PANAMA

STUDY ABROAD IN PANAMA

PRESENTED BY THE CENTER FOR LOGISTICS, TRADE AND TRANSPORTATION, CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION, DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

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Country Overview

Panama is located in Central America, bordering both the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean between Colombia and Costa Rica. Panama, with the backing of the United States, seceded from Colombia in 1903, allowing the Panama Canal to be built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers between 1904 and 1914. Its location on the Isthmus of Panama is strategic. By 2000, Panama controlled the Panama Canal, which connects the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea to the North of the Pacific Ocean. Revenue from canal tolls represents a significant portion of Panama’s GDP today.

Panama has the third or fourth largest economy in Central America, and it is also the fastest-growing economy and the largest per capita consumer in Central America. In 2010 Panama ranked fourth among Latin American countries in terms of the Human Development Index, and 54th in the world in 2010.

As of 2010, Panama is the second most competitive economy in Latin America as well, according to the Global Competitiveness Index from the World Economic Forum (WEF). Panama has the largest rainforest in the Western Hemisphere outside the Amazon Basin, and its jungle is home to an abundance of tropical plants, animals and birds – some of them found nowhere else in the world.

Panama’s wildlife holds the most diversity of all the countries in Central America. It is home to many South American species as well as North American wildlife.

Panama owns a cultural multiplicity that makes it unique in the region; one of the biggest contributors to this cultural richness is the constant presence of visitors from all parts of the world. Also an important part of the cultural wealth of the country is the traditions of the seven indigenous groups of Panama. These groups of indigenous origins cultivate music and dance traditions which date back many years, but their most appreciated cultural contributions are their abilities as masterful craftsmen. The artful pieces produced by some of these groups are true jewels.
Panama is immensely active in regard to nightlife. There are tons of places where people go out to eat, enjoy, relax, listen to music and dance. You will find that Panamanians love to enjoy life. A city of more than one million people has many places that don’t close until the manager says so, and you might find yourself seeing the sunrise. It all takes place in three sectors of the city: the downtown business district; Casco Viejo, the historic Spanish Colonial sector; and the Amador Causeway, which connects four islands in Panama Bay. Panama is an awesome place to hang out and dance, and there are many cutting-edge places that rival those in New York and Miami.

Documents

You will need at least two very important documents:

- A valid U.S. passport - Based on federal regulations, it is required that you obtain and use a valid passport when traveling to Panama. In most cases, passports must be valid six months past the date of return. A passport is the surest and most readily accepted form of ID abroad. Passports are required during your flight and at several check points during arrival and departure. They are also required for certain money exchanges. All travel documents should be kept together, readily available during travel, and safely deposited when not in use. A photocopy of these materials should be made and stored apart from the originals in case you lose your documents. If you are an American citizen, no visa is needed for Panama (if you stay no longer than 90 days), but travel is not possible without the appropriate documents. Be sure you have the necessary papers in your possession when you arrive at the airport. You cannot depart without them.

- If you do not have a valid passport, make sure that you get one immediately; see the passport application form in this package. Once you have your passport, make a photocopy of the most important pages because you’ll want to leave the original in your room in Panama and just carry the copy around for identification purposes.

- A second official picture ID (such as your driver’s license or Southern Miss ID) - At the airports they often ask for picture ID, and you must be ready to show a second identification document.

VERY IMPORTANT: When traveling, always carry documents with you, never in your suitcase!

Flight and Flight Schedule

- Flight changes: Sometimes airlines change time of departure and often change gate of departure. While we will try to provide the latest information we have, it will not be possible to get in contact with you at the last minute. Therefore, we ask you to verify with the airline that your flight schedule has not changed and, if it has changed, make sure that you adjust your trip accordingly. Remember: It’s better to be early and wait than late and miss your flight!
• You need to be at the airport of departure two and one-half hours before the flight departure.

• Make sure you check your luggage through to Panama.

Upon arriving in Panama, you will be taken to your first destination (City of Knowledge), where you will probably want to rest.

**Security**

• International emergencies: Southern Miss provides a wide range of study-abroad opportunities in various countries, and the health and safety of our students and faculty are of primary concern. Therefore, we have undertaken a variety of measures to protect the safety, security and well-being of our students. These include close monitoring of U.S. Department of State cautions, advisories, announcements and warnings; registration of programs with U.S. embassies and consulates; and the development of a plan, which provides guidelines for program officials to follow in the event of emergencies. Should an international emergency occur, program personnel will work in consultation with local authorities and U.S. consular personnel to institute all necessary security measures.

**List of Important Contact Numbers**

• Southern Miss International Programs: 601.266.4344; 601.266.5147; 601.266.5009

• Southern Miss 24-hour number: 601.266.4986

• International Student Identity Card Emergency Assistance: 715.342.4104 (collect worldwide)

• Overseas Citizens Services: (after-hours emergency number; ask for the OCS duty officer)
  - From in the U.S.: 1.888.407.4747
  - From overseas: 202.501.4444

• U.S. Department of State Hotline for American Travelers: 202.647.5225

We advise you not to take your passport with you while you are out and about in Panama. Take with you a copy of the passport. Leave the passport at your accommodations. Be aware of your wallet and purse or backpack at all times. Pickpockets can tell immediately if a person is a tourist. Besides, you probably do not look Panamanian. Panama is not an insecure country, but anywhere you go, you have to be careful and follow the advice of your program director.

**Money**

Expenses and spending money: The unit of currency in Panama is the dollar and also a local currency called a Balboa (the local currency has the same value to the people of Panama as the dollar). Most banks are open from Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Most of them accept MasterCard, Visa and American Express. Most banks have stopped accepting traveler’s checks.
Cash: The best and easiest way to get cash in Panama is through ATMs. Of course, you may take all your money in cash or in traveler checks, but that’s not advisable. Do carry some cash and remember to always keep some extra cash (about $50) for an emergency. Traveler’s checks may be cashed at the airport and at some local banks in Panama. However, with the ATMs available everywhere, fewer and fewer travelers are using traveler’s checks. One of your local banks will be able to provide you with American Express traveler’s checks. You must present your passport. Some other banks in the area will not cash traveler’s checks. Do not take your personal checks with you to Panama since they are not accepted outside the U.S. Be sure to confirm with your U.S. bank that you can withdraw cash with your particular bank card at Panama bank ATMs, as this is not always possible.

Credit and debit cards: It’s a good idea to bring one or two credit cards (not local cards from specific stores such as Walmart or Sears). If you bring only one, make it a VISA or MasterCard. You can use credit cards quite widely in department stores and good restaurants and also pay for extra excursions, gifts, etc. Some debit cards do not work in Panama.

If you need to have money sent from home, go to Western Union’s main office. You must present your passport. Their phone number in Panama is 507.269.1055.

One of the most frequently asked questions is, “How much money will I need?” This is not easy to answer. All of your transportation in Panama from/to the airport, to/from meetings, room, tuition, opening reception ceremony and closing ceremony, and all excursions are included in the program cost. However, you will need to pay for your meals, shopping, etc. For regular expenses for the 10-day stay, we suggest that you bring anywhere from $600–$1,000. Of course, some participants have brought less and survived well, and others have brought much more and did not have enough at the end. There is no set amount to take since some students may want to spend more than others. This is strictly up to you.

If you do run out of money, you can usually get a cash advance on a credit card at an ATM that accepts VISA or MasterCard (provided you have a pin number for that card and credit). There are ATM machines almost everywhere. Again, check with your bank to ensure that you will be able to withdraw cash at an ATM in Panama. I do recommend this as the best form of getting quick cash. It is much better than carrying traveler’s checks. Remember that when you cash a traveler’s check or get money from an ATM, the bank will charge you a certain processing fee. Most travelers use an ATM, credit cards and carry cash. We advise carrying most of your cash, not in your purse, your backpack or your wallet, but in some hidden inside pocket (a pouch, money belt, etc.).
Shopping

As part of the experience in Panama, you will be taken to experience some of the local stores. Businesses and shops are usually open between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. If you want to go to a bank, these times are important to know.

Public Transportation

Public transportation by taxi, bus, train, private car, etc. is good, very easy and inexpensive in Panama. Most of the travel will not be an issue due to the site visits and excursions everyone takes together. However, if you want to get a group of people to go on a trip to the store on your own time, then transportation must be researched by you or your group.

Restaurants

There are plenty of restaurants around the City of Knowledge and Panama in general. Eating in Panama is not expensive, but it all depends on where and what you order. Tipping is less customary in Panama than the U.S. However, certain services such as taxi drivers, waiters (in some better restaurants) and guides will expect to be tipped between 5% and 10% of their full charge.

Telephone

First thing to remember: During the summer, there is a one-hour difference between Panama and the U.S. When it’s 1 p.m. here in Mississippi (CST), it’s noon in Panama.

Second: It’s about two to three times more expensive to call from Panama to the U.S. than it is from the U.S. to Panama.

For the first call, the day of your arrival or the following day, the best thing to do is to have previously arranged with your family or friends here in the U.S. when you will be contacting them. You will need to purchase a phone card (it can be reloaded via credit card as many times as you want), and this will be the best way to get in touch with those at home. Do not purchase a phone card here in the U.S. They will have them at the grocery stores and gas stations in Panama so don’t worry about getting them before you leave.
Email and Snail Mail

- INTERNET/EMAIL: There is free Internet at the City of Knowledge so you will be able to receive and send email as long as you bring your laptop or Wi-Fi-enabled device.

- PACKAGES: You can send packages through DHL, UPS, Federal Express and other carriers. For information, please check the front desk of the school.

Medicine

Bring any prescription medicine you need with you, as well as an extra set of prescription eyeglasses or contact lenses. If you suffer from allergies, bring whatever medicine you need. If you have a handicap, suffer from any environmental allergy (cats, etc.) or have any special dietary requirements, please advise the program director in advance. He will assist you in making whatever special arrangements may be necessary.

Housing

There is no co-ed housing. For approximately the first seven days, the group will be staying at a hotel in Panama City. Followed by one night stay in a hotel out of Panama City, then the group will return to stay in Panama City for the last two nights. You will share a room with one other (same gender) person. While you are in Panama, it is important for you to recognize and respect the cultural and religious views and customs of the area.

Climate and Clothing

Panama is completely surrounded by water on both the Pacific and Atlantic side so humidity is a big issue. Summer clothes will be best. You may also want to have something for the rain in Panama. Also, during your site visits and tours of the buildings and culture of Panama, you will need to wear nice
clothes. The men should wear jeans/pants (khakis) with a collared shirt, and women should wear a nice sun dress or something along those lines. Both for the men and women, no open-toed shoes should be worn while on the site visits. After the site visits and on your personal time, it’s entirely up you. A good sweater or light jacket is always handy to have for the trip and if it gets chilly.

Packing

RULE OF THUMB — PACK AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE!

Remember, you’re the one who’s going to have to lug all of this stuff through airports and in and out of your accommodations at all times. Limit yourself strictly to one medium-sized suitcase, plus one shoulder bag or large purse (not both). One of the suitcases could go inside the other for the trip down so that you’re only carrying one. You’re going to need that extra space coming back for packing all the things you might be buying.

Weight: Most airlines are very strict regarding the weight and size of suitcases. Please remember there is a new rule regarding the weight of suitcases: Each passenger may check in one suitcase (unlocked so they can be opened by security). There is a fee, which varies dependent on the airline, for an additional suitcase. The suitcase must not exceed 50 lbs. or 22.4 kilos. Therefore, any suitcase weighing between 50+ and 70 pounds will cost approximately $50 extra per suitcase, depending on the airline.

CARRY-ON BAGGAGE ALLOWANCE and TSA SECURITY

You are allowed to have one carry-on piece of luggage travel with you inside the cabin of the plane (a small bag or a backpack).

• Size and weight - Please check airline regulations.

• Medicines and prescriptions (no liquids) - There is a ban on fluids and gels in your carry-on without an immediate emergency need. Bring copies of prescriptions for medications in fluid or gel form which must be taken during the flight. Otherwise, pack fluids or gels in your luggage, or they will be confiscated by airport security. Please make sure that you put any prescription medication you’re likely to need in the carry-on, not in a suitcase. Don’t forget over-the-counter drugs that you regularly use, such as Tylenol, etc. Of course, you can buy anything you need in any pharmacy in Panama that does not require a prescription.
• Exceptions to the policy from the TSA:
  1. Travelers may carry through security checkpoints travel-sized toiletries (3 ounces or less) that fit comfortably in one, quart-sized, clear plastic, zip-top bag.
  2. After clearing security, travelers can bring beverages and other items purchased in the secure boarding area on board the aircraft.
  3. Travelers may carry through security checkpoints any quantity of saline solution, eye drops, and prescription and nonprescription medicine.

• Passport, air tickets, money and other important documents - Don’t forget the copy of your passport, your money and/or traveler’s checks, a couple of credit cards (especially those you can also use at an ATM—and your PIN code to be able to get money out of an ATM). Remove all excess photos, personal stuff, extra credit cards, etc. from your wallet or shoulder bag. The more things you carry, the more you can lose. Write your credit cards numbers on a piece of paper, and do not put this paper with your cards.

• Personal items (such as telephone numbers, addresses, camera, book to read, one change of underwear in case your luggage is lost or delayed) – Do not bring nail clippers, pocket knives or anything that someone can use as a weapon. No liquids are allowed. A notebook, pen, pencils and an English-Spanish-English dictionary (which you may want to purchase in Panama) are recommended.

**Electricity**

If you bring an electric razor, a hair dryer, a telephone, fan, etc., the sockets to plug in your electronic items are the same as the United States. Do not bring voltage transformers. In case of doubt, ask the program director.

**Registration for Classes**

Do not register for the Study Abroad in Panama Program through SOAR in the spring. Once your application has been accepted and you have been notified of your acceptance, the Office of International Programs will automatically register you in one course. Please check your SOAR account to be sure you have been properly registered for the Study Abroad in Panama Program.
CLASSES! GRADES!

The program director of the Study Abroad in Panama Program is the person responsible for assigning final grades after careful assessment. Grades for this short summer program will be posted at the end of the regular summer session in August. For further information regarding grades, attendance, etc., see separate sheet on “Grading and Policies.”

ORIENTATION SESSION

During the last week of March or early April, we will have an important orientation session for all participants in our Study Abroad in Panama Program. You can attend the orientation session in person or via teleconference. The orientation will last approximately 45 minutes. If for some reason you will not be able to attend, please let us know in advance so we can provide you the latest up-to-date information to be given at this orientation session. Date, time and location for the in-person meeting and access information for the teleconference will be provided in the welcome letter from Dr. Tulio Sulbaran, program director.

WEEKLY PREPARATION SESSION

Prior to leaving for Panama, we will have preparation sessions at Southern Miss that you will be able to attend in person and/or access via teleconference. The preparation sessions will begin in April and will continue until the week before leaving for Panama. The day of the week and the time will be determined during the orientation session based on the availability of the students participating in the Study Abroad in Panama Program. Each session will last approximately 45 minutes and is designed to prepare the students to have the best possible learning experience in Panama.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Finally, if after becoming familiar with the information in these pages you still have questions or concerns, please make an appointment to see Dr. Tulio Sulbaran, director of the Center for Logistics, Trade and Transportation; email: tulio.sulbaran@usm.edu; phone: 601.266.6419.

We look forward to taking you to Panama for a great and very rewarding learning experience.

Dr. Tulio Sulbaran, Ph.D.
Director of the Study Abroad in Panama Program