

TRAVEL

Spread your wings in Panama



Canopy Lodge provides birding guides to help spot some of the more camouflaged creatures.

KIKE CALVO/Canopy Lodge

The wild jungle setting of this temperate, Latin American backwoods provides world-class birding and endless wildlife to discover, **Suzanne Morphet** writes

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EL VALLE DE ANTON, PANAMA
PUBLISHED FEBRUARY 27, 2017

This article was published on February 27, 2017. Information may no longer be current.

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The tangled mass of tropical vegetation in front of the veranda of our lodge appeared lifeless half an hour ago. But now birds flit before us, popping in and out of the greenery. Our guide, Tino, hung bananas at the feeder and it's a magnet. "Is that a dusky-faced tanager on the banana now?" I ask Tino, perhaps a little too confidently.

"No, a clay-coloured thrush," he replies. My friend Julie laughs. "It's only our first day, Suzanne."

It is, and besides, we haven't come to Panama to look at birds. Yet, visiting Panama – and El Valle de Anton in particular – and not looking at birds would be like going to Rome and not poking your head inside a few churches. Impossible.

"Look, look at that," says Tino excitedly, shining his little green light into the branches of a tree near the veranda of our lodge. "Oh my goodness," exclaims Julie, looking through her binoculars and locating a green honeycreeper. The bird is stunning, with a brilliant green body, jet-black head and yellow beak.

Canopy Lodge and its three sister lodges in other parts of Panama are renowned among birders for their prime locations in birding hot spots, and for their guides. Tino, for instance, tells us – with no hint of gloating – that he can mimic the call of 50 or more birds. Of course, he can also quickly spot them. "Look now," he says, as two collared aracari – a type of toucan with large, bright bills – land on the bananas by the feeder, followed by three more. "That's a beautiful bird," he says, zooming in on one with his powerful scope for us to admire better.

The birds are indeed beautiful, but the real reason we've come to El Valle is because of its temperate climate, what Panamanians like to call "eternal spring." That, and its unusual location in the crater of an ancient volcano, 600 metres above sea level. El Valle is the second largest inhabited volcanic crater in the world after Tanzania's Ngorongoro Crater.

We've chosen to stay at Canopy Lodge because of its enchanting setting, with a wild jungle at one side and a manicured garden on the other. More to the point, a river runs through it, and water has been diverted from the river to form a natural swimming pool. The truth is, we're bathers, not birders.



The Canopy Lodge resort in El Valle de Anton, Panama is renowned for its prime location in a bird watching hotspot.

Canopy Lodge Resort

The large, free-form pool is better than any hotel pool. An enormous cashew tree towers over it, filtering the tropical sun and supporting a tree house where a porcupine sometimes rests in one of its cupboards. The branches are covered in bromeliads and Tarzan-style ropes hang down, inviting us to play.

On our first afternoon, we hurry to the pool. We swing from the ropes, then drop – "like ripe papayas," according to the lodge's fun-loving owner – into the cool, clear water. Perhaps best of all, we have the pool to ourselves. The other guests, birders all, are too busy to bathe – at least in the pool.

When they return at the end of each day they gather in the lounge to check birds off their lists and compare notes before dinner. By 8 or 8:30 p.m. they retire to their rooms and rest up for the next day, which starts as early as 5:30 a.m..

We're busy, too, just not birding. One morning we browse the town's colourful handicraft, flower and food market, then head to the community-owned hot springs.

Since we're in the caldera of a volcano, it's no surprise that hot water bubbles up from the ground here. But due to some problem – our knowledge of Spanish is on par with our knowledge of birds – the water isn't flowing today.

A German man is just leaving and he tells us it's still worth the \$2 entrance fee to give ourselves a mud facial. He's been in El Valle for a week and happily suggests other places we should also visit. There's the orchid centre, where thousands of orchids are being propagated for replanting in the wild, including the white and rare Holy Ghost Orchid, Panama's national flower. It sounds exquisite, with a centre shaped like a dove with purple-spotted wings.



A keel-billed toucan perches on a tree limb in El Valle de Anton, Panama.

Suzanne Morphet

We might also want to visit the zoo, where another endangered species and national symbol – the golden frog – is being bred to ensure it survives despite being wiped out in the wild. And have we thought about hiking up to the Sleeping Indian Girl at the top of the caldera? We have and we will. We've been admiring the way one section of the volcano's walls resembles a person lying on his or her back. We're also looking forward to the views from the top.

That evening a couple of the birders back at the lodge share photos on their phones over dinner. Richard, from Washington State, shows us a brilliant green and red Cuban tody. Tony, who's from Pennsylvania, flashes a hummingbird before us, one he spotted in Trinidad. When I ask Tony's wife, Pat, how they got into birding, I learn it was as innocuous as buying a bird feeder after someone gave them a gift certificate to Home Depot 20 years ago. "Now," she says, "95 per cent of our holidays are related to birding."

After dinner, Tino asks Julie and I whether we'd like to go birding the next morning. It feels like we're on a slippery slope, but yes, we would. We're up at dawn, finish breakfast by 6:30 and we're on the road by 7:15. We don't go far, five kilometres or so to the other side of the caldera. Now, the sun is up and birds are calling from the treetops. At first, Julie and I see nothing but dense greenery while Tino pulls birds into his scope like a magician pulling rabbits from a hat.

Look, a social flycatcher. Quick, there's a tropical kingbird. Look now, a keel-billed toucan. But when Tino spots a hummingbird in her nest just a couple metres away and almost at eye level with us, we're truly awed. Her camouflage is perfect, but he found her anyway. "I saw a little cup," Tino says humbly.

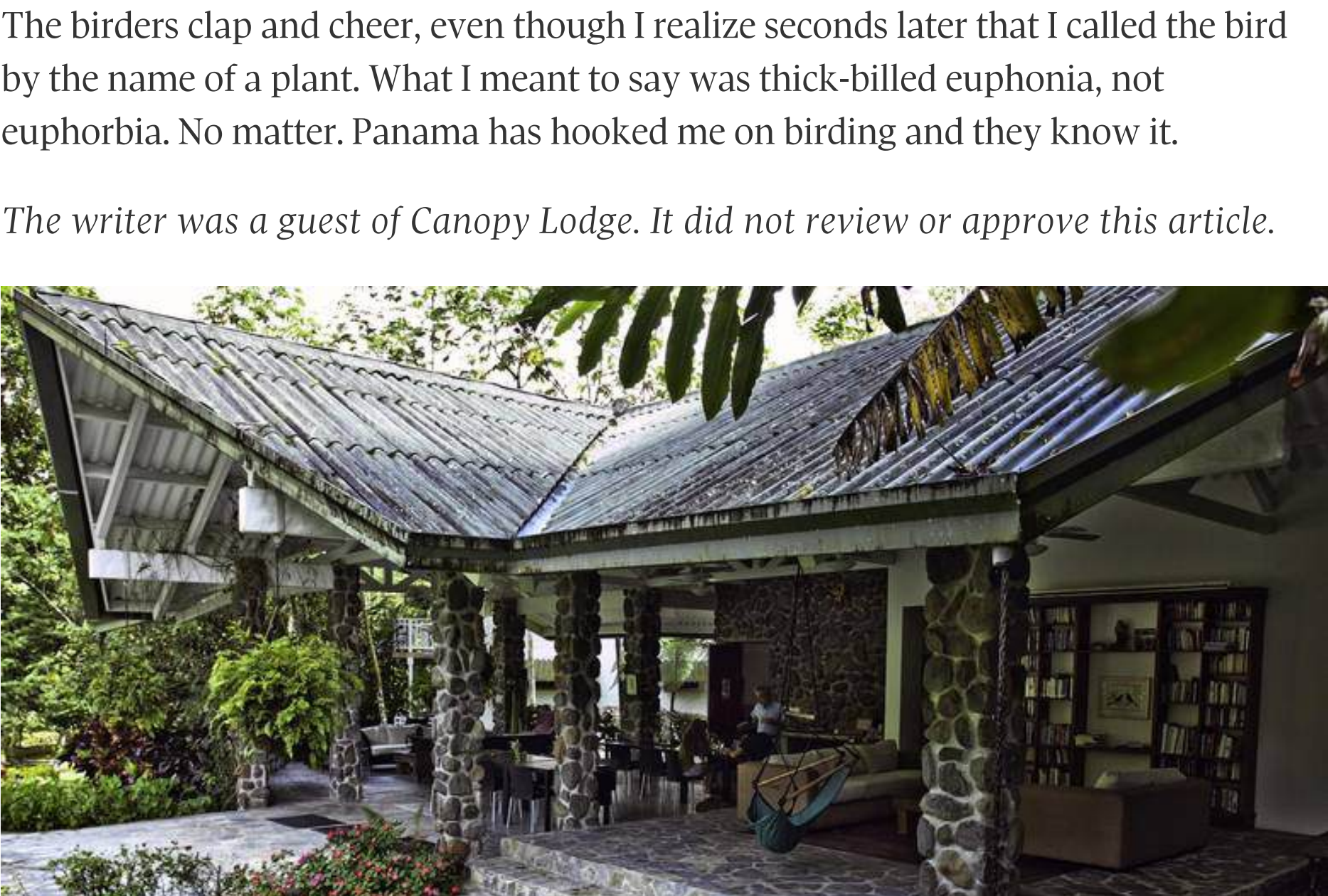
At lunch that day, I get it when Feliz, a doctor from San Antonio, Tex., tells me watching birds takes her to a magical place. She describes a green hermit hummingbird she saw that morning. "Oh my God, it was glorious, like a jewel." I tell her about a female barred antshrike we saw that was orange and frilly and far more beautiful than its name suggests. Feliz is here with another doctor who is a long-time birder. "I was partial to Costa Rica," the woman says, "but I'm impressed."

For the rest of our stay, Julie and I do more typical tourist activities, including riding the zip lines through the cloud forest at Canopy Adventure, just up the road from our lodge. Seeing a sloth hanging from a tree branch in full view on our last morning is another highlight. And, of course, swimming in the pool is a twice – sometimes thrice – daily pleasure.

But I'll always associate Panama with birding. Near the end of our stay a few of us are watching birds near the lodge one morning when a brilliant blue and yellow one flies past. "That's a ... a ..." I pause, trying to recall the name. "... a thick-billed euphorbia," I finally blurt out.

The birders clap and cheer, even though I realize seconds later that I called the bird by the name of a plant. What I meant to say was thick-billed euphonia, not euphorbia. No matter. Panama has hooked me on birding and they know it.

The writer was a guest of Canopy Lodge. It did not review or approve this article.



Panama's Canopy Lodge resort attracts mainly birders, but offers a chance to explore an array of flora and fauna native to the region.

Canopy Lodge

If you go

Air Canada Rouge flies to Panama City non-stop from Toronto three times weekly from November until mid-April. At other times of year, you can get there with Delta connecting in Atlanta, or American Airlines connecting in Miami.

Canopy Lodge is two hours west of Panama City in the town of El Valle de Anton.

Most people who visit Canopy Lodge and/or its three sister lodges are birders, but anyone interested in nature will enjoy the lodges and surroundings.

The company offers a variety of packages. These include five– to seven-night stays at one lodge, starting at \$1,999 (U.S.) a person in high season and \$1,299 in low season; 14– and 20-night packages include stays at various lodges. Packages include transportation, meals and expert guides.

It's also possible to book rooms without a package. Rates at Canopy Lodge start at \$267 a person per night in high season (\$184 in low season) and include all meals (canopytower.com). If you stay for three nights or longer you'll receive a complimentary birding tour with one of the lodge's naturalists.

High season is January through March when the weather is mostly sunny and dry.

The Canopy Family is offering Canadians a 5-per-cent discount throughout 2017 in honour of Canada's 150th anniversary.

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