

Agriculture & Food Systems

14-Day Faculty-Led Program

Forum on Education Abroad Member • Loyola University Maryland — Returning Partner 2026 • 20+ Years in Panama

Why Panama for Agriculture & Food Systems?

Panama sits at one of the most consequential agricultural crossroads on earth — the land bridge where North and South American species met, mingled, and spread to the rest of the world. The crops your students study in textbooks originated here, moved through here, or were transformed here by centuries of colonial trade. What makes Panama exceptional for a food systems program is not any single farm or research station: it is the density of contrast. Students compare a GlobalGAP-certified pineapple export operation with a smallholder agroforestry farm on the same day, in the same watershed. They walk into Panama’s national seed conservation program, a commercial biotech laboratory, and an Emberá forest food system in the same week. They see what industrial agriculture, protected agriculture, artisanal fishing, indigenous agroforestry, and large-scale agribusiness each look like — operating simultaneously, in a country the size of South Carolina. There is no classroom exercise that produces that comparison. Panama does it in 14 days.

Program Itinerary

Day	Program	Agricultural Learning
1	Arrival & Welcome Dinner Airport pickup and transfer to Istmo (90 min). Settle into private bungalows on the Pacific coast. Welcome dinner — menu sourced from local farms and the Pacific coast. Faculty introduces the program’s central question: what does a food system look like when it sits between two oceans, two agricultural zones, and 500 years of colonial trade history?	<i>Food systems framing Local & regional food culture Program orientation</i>
2	Pacific Coast — Artisanal Fishing Economy + Local Market + Paddleboard Morning visit to the fish market: post-harvest handling, cold chain challenges, market access, and the economics of small-scale fisheries on the Pacific coast. Local market visit: seasonal produce, informal food economy, price structures. Afternoon beach cleanup. Evening faculty seminar: Pacific coastal food systems and the tension between subsistence, artisanal, and industrial food production in Panama.	<i>Artisanal fisheries & post-harvest systems Informal food markets & pricing Coastal food security</i>
3	El Valle — Poultry Farm + Cloud Forest Ecology + Local Market Full-day excursion to El Valle de Antón (600m, volcanic crater). Poultry farm visit: production systems, feed inputs, biosecurity, and market channels for domestic vs. export birds. Cloud forest ecology walk: agroforestry potential, native species, and the elevation gradient’s effect on agricultural systems — students physically move from Pacific lowland crops to highland production. Indigenous artisan market: traditional food crops and preparation methods still sold at scale. (Lunch not included)	<i>Poultry production systems & biosecurity Elevation gradient & agroecological zones Traditional food crops & market chains</i>
4	Panama City — Casco Viejo + Canal Miraflores Casco Viejo walking tour: Panama City as a colonial food trade hub — the camino real that moved silver, food, and enslaved labor across the isthmus shaped what was grown and who grew it. Miraflores Locks: Canal water management infrastructure and its relationship to the freshwater supply that underlies the country’s agricultural zones. (Lunch not included)	<i>Colonial food trade & land use history Water infrastructure & agricultural zones</i>

5	<p>Isalbert Pineapple Export Farm + Finca Manatí Smallholder — Side-by-Side Comparison The academic centerpiece of the program. Isalbert: large-scale pineapple export operation — monoculture systems, agrochemical inputs, labor practices, cold chain logistics, GlobalGAP certification, and US/EU market requirements. Finca Manatí: smallholder diversified farm in the Canal watershed buffer zone, practicing agroforestry, water quality stewardship, and watershed PES (Payment for Ecosystem Services). Faculty leads structured debrief: same country, same crop region, entirely different food system models. What are the trade-offs — for farmers, communities, ecosystems, and eaters?</p>	<p><i>Export monoculture vs. smallholder agroforestry</i> <i>Global supply chains & certification systems</i> <i>Food systems trade-offs & agrarian transition</i></p>
6	<p>Community Service — Local School Visit Partner school visit: students engage with local children on food, agriculture, and where food comes from. Structured exchange — not performance. Faculty frames this as food systems education and the relationship between agricultural literacy and rural communities. Afternoon debrief and reflection at Istmo.</p>	<p><i>Food literacy & agricultural education</i> <i>Rural community engagement</i> <i>Service learning & sustained partnership</i></p>
7	<p>Recreation Day — Surfing + Salsa Morning surf lesson at Pacific beach. Afternoon free for rest, journaling, or independent fieldwork. Evening salsa dancing class at Istmo.</p>	<p><i>Rest & integration</i> <i>Independent fieldwork time</i> —</p>
8	<p>IDIAP National Agricultural Research Station — Rice Breeding + Criollo Seed Conservation Visit to Panama’s Instituto de Investigación Agropecuaria (IDIAP): national agricultural research infrastructure. Rice breeding program: how Panama develops and releases new varieties adapted to local climate, pests, and market preferences. Criollo seed conservation: the national program to document, preserve, and reintroduce traditional Panamanian cultivars that industrial agriculture has marginalized. Discussion: what is the relationship between seed sovereignty, national food security, and agricultural research funding?</p>	<p><i>Plant breeding & varietal development</i> <i>Seed sovereignty & genetic conservation</i> <i>National food security & research infrastructure</i></p>
9	<p>Simply Natural Tours — Greenhouse Technology, Grafting & Irrigation Systems Hands-on day at Simply Natural Tours: protected agriculture infrastructure — shade houses, hydroponic systems, drip irrigation design, and grafting techniques for disease resistance. Students participate in grafting demonstration and examine irrigation layout for efficiency vs. cost trade-offs. Discussion: what role does protected agriculture play in a tropical climate where rainfall is abundant but unpredictable — and who can afford to adopt it?</p>	<p><i>Protected agriculture & greenhouse systems</i> <i>Irrigation design & water use efficiency</i> <i>Technology adoption & smallholder access</i></p>
10	<p>Emberá Indigenous Village + Chagres River — Traditional Agroforestry + Overnight Portobelo Dugout canoe into the Chagres River rainforest. Emberá community: traditional forest-based food systems — native fruit cultivation, medicinal plant knowledge, fishing practices, and the management of a forest as a food system rather than land to be cleared. Discussion: what is food sovereignty when your food system is a watershed, and that watershed is managed by a canal authority? Continue to Portobelo/Colón area. Overnight near Portobelo — the only night away from Istmo.</p>	<p><i>Traditional agroforestry & forest food systems</i> <i>Food sovereignty & indigenous land rights</i> <i>Watershed management & food security</i></p>
11	<p>Caribbean Cacao Farm + Snorkeling + Return to Istmo Morning: Caribbean snorkeling — marine food systems, reef ecology, and fishing as food security on the Atlantic side. Afternoon: cacao farm visit on the Caribbean coast. Caribbean cacao is a distinct agricultural story — the region’s Afro-Panamanian communities have grown cacao for centuries under agroforestry systems that look nothing like the</p>	<p><i>Cacao agroforestry & post-harvest processing</i> <i>Fine-flavor vs. commodity supply chains</i> <i>Marine food systems & reef ecology</i></p>

	monoculture plantations found elsewhere. Post-harvest processing, fermentation, and the economics of fine-flavor vs. commodity cacao. Return drive to Istmo.	
12	Grupo CALESA — Sugarcane & Rice Operations, Biotech Labs, Solar Farm Full day at Grupo CALESA, one of Panama’s largest agribusiness operations. Sugarcane production and processing: mechanization, irrigation, milling, and ethanol production. Rice operations: large-scale paddy management, post-harvest handling, and domestic market supply. Biotech laboratories: seed treatment, tissue culture, and crop protection research at commercial scale. On-site solar farm: renewable energy integration into large-scale agricultural operations. Discussion: what does vertical integration look like in a Central American food system, and what are the implications for smaller producers?	<i>Large-scale agribusiness & vertical integration Crop processing & bioenergy production Agricultural biotech & renewable energy integration</i>
13	University Agriculture Exchange — UTP Penonomé + Final Presentations + Farewell Bonfire Day trip to Universidad Tecnológica de Panamá, Penonomé campus. Faculty presents research or a topical lecture to Panamanian agriculture students. Student-to-student exchange: what agricultural challenges does Panama face that US students rarely study — food import dependency, climate vulnerability, rural exodus, land tenure? Return to Istmo. Student final presentations or capstone exercise. Farewell bonfire.	<i>Comparative agricultural systems Food policy & rural development Peer-to-peer academic exchange</i>
14	Departure Breakfast at Istmo. Final reflection. Airport transfer to Tocumen International Airport (90 min). Departure from Panama.	—

All meals at Istmo included. Off-site lunches on Days 3 & 4 not included. Overnight accommodation near Portobelo (Day 10) included.

<p>What’s Included</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Private retreat center — 8 bungalows, 24 beds (exclusive use) ● All meals prepared by on-site chef ● All activities, bilingual guides, and entry fees ● Ground transportation throughout ● Airport transfers (arrival & departure) ● Farm & research station visit coordination (IDIAP, CALESA, Simply Natural, Isalbert, Finca Manatíal) ● University exchange coordination (UTP Penonomé) ● Community service partner coordination ● Overnight accommodation — Portobelo area (Day 10) <p>Not Included Airfare, travel insurance, off-site lunches (Days 3 & 4), personal expenses</p>	<p>Safety & Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Panama: US State Dept Level 2 (same as Costa Rica & most of Western Europe) ● US-trained EMT on staff at Istmo ● Medical clinic 10 min away; hospital 90 min (Panama City) ● Sean Davis: dedicated on-site coordinator, full program duration ● 24/7 emergency protocols and documentation available ● Exclusive-use property — no other guests during your program ● Forum on Education Abroad Standards of Good Practice
---	---

Program Pricing

Larger groups = lower per-student cost. All pricing includes lodging, meals, activities, and ground transport.

Group Size	Low Season (Apr–Nov)	High Season (Dec–Mar)	Per Student Low Season	Per Student High Season
7 students + 1 leader	\$28,583	\$30,280	\$292/day	\$309/day
12 students + 1 leader	\$40,817	\$43,011	\$243/day	\$256/day
14 students + 2 leaders*	\$45,711	\$48,103	\$233/day	\$245/day
22 students + 2 leaders	\$65,285	\$68,473	\$212/day	\$222/day

*At 14+ students, a second faculty leader included at no additional cost. | Prices include all lodging, meals, activities, and ground transport.

Your Hosts

Sean Davis — M.S. Educational Administration. Returned Peace Corps Volunteer (Chile). Founded an international school in Panama City. 20+ years in Panama.

Ayesha Davis — M.S. Environmental Engineering. Returned Peace Corps Volunteer (Paraguay). 10+ years designing water/sanitation projects with the World Bank and IDB across Latin America. Istmo co-founder.

Ready to explore?

This itinerary is a starting point, not a contract. We work with study abroad offices to shape programs that fit the faculty member’s course, the institution’s timeline, and the students’ level. Reconnaissance visits available.

Schedule a call: <https://calendar.app.google/Nve9vEcYxtJKpRpE8>

Want to visit first? Our reconnaissance visits let you see the campus before you commit. 4 days / 3 nights — email us to book yours (info@istmoretreat.com).