

Trip Review: Caravan Tours. Panama Canal Cruise, Rainforests and Beaches February 2011

When working on an itinerary, I found I had a plane change in Panama and the very same day I was working on the reservation, a Caravan Tours brochure arrived which had a 10 day tour in Panama. Was this a sign?

The stopover cost..... nothing. It was a 44-people-in-a-bus type of tour and to be honest, I wasn't expecting much and was happy for a clean, safe place to sleep, a seat on the bus and an opportunity for few experiences that I missed last year while on the Explore tour like a Panama Canal transit and a visit to the Embera Indians.

There are a lot of "pros" to the trip

- price is excellent -- about \$180 a day (including the single supplement)
 - the hotels are not only good, but close to outstanding- we were in a Courtyard by Marriott in Panama City, a Radisson in the rainforest and a Wyndom in Playa Blanca where everyone had a suite (really a condo). It was an as all inclusive, including drinks and everything in your mini-bar!
 - all meals for the 10 days were included - most meals were fairly extensive buffets
 - the guide was excellent. Oneil turned out to be wonderfully knowledgeable and shared a lot of information on the bus and during sightseeing
 - we had assigned seats on the bus and we rotated 4 seats each day. At the end of the 10 days we ended up pretty much where we started. There was an extra seat at the back of the bus that was always open.

And there were some slight negatives:

- There were 43 people (3 cancelled, thank goodness) on a 48 passenger bus and we kept to a printed, timed schedule every day.
- there was minimal free time to explore on our own. And when we did have a few hours in the afternoon free, we were at Playa Blanca, a fairly isolated beach resort.
- for some reason, Caravan thinks they have to entertain you at night. So for four nights "dancing girls and boys" put on a show.

I really enjoyed seeing the family groups. We had a group of 12 and several groups of 4 and 5. One 94 year old great-grandma picked out this trip and treated her whole family! There are no age limitations on Caravan, so there were younger kids - a few 10 year olds on the tour.

A special note on the hotels:

Courtyard by Marriott in Panama City: this was the BEST location -- 20 minutes from the airport, next to a huge, upscale shopping mall and a supermarket. Very friendly staff and helpful managers. We began and ended our tour here.

Radisson Summit Hotel (in the rainforest): infinity pool, walking trails, golf course, beautiful amenities in the bathroom and a shower as big as our main closet at home. How could this be on a "budget" tour?? It was wonderful!

The Royalton Playa Blanca is morphing into a Grand Wyndham Playa Blanca Resort and Spa

This was the surprise of the trip. We each had our own suite/condo/apartment with ocean views. The property is an all-inclusive including everything in your mini-bar. There were 2 huge pools, three restaurants and you could take your meals at any one. There were horses on the beach, 5 beach chairs for every person (it wasn't very crowded), and live music throughout the afternoons and evening. We all loved it.

For the money - the Caravan trip turned out to be an excellent value. You have to go with the flow and adhere to the guide's schedule and you can't expect a lot of personal attention. But he is there if you need him.

Copa Airlines: they were great - part of Star Alliance and they use 757-700's. They were on-time, had good service and were reasonably priced.

A word about Toucuman International Airport in Panama City: for all the money Panama has coming in because of the Canal, it really ought to put more personnel at the airport. The facility is lovely with a great food court, lots of shopping and nice seating areas. But it was an hour in the immigration line coming in; and at least 45 min. in the security line going out. They do an extra security check at the gate for US bound planes. Be forewarned.

Some suggestions :

1. it will probably be more of an adult group if you reserve between Sept. and June, and stay away from school vacations.
2. plan on either arriving a few days early or staying a few days later to see more of Panama. There was no extra time in Panama City. Last time I was here I stayed at the Suites Ambassador and that was a great place to stay.
3. for communication, every hotel we used had public computers as well as decent in-room wi-fi. You can also buy a local sim card (\$1.) - I use +Movil -- and take advantage of 4 cents a minute to the US

Caravan Tours (www.caravan.com) has only nine itineraries, and they have departures just about every week. For a budget company, I thought they did a good job. Several people on the trip had taken numerous tours with the company and had always been pleased.