

WISH YOU WERE HERE

AT PANAMA'S TRANQUILO BAY, ECO-TOURISM WITH ALL THE AMENITIES

From Chance Carlin of Austin.

Remote travel has never been easier. Blindfold on, Heidi Schrab and I booked an infrequently traveled destination on a fairly isolated island in Central America that sounded promising. Getting to Bocas del Toro, Panama (an archipelago of some 68 tropical islands), required three flights, an overnight stay in Panama City and a boat ride. But when we arrived at Tranquilo Bay, we found an unbelievable paradise (www.tranquilobay.com).

So this is what happens when four Texans set their minds to creating the perfect backdrop for a multisport adventure vacation. Two couples started building the modest but fabulous eco-tourism resort seven years ago and have truly brought charm and exceptional modern details to the island. The natural beauty ranks up there with every hot tourist spot on the other side of the globe featured in travel magazines ... but even better because it is still pristine and unspoiled. And the folks at Tranquilo Bay served up royal treatment to a couple of curious adventurers. From the moment we set foot in Panama, we received white glove, red carpet, super-elite, over-the-top service and got a primer on the region.

We even sent dietary restrictions ahead of time (one of us is a very finicky eater) and the food was totally gourmet — watch out Jeffrey's! Each evening we talked about what the following day would bring (weather-wise) and focused on which activities were best suited for the day. The daily customized adventures were exhausting, challenging, fun and exhilarating; each day was better than the last.

We visited native Indian villages, walked rainforest hiking trails, surprised truckloads of amazing crawling things, examined flora and fauna not found in other parts of the globe, uncovered hidden waterfalls, explored island caves on sea kayaks, snorkeled and



Jay Viola

Hiking on trails through the rainforest was just one of the enchanting activities that Chance Carlin and Heidi Schrab found at Tranquilo Bay, Panama.

floated over reef after reef (oh yeah, and nurse sharks that were 5 feet long). We relaxed each evening in hammocks. We decided for sure we are going back for surf and fishing season.

Chance Carlin is mastermind behind GoCarlini.com, a personalized fitness studio catering to South Austin.

Heidi Schrab, a finicky eater, loves Mother Earth and works to support her through Green Mountain Energy and Texas Solar Energy Society.

WINE FEST



FALL CREEK

At Fall Creek Vineyards on Lake Buchanan, the artisan fair is free. The buffet lunch is \$29.9 and includes two glasses of wine.

AT FALL CREEK VINEYARDS, SHOPPING AND NOSHING

Fall Creek Vineyards, on the northwest shores of Lake Buchanan at Tow, is hosting its inaugural Artisan Fair and Lunchtime Feast Nov. 24, featuring works ranging from children's furniture, hand-crafted wood gifts, paintings to natural olive oils and creams and holiday gift items. Hours: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission: free. Reservations are required for the buffet lunch, 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Price: \$29.95, which includes two glasses of wine and Christmas caroling. Can't make the event? The winery is open 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday noon to 4 p.m. Sunday. Free. (325) 379-5361 www.fcv.com.

BOOK

LOOKING BEYOND 'WOW' TO FIND THE HIP HOTELS

What makes a hotel hip? "It's not just the feeling of 'wow,' because you can get wow from anything. You can get wow from a 100-foot-atrium in a corporate hotel," Herbert Ypma, author of the "Hip Hotels" guidebook series, says. Instead, Ypma looks for "highly individual places" that are "capturing and reflecting and radiating the notion of travel" with some element that is unforgettable from stunning decor to breathtaking location. There are 14 books in the "Hip Hotels" series, including the most recent, a paperback version of the "Hip Hotels Atlas" (Thames & Hudson, \$36.95), that has just been released in the U.S. www.hiphotels.com.



— Associated Press

ON THE WEB

LEARN ABOUT GERMAN HERITAGE BEFORE YOU GO

Heritage travel is becoming more popular, so the German National Tourist Office and the German Information Center USA have created a one-stop site for information — www.germanoriginality.com. The site is just in time for 2008, the 400-year anniversary of German settlement in the U.S. A lot of Texans claim German heritage (more than 17 percent, according to the 1990 Census), so even if you can't get to the homeland soon, you can learn a lot about yourself online.



AMI

An American Medical ID can be inscribed with your medical conditions and medications.

MEDICAL ID

SOME JEWELRY BEYOND EARRINGS TO CONSIDER

If you are living with a chronic illness, be sure to include your medical identification when packing for holiday travel. American Medical ID offers custom-engraved bracelets and necklaces starting at \$21.95 that include information on medical conditions, drug and food allergies, prescribed medicines and emergency contacts. With medical identification handy, you are more likely to get proper, prompt medical care in the event of an emergency. (800) 363-5985, www.IdentifyYourself.com.