

LIVING & WORKING IN GAMBOA – Information for Interns

Rainy season conditions in Gamboa are generally hot & humid. Hot being mostly in the realm of 24-30°C. Humid being very. It rains a fair bit – not every day & rarely all day, but sometimes very hard.

You will live in furnished, non-air conditioned apartments shared with other students & interns. The beauty of living without AC is that you can listen to the frogs calling as you fall asleep, and wake up to the calls of parrots, rather than a constant mechanical drone. The downside is that things tend to mold. The apartments have "dry closets", which help, but you will have to be careful to ensure that your stuff is not ruined by mold. There is air conditioned lab space for storage of equipment. I also recommend dry bags (as for boating) or dry boxes and silica gel desiccant as a good option for storage of cameras, etc, that you want to keep in your apartment. [I have used this system successfully for optical & electronic equipment in the rainforest for years.] There are washers and dryers available in the building.

You will need clothing & gear appropriate for the field, for Gamboa, and for Panama City ("town").

Life in Gamboa is pretty informal. I mostly wear shorts, sandals, and sleeveless shirts during the day. At night, especially at dusk, the mosquitoes can be bad outside. Repellant is an option, but I tend toward the long pants, long sleeves & closed shoes alternative.

In Panama City, people are more formal. Bring at least one set of respectable "town clothes" to wear if you are doing anything at all bureaucratic (e.g. getting a drivers license, extending a visa). Also, the STRI buildings in town are air conditioned and the seminar room is sometimes quite cold, so a light fleece or at least a long-sleeved shirt are good for that.

THE FIELD: be prepared for water, mud, all manner of things that stain (animal droppings, fruits, your own blood squashed out of insects, etc), biting insects, ticks, leeches, spiny plants, and sweating a lot. All that said, it can also be quite pleasant in the field.

FEET: You will spend a lot of time in rubber boots, so make sure you have a pair that is comfortable. Also, get a pair without the cloth lining that is often put in rubber boots in the US – you want boots that you can rinse out and dry with a cloth if necessary, or that will air dry fast. That cloth lining will just mold. I have *not* found hip or chest waders to be useful for tropical rainforest work, just hot & uncomfortable. Taller boots are good, but you should expect to often go into water over the depth of your boots. Thus your socks are also important. You want socks that will be comfortable & still protect your feet when wet, and that are easily wrung out. After trying various alternatives, I favor Thorlo or Smartwool hiking socks. Pay attention to your feet. I know people who have lost toenails to foot fungus.

CLOTHES: I favor quick-drying nylon field pants. Lots of pockets are good. Whatever you wear, you will be spending a lot of time in it wet, from sweat, rain, or pond water. I don't recommend wearing shorts in the field, in part because of all the spiny plants & biting insects. Also because of the leeches. Ocelot Pond is full of leeches, but wearing long pants tucked into your socks is very effective against them, even when walking around in the water over your boot depth. For diurnal field work, I tend to sleeveless shirts or t-shirts, but I'm not much bothered by moderate levels of mosquito bites. For nocturnal field work, I wear long sleeves against the mosquitoes. Note that you cannot have insect repellent on your hands when handling frogs, as they can absorb it through their skin, so keep this in mind. Also, cotton bandanas are useful for all sorts of things, from keeping sweat out of your eyes to drying off wet leaves so you can collect egg clutches & stick them in your bucket with duct tape.

RAIN: In Gamboa or in town I mostly use an umbrella, rather than a raincoat, since it is much less sweaty, although on occasion I have used a raincoat. In the field I generally just get wet, since it's warm. Mold will ruin gore-tex, and I find the "breathable" aspect of waterproof/breathable clothing is not worth much under tropical rainforest conditions.

POISONOUS SNAKES: There are several kinds of snakes in the Gamboa area that could potentially kill you, including fer-de-lance (*Bothrops asper*), the snake that kills more people in Latin America than any other, and coral snakes. They are not the most common snakes, but people see them every season. In particular, small fer-de-lance seem to be getting more common near Ocelot Pond in recent years. *The most important thing is to watch where you put your feet and hands, and not surprise a snake (or let it surprise you).* We will train you to recognize the local dangerous snakes.

NIGHT WORK: You should carry at least two, maybe three lights. I use a high intensity, rheostat controlled, halogen light with a rechargeable belt-mounted battery pack, a smaller lightweight headlamp, and a handheld flashlight. We have some of the large lights for general lab use, but you will want at least a couple of lights of your own.

VEHICLES/TRANSPORTATION: There are (usually two, heavily used) 4WD trucks for shared use of the STRI Gamboa community. If approved as a STRI driver, you can sign out. We also have a 4WD truck for the Warkentin lab. These are all manual transmission vehicles. There have been shared STRI bicycles most years, again heavily used, and several people in the lab have their own bicycles. Ocelot Pond is about a 10-15 min cycle from Gamboa, on a paved road with an unusual one-way bridge over the Rio Chagres, but traffic is not particularly attentive to cyclists & so the road is dangerous at night. Pipeline road is unpaved & muddy – accessible by 4WD or also mountain bikeable. Gamboa does not have much in the way of shopping – you will have to go to town to buy food, etc. As much as possible, we coordinate town/shopping trips among lab members to share transportation, but we will have more people than fit in our truck at once. There is also frequent, cheap bus service between Gamboa & Panama City, and getting around Panama City by taxi is quite affordable.

MONEY: Panama uses US currency. There is one ATM in Gamboa & many in Panama City where you can use bank cards. You can also use debit & credit cards at many shops.

SHOPPING: You can get very little in Gamboa but most normal consumer items are available in Panama City.

IMMUNIZATIONS, ETC: Last time I checked the Canal Zone was still pretty healthy – i.e. you don't need any immunizations for there that you shouldn't already have for here anyway. If you go elsewhere in the country, you may want a yellow fever immunization, or to take malarial prophylactics. Check the CDC web page for the latest information.

RECREATION, ETC.

Scuba diving is popular among some of the STRI folk. If you are a diver & want to go for a weekend dive trip to the Pacific or Caribbean, bring your certification. You can rent the gear at various dive sites, but may want to bring your own mask & snorkel for snorkeling in local streams. Other things that may require different than your regular field stuff: twice weekly games of ultimate frisbee in Gamboa, dancing in Panama City (some places will not let you in wearing sandals).