swarm and many of the birds that follow these swarms as they roam the forest floor. Spotted, Bicolored and Ocellated Antbirds, Gray-headed Tanagers, and Plain-brown, Northern Barred and, with luck, Ruddy Woodcreepers.

After lunch and a siesta we will head out to walk along the banks of the Chagres River to see other water birds including Amazon and Green Kingfishers and American Pygmy-Kingfisher, as well as Blue-Crowned Motmot and Cinnamon Woodpecker. We could also see species like Gray-necked Wood-Rail, Green Heron and Anhinga. In this area we might be lucky enough to spot alligators, turtles or capybaras.

Day 6

Cerro Azul and Costa de Este

This morning we will have an early start for an excursion to the foothills of Cerro Azul, where we will have a picnic lunch in a private residence overlooking the virgin forests of Chagres National Park. From this beautiful spot it is possible to see Yellow-eared Toucanet, considered by many the most colourful of the local toucans, and Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle. After lunch we'll bird the surrounding areas in search of the tiny Rufous-crested Coquette (the world's second smallest hummingbird) as well as Violet-capped and



Yellow-eared Toucan

Violet-headed Hummingbirds, Green Hermit and Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer. Fruiting trees attract Speckled, Black and Yellow, Rufous-winged and Emerald tanagers amongst others. Finally, if we are really lucky, we might see a Panamanian endemic, Striped-cheeked Woodpecker or possibly White-tipped Sicklebill, a local specialty.

Costa del Este is a new upscale housing development located just east of Panama City and the Old Panama Ruins which date from the 16th century. It was originally an area of marshes and mangroves, and later became the site of Panama City's main rubbish dump, now closed. The area first became accessible to birders in 1996 when construction of the housing development began. Since then the marshes have been drained and much of the area has been built up, but the mudflats off-shore still continue to attract very large numbers of shorebirds and other coastal species, including Cooi Heron (as well as the more widespread herons), Roseate Spoonbill,

Wood Stork, Black-necked Stilt, Collared and Wilson's Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, Least Sandpiper, Greater Yellowlegs, Franklin's, Ring-billed and Herring Gulls, Gull-billed, Common, and Least Tern.

Day 7

Canopy Tower

Today we will have another exciting morning on the canopy platform followed by a repeat or catch up day. Our guide will be able to take us back to one of our favourite birding locations and any others we may have missed. Other options might include a visit to the nearby Summit Gardens with their Harpy Eagle display or maybe visit the Panama Canal and its visitor centre, which is a popular option for the afternoon. Please allow an additional amount of approximately \$40 if you wish to make the trip to the Canal. Alternatively, after a hard weeks birding, you might just want to spend the entire day at leisure on and around the Canopy Tower itself.



Day 8

Canopy Tower and in Flight

After a final morning's birding at the Tower we depart for our transfer to Panama City's International Airport for our evening homeward-bound flight back to Europe.

Day 9

London

We will arrive back at London Heathrow in the afternoon.

El Valle Canopy Lodge Extension

During the extension at El Valle, single participants will be accommodated in single rooms, each with a private bathroom, in a charming cottage in the grounds of the lodge a couple of minutes' walk away from the main building. If you prefer to be in the main building you could share a twin en suite room with one of the other single members of the party or have a twin room for yourself, paying the single supplement of £300.

Day 8

El Valle – Arrival/Chorro Macho

After a last look at the birds from the observation deck and a wholesome breakfast we will have to leave at the same time as the main group, only we will be heading for El Valle. We will board a comfortable air conditioned bus for the 2 hour ride to El Valle de Anton, also known as Crater Valley. We will be staying at the Canopy Lodge built and owned by the owners of Canopy Tower.

We will spend five nights in our lodge with beautiful views over the crater of an extinct volcano that erupted five million years ago, in which it is located. The resultant scenery is quite unique - a steep valley surrounded by jagged peaks and filled with flowers, streams and verdant forests.

Our home for the next few days will be the Canopy Lodge, a charming small hotel built next to a mountain stream and contiguous to the Cerro Gaital Natural Monument. In the gardens surrounding the lodge we can easily see species like Crimson-backed, Blue-grey and Plain-coloured Tanagers, Social Flycatcher, Ruddy-ground Dove, Barred Antshrike, Yellow-faced Grassquit, Rufous-tailed Hummingbird and Clay-coloured Robin.

After lunch, our local guides will take us out to explore the Chorro Macho trail. Beginning at the entrance to the Canopy Adventure, the Chorro Macho Trail is an easy, short loop across several bridges and through some spectacular mature rainforest. Watch for Sunbittern, Buff-rumped Warbler, and basilisk lizards along the stream. Any of the interior rainforest species found in El Valle are to be looked for here. Broad-billed and Rufous s, Chestnut-backed Antbird, and even Dull-mantled Antbird are often present, while rarer species such as the Rufous-vented Ground-Cuckoo have been recorded with tantalizing frequency. The beautiful and impressive Chorro Macho waterfall is a major attraction on this trail, so don't forget your camera!

Day 9

El Valle – Las Minas/Cara Iguana

About 5 km from the Canopy Lodge, driving along the road to la Mesa, we will turn left on a dirt track that runs for about 3.5 km, through patches of forest and pasture. This pastureland is great habitat for Eastern Meadowlarks and Blue-black Grassquit, as well as some raptors such as White Hawk and Swallow-tailed Kite. In the sporadic patches of forest we could see Spotted and Olivaceous Woodcreepers. After driving for about 2km on this road, we will find a taller patch of primary forest where some rare birds can be found such as the beautiful Yellow-eared Toucanet, the endemic Stripe-cheeked Woodpecker, the elusive Barred Forest-Falcon, the always restless Black and Yellow Tanager, Common Bush-Tanager, Tawny-capped

Euphonia and Black-crowned and Streak-chested Antpittas, together with a good number of mixed-species feeding flocks which will keep us on our toes.

After lunch, we will start our exploration of the foothills by visiting the nearby Cara Iguana trail where we can expect to see some of the specialties of this rich avian region, for example Lesser Eleania, Yellow-olive Flycatcher, Rosy Thrush-Tanager, Rufous and White Wren and Lance-tailed Manakin.

Day 10

El Valle – Altos del Maria

Set at a higher altitude in the mountains on the continental divide east of El Valle, the Altos del Maria provide a spectacular addition to the Canopy Lodge extension. Departing early in the morning from El Valle in comfortable 4x4 jeeps, or in an a/c van, depending on the road conditions, we will drive along mountain roads or back along the Pan-American Highway and then up into the mountains. As the sun rises over the highlands ahead of us, spectacular mountains, vast valleys, and towering cliffs will be revealed. Ascending an excellent paved road, we will climb a ridge to our destination for the morning, an expansive area of cloud forest at 1100 meters above sea level. Early morning birding will take us along some of the wide, gravel roads in the area. Afterwards, we will search some trails through the woods for additional forest birds, before returning for a picnic lunch at the nature center, or we may have lunch in the forest.

This area harbours an exciting variety of highland forest birds. Some of the characteristic species of this cloud forest include White Hawk, Orange-bellied Trogon, Spotted Woodcreeper, Red-faced Spinetail, Spotted Barbtail, Russet Antshrike, Tufted Flycatcher, Rufous-browed Tyrannulet, White-ruffed Manakin, Ochraceous Wren, Gray-breasted Wood-Wren, Pale-vented Thrush, Black-and-yellow Tanager, Dusky-faced Tanager, Tawny-crested Tanager, and Slate-colored Grosbeak.

Some of the humming birds we may see in this area are: Band-tailed Barbthroat, the exquisite Snowcap, Purple-throated Mountain-Gem at the extreme eastern edge of its range, and Bronze-tailed Plumeleteer. Even the bizarre Brown-billed Scythebill has been seen here. After lunch, we will drop down into a valley and climb to the ridge on the opposite side via a smooth gravel road. Reaching some large swaths of mature humid forest along this ridge, we will explore some trails and roadside spots in search of more forest birds. Around mid-afternoon, we will head down the road on the far side of the ridge and back into El Valle for some relaxation time prior to dinner.

This area is the site of a private development and our visit here may differ slightly from the description above, depending on what areas are open for visitors and on the conditions of the access roads.

Day 11

El Valle

After an early breakfast we will board a bus and travel for 20 minutes to La Mesa. The area around the main entrance to the Cerro Gaital Natural Monument is well worth some of our attention, and may yield such species as Gray-headed Kite, White-tailed Emerald, Green-crowned Brilliant, Blue-throated Toucanet, Orange-bellied Trogon, Spotted Barbtail, Rufous-capped Warbler, Tawny-capped Euphonia, Common Bush-Tanager, Black-faced Grosbeak, and, if we are lucky, a Black Guan, Purplish-backed Quail-Dove, Scaled Antpitta, or Black-headed Antthrush.

We will have lunch back in the Canopy Lodge and afterwards we will bird the La Zamia Trail at the opposite end of the Cerro Gaital Natural Monument. This is an easy, level trail in which the rare Rufous-vented Ground Cuckoo has been seen occasionally. For those interested in botany, it is worth noting that La Zamia trail is named after the rare and primitive genus of palm-like plants called Zamia of the order Cycadales. Some of these unusual and ancient fern-like dioecious plants with aerial or subterranean stems are found on this trail.

Day 12

El Valle



Rufous Motmot

Today we will have an early breakfast and travel from El Valle to visit a patch of dry forest just one hour away near the small village of El Chiru. The contrast with the lush and wet foothills of El Valle is dramatic. This habitat consists of relatively permanent growth of low and often straggly bushes and small trees with grass interspersed between. It is a distinctive habitat of the Pacific lowlands and there is little of it left because most of the population in Panama has settled along the Pacific Coast. We will search for Pale-eyed Pygmy-Tyrant, Crested Bobwhite, Rufous-browed Pepper Shrike, Brown-throated Parakeet, Blue Ground Dove, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, Pearl Kite, Aplomado Falcon, Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures and other feathered residents of this threatened area. Bird activity is high during the first few hours after dawn then when it gets hot we will go to have lunch in a lovely cottage by the ocean at Santa Clara beach. This is a good

opportunity to see some marine birds and to take a swim in the warm waters of the Pacific Ocean, the water temperature is in the low 80's F.

After lunch we will visit Juan Hombron Beach for more lowland specialties and at mid afternoon will return to the much cooler foothills and bird the trails around the Canopy Lodge or spend some time watching the lodge's well-attended feeders attracting certain foothill specialties difficult to see elsewhere, like the striking Flame-rumped Tanager and the rare White-lined and Dusky-faced Tanagers. Other foothill species coming to the feeders include Buff-throated Saltator, Black-striped Sparrow, Rufous Motmot and Red-crowned Woodpecker. There is also a colony of Chestnut-headed Oropendolas located in a group of Eucalyptus trees not far from the lodge. These magnificent birds come down to the feeders occasionally and dwarf the other attendant species. This is a great opportunity to take close-up pictures of a bird normally seen high in the canopy. Recently Collared Aracaris and even a Blue-throated Toucanet have been coming to the feeders.

Day 13

El Valle

After a final morning birding at Canopy Lodge, we will transfer to Panama City to check in for our evening flight back to Europe.

Day 14

London

We will arrive back at London Heathrow in the afternoon.

Tour Grading

Grade A. This is a traditional lodge-based birding tour with no really strenuous walking involved, although it does involve more than a few early starts and plenty of time spent on foot! Suitable for active people of all ages; just a love of birds is required! Some of the trails are steep and can be slippery, but these are optional.

Group size & guide

This birding tour will be limited to 14 participants and will be led by one of Canopy Tower's full time ornithological guides. If the group is of 10 or more then two guides will be assigned. Canopy Tower is set up to work with the demands of the most serious birder and therefore prides itself on its knowledgeable guides. The guides are enthusiastic and very knowledgeable birders, speak excellent English and have worked with some of the world's most well-known ornithologists at Canopy Tower over the past few years.

Transportation

The Canopy Tower is less than one hour's drive from Panama's international airport accessed by paved road and bus. For our excursions we will use Canopy Tower's own four wheel drive vehicles, again the drives to our trails are short, but our vehicles will help us gain access to more remote locations.

Food & accommodation included in the price

This tour price is inclusive of all food and accommodation. The Canopy Tower's kitchen offers delicious and wholesome set meals and can cater for all individual dietary requirements with prior notice. Breakfast and lunch are accompanied by fresh tropical fruit juices and wine at dinner. For our all day excursions we will take packed lunches to eat in the field.

The Canopy Tower is a unique structure and unlike any other lodge in the world. The Tower has one suite (Blue Cotinga) and five comfortable twin rooms with en-suite facilities on the third floor. Each room is a strange segment shape and has its own forest view offering your own views of the canopy birds. There is a further suite (Harpy Eagle) on the second floor along with 4 en-suite single rooms. The use of either of the two suites will incur the advertised supplement. The walls between the rooms are not the thickest, and it is possible to hear some goings-on around the tower. Generally people find this aspect of the tower insignificant in terms of their overall stay, but it is something to be aware of. On the fourth floor one finds the restaurant and lounge areas, equipped with a good library, hammocks and comfortable seating. There is also a computer with internet available free of charge and WIFI signal in case you bring your laptop. The fifth floor is the observation deck, with the old radar dome still taking pride of place. The observation desk has plenty of seats and an all important telescope.

Extra expenses

Drinks, tips, laundry, and all items of a personal nature are not included in the cost of the holiday. During your time at Canopy Tower you will be very well cared for by local guides. It would be wise to allow around US \$75 per person for tips to your local guides and \$45 per person to the staff of the Canopy Tower. For those going on the extension to El Valle a smaller amount should be budgeted for the guides and the staff of the lodge there. A \$10 tip for the driver who will be with you for the week would also be gratefully received. Tipping is optional (dependant on good service!), however, due to its close relation to the United States the American habit of tipping is well entrenched and Panamanian guides as well as the staff in hotels and restaurants do generally expect a tip. The optional night drive is \$70 and this is charged locally.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking. Please note that as all our Bargain Selection tours are carefully costed on maximum group sizes to maximise value for money, it may be necessary to impose a small group surcharge of up to 10% on groups falling short of 8.

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