



Behind the scenes at the Embera Indian marketplace



An Embera Indian woman weaves a basket



A view of the pool at the Gamboa Rainforest Resort and the Chagres River

BASKET CASE

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

Forty-five dollars sounds like a lot to spend on a basket that's the size and shape of an average dinner plate, until I learn that it took a woman nearly four months to complete. I select one with an intricate design of bright colors and hand over the money without bartering.

This market is the last stop of our visit to the Embera Ella Puru village of the Embera Indian tribe in Panama. Getting here from the Gamboa Rainforest Resort, where our group is staying, meant driving for more than an hour, then riding in two different boats for nearly another. The long boats are called *piraguas*, made of hollowed trees similar to a canoe but with motors attached in order to more easily traverse the strong currents of the Chagres River.

The Embera Indians, one of seven native peoples who reside in Panama, are permitted by the Panamanian government to live in national forest lands under certain conditions. Among the requirements is that they must send their children to school to learn Spanish (and when attending school, the children must forgo native dress in favor of uniforms). But the tribe's biggest concession—and how we're here—is that they must host visitors. It's a mandated educational exchange program—they learn Western culture, we learn theirs—that enables the Embera Indians to continue to maintain some of their traditions. But the cost is evident when looking into the weary eyes of an Embera Indian. Unable to refuse tourists, they're perpetually demonstrating

their culture and routinely photographed. Individuals often shy away from cameras, perhaps tired of feeling like the attraction at some weird kind of zoo. I see this and focus my camera on the village structures more often than on its inhabitants. Through the opening into one hut, I notice a crushed Coca-Cola can on the bamboo floor.

As we first docked, several women greeted our group with extended arms to shake our hands. We climbed up a short hill toward a band of men, including the former chief, playing up-tempo music on wooden percussion and wind instruments. We were escorted into a large hut and the current chief, through an interpreter, shared tribal history while we were served fried tilapia and fried plantain chips. The chief explained that the tribe's houses are built on platforms to protect people from bugs, snakes and jaguars; indoor kitchens generate the smoke that acts as an insect repellent; Embera Indians have always lived near rivers; and traditional crafts include baskets, woodcarvings and *taqua* or "vegetable ivory" carvings of coconut seeds. Because fishing is controlled in these waters, the men of this tribe are no longer able to hunt or fish. The crafts, typically made by women, are a primary source of income.

While wandering back toward the market it was possible to glimpse villagers who weren't putting on a show: Three young children chased one another around a pole, giggling. A father hoisted a baby onto his shoulders. Two women chatted as they hung laundry on a line. Though I felt like an intruder, visiting the Embera Indians is a treasured memory.

The village is in stark contrast to the

Artisans and heritage flourish in Panama

plush accommodations we enjoyed as guests at Gamboa Rainforest Resort at the Panama Canal. My suite boasted a cozy king-size bed, sitting area and desk, plus a luxurious bath with oversized shower and a spiral staircase heading up to a loft with two twin-size beds and a full, second bathroom. But the best feature of the resort is that all rooms have a balcony outfitted with a hammock that overlooks the Chagres River. Spend one lazy afternoon gently swinging while taking in that view, and it's possible to forget what stress feels like. The view is surreal—seriously, it is so beautiful that it seemed like a computer-generated movie set created for "The Flintstones" or "Jurassic Park," minus the dinosaurs. If that alone doesn't eliminate stress, spend some time at the resort's luxurious spa. But you'll want to pull yourself away to enjoy some of the various excursions the resort offers, such as the day trip to the Embera Indian village. One morning while kayaking in the Panama Canal, our group saw a Jesus lizard (so named because it can walk on water), several howler monkeys and four Capuchin monkeys. Touring the rainforest canopy on the aerial tram, we saw a toucan and several breathtaking flowers. Atop the observation tower, we watched several boats navigate the Panama Canal. With three restaurants, three bars and 24-hour room service, it's possible never to leave the resort. But with Panama City within easy access, even more entertainment options abound.

It may not be possible to pack everything into one trip. But if the Embera tribe teaches anything, it's to embrace simplicity. **SP**

MORE INFORMATION

GAMBOA RAINFOREST RESORT AT THE PANAMA CANAL

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Cristóbal, Provincia de Colón
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WHAT IT COSTS

Overnight rates vary by season and room size, ranging from \$120 to \$600. The day trips described in this article are priced from \$40 to \$50 per person. The U.S. dollar is the official paper currency in Panama.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

U.S. citizens need a valid passport. Visitors must pay \$5 for a tourist card upon entering the country. An airport tax of \$20 is due upon leaving the country, although this may be included in the airline ticket fees. Spanish is the official language, but many Panamanians also speak English.



Antonio is the current chief of the Embera Indian village.

PHOTOS BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK