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Tourism Cares Supports Panama's Transformation of its Tourism Sector by Participating in Country's Innovative Community Tourism Experience Contest

Norwood, Mass., USA (June 9, 2023) – Tourism Cares, a global non-profit dedicated to advancing sustainability in the tourism industry, was recently invited by Panama to be a part of the inaugural Innovative Community Tourism Experiences Contest, organized in partnership between the Panama Tourism Authority (ATP), Panama por Naturaleza, and the UN World Tourism Organization, that promotes innovative and disruptive tourism experiences that encourage the conservation and regeneration of the natural and cultural heritage of Panama and the empowerment of local communities. The contest, held May 19 – 20, 2023, concluded with great success, with the community of Mata Oscura in the province of Veraguas as the winner with their experience "Turtle Eco-Route."

This contest also marked the beginning of a new partnership between Tourism Cares and Panama who jointly recently announced the country will be host to Tourism Cares' Meaningful Travel Summit 2024 and plans to expand this community tourism campaign through participation in Tourism Cares' Meaningful Travel Map.

The objective of the Innovative Community Tourism Experiences contest was to develop new marketable sustainable tourism experiences that highlight Panama's natural and cultural heritage, as well as the authenticity of its local communities, improving the quality of life for residents and promoting regenerative tourism that contributes to the achievement of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

A total of 41 applications were received from all 10 provinces of the country, including four

Indigenous regions. Twenty-five experiences qualified as semifinalists, whose representatives underwent an intensive two-day training by IE University, one of Europe's most prestigious universities, to bolster their presentations. Applicants will be integrated in the Tourism Cares Meaningful Travel Map of Panama.

Tourism Cares' CEO Greg Takehara served on the international panel of judges, together with Shannon Stowell, CEO of the Adventure Travel and Trade Association, and Sofia Gutierrez, Deputy Director of Sustainability for the UNWTO.

The evaluation criteria used to assess the submitted applications were based on several components, including the innovation and commercial appeal of the experience, community empowerment and benefit, as well as sustainability and conservation of cultural and natural heritage.

After a thorough evaluation process and deliberation, the judges selected five finalists according to the contest categories:

1. Category Bridge of the World: "Experience the Caribbean and More: Pirates, Connections and Nature of the Panamanian Caribbean" presented by tour operator El Trip de Jenny and the community group Los Rapaces Ecotourism; Achiote, Colón Province.
2. Category Multicultural Panama: "Panama Sand & Folklore" presented by tour operator Balaena Travel and the community group Cooperativa de Servicios Múltiples ProTurismo; La Arena, Herrera Province.
3. Category Forests of Life: "Crossing the Isthmus: The Crystalline Northwest" presented by tour operator Panama Heavens and the community group Cooperative de Turismo Santa Fe R.L.; Santa Fe, Veraguas Province.
4. Category Birds in Paradise: "The Secrets of Playa Muerto" presented by tour operator Ancón Expeditions and the community group Cooperativa Turismo de Playa Muerto R.L.; Puerto Piña, Darien Province.
5. Category Ocean Wonders: "Turtle Eco-Route" presented by tour operator Tourism Guide Services and the community group Fundación Agua y Tierra; Arenda de Quebro Veraguas Province.

The grand prize winner was the "Turtle Eco-Route" experience, with the community receiving a contribution of up to B/. 25,000.00 for the development of tourism infrastructure, and the tour operator winning fully funded trips to participate in important international events and fairs in the sector, which include participation at the Adventure Travel World Summit 2023 in Hokkaido, Japan, as well as in USTOA's Annual Conference & Marketplace 2023 in Los Angeles. Other prizes for the five finalists and 25 semifinalists were awarded, helping to motivate the local industry to be a part of this great initiative.

During the final event held at the modern Panama Convention Center located at the entrance to the Panama Canal, the 25 semifinalists had the opportunity to showcase and promote their innovative experiences to more than 300 participants from Panama's tourism industry, as well as potential donors invited to contribute to the empowerment of the participating rural and Indigenous communities.

Panama's Minister of Tourism, Ivan Eskildsen, remarked "With this contest, the country has accelerated the implementation of Panama's Sustainable Tourism Model, transforming our tourism sector into a more sustainable and inclusive one. Data shows that there is an immense market of travelers seeking experiences in destinations with extraordinary nature and authentic culture, and we have worked on preparing ourselves through training and programs like 'One Thousand Kilometers of Trails' so that rural and Indigenous communities can be the hosts of these experiences."

Tourism Cares' visit to Panama's Local and Indigenous Communities

At the conclusion of the contest, select attendees were invited to a post-tour organized by the Authority of Panama, to experience the rich and vibrant rural and Indigenous communities throughout the country.

Experiences included a visit with King Reynaldo Santana at his palace in the Nasa Indigenous region, the coastal region of Bocas del Toro to visit the Bocas Hope Spot, and sites along the Bastimentos Trail, including the newly developed Wizard Beach. All visits were designed to support conversation and alignment around sustainable tourism development and the contributions the travel trade can make to supporting community tourism investment.

For more information about the Innovative Tourism Communities Contest and the Tourism Cares with Panama Meaningful Travel Summit, visit <https://www.unwto.org/es/nuevas-experiencias-turisticas-impulsado-por-panama> and <https://www.tourismcares.org/panama-summit>

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About Tourism Cares:

Tourism Cares, Inc., a U.S.-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit that advances the travel industry's positive impact to help people and places thrive. We believe it's in all our best interest to support the destinations our industry depends on so that communities, travelers, and businesses can prosper. We mobilize the entire industry to use its business as a force for good by uniting, activating, and inspiring all sectors to make a positive impact through travel. Learn more at [TourismCares.org](https://www.TourismCares.org) and [@TourismCares](https://www.instagram.com/TourismCares).