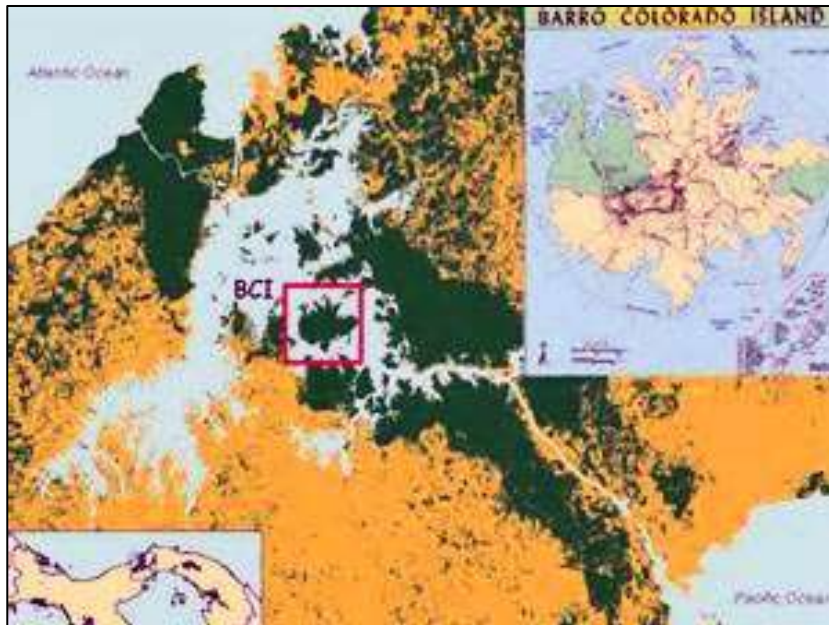


Barro Colorado Island

From Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute

HISTORY - Barro Colorado Island was created when the Chagres River was dammed to form Gatun Lake as part of the Panama Canal. While the lake has many islands, Barro Colorado is the largest with 3,707 acres.



Barro Colorado island on Gatun Lake and James Zetek

James Zetek was one of the first scientists to visualize the importance of setting the island aside as a biological reserve dedicated to research. In 1923, the Governor of the Canal Zone, J.J. Morrow, designated Barro Colorado a biological reserve which soon earned an international reputation as the leading field station for studies of tropical biology. The National Academy of Sciences administered the reserve until 1946 when the responsibility was given to the Smithsonian Institute.

Under the Torrijos-Carter Treaty and in compliance with the Convention for Nature Protection in the Western Hemisphere, Barro Colorado was declared a Nature Monument in 1979. In addition to the island, the neighboring mainland peninsulas of Buena Vista, Frijoles, Peña Blanca, Gigante and Bohio were incorporated with the Nature Monument comprising an area of 12,000 acres all together. At the same time, the continuance of the research activities by the Smithsonian Institute were secured.

The Barro Colorado Nature Monument has hosted more than 80 years of biological research and is one of the sites with the longest history of continuous research in the New World tropics. Each year between 250 and 300 scientists from around the world visit Barro Colorado Nature Monument.



Barro Colorado in the 1920s and today.

In addition to the historic Barro Colorado Field Research Station founded in 1923, the island now has air conditioned housing, administration, laundry, kitchen, dining, computer room, darkroom, laboratory, Visitors Center and other facilities to those that go there for research. There are also growing houses, an insectary, permanent trails and protected plots of forest.



Barro Colorado Gamboa docks and an aerial view of the island.

My Visit To Barro Colorado Island

by Louie Celerier, Tuesday, March 8, 2005

Tuesday was another early starting day, 6:00 am to be exact, in order to get to Gamboa in time for the launch to Barro Colorado, the wildlife island refuge operated by the Smithsonian Institute in the middle of Gatun Lake. **ECOcircuitos** was, as always, right on time.

Barro Colorado is not for the casual tourist. This is a place for the study of insect, plant and animal life. Nevertheless, I wanted to go there and satisfy my curiosity about the place. I was fully rewarded, but the trip taxed my stamina. I had expected mild climbing and mostly even ground. This was not so. Much climbing and going steeply down was involved.

Arriving at the island around 8:30 am, we faced the first climb immediately. The dock was at the bottom of a very steep hill and the main building was quite a way up this hill. The steps I climbed rivaled anything in San Francisco, or so it seemed to me. Reaching the building with my lungs about to burst, I was faced with another set of stairs inside the building to go to the top floor. There, we were

given complimentary coffee and, because they felt sorry for me, they let me have two delicious carimañolas left over from the staff breakfast, at no charge. After a short break, we were ushered to a conference room for a short lecture about what we were about to do and see. Some of it was above my comprehension, but several in the group were there to study and they really understood it all and could hardly wait to get started.



Left: We spot the howler monkeys . Right: The howler monkeys. See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.

We left the building and immediately we were faced with a very steep climb into the forest. After climbing for a short, but difficult, time, we stopped because a group of howler monkeys had been spotted. They started howling when they saw us, but I don't know who was making more noise, they with their howling, or I with my wheezing. The next series of climbs were more gradual and, because the naturalists in the group were involved in bird watching and plant admiration, I was able to rest a bit. Then, I broke from the group and climbed ahead until I came to a clearing with some crude benches. I picked the best of the lot and laid down to wait for the group. Thanks to this, I was fully refreshed when they caught up with me and I had no more trouble keeping up with the group from there on. Well, I lie a



Now we are going down a steep incline. Ahhh! A resting place at last.

bit. The climbs were not as steep from there on and, after a while, we started to come down. Two and a half hours after starting our trek, we reached the main building again.

This time we were fed an excellent Panamanian lunch. After a short rest, we were again ushered into the conference room for a bit more information and to answer any questions we may have had. By then, our main subject of conversation were the many ticks and chiggers we had picked up during our hike. It became a game to see who could spot ticks quicker running up our clothes. By 3:30 pm it was time to catch the staff boat taking workers getting off work back to the mainland at Gamboa.

ECOcircuitos met us at the dock and took us to the big and beautiful Gamboa resort for refreshments before heading back to our hotel. We ran into some classmates there and, as much as I try, I cannot remember who they were. Please forgive me and make allowances for old age. If you read this, please remind me who you were as the suspense is killing me.

While at the resort, we had a good, but short rain shower. Something they tell me is not uncommon for Gamboa, even in dry season as it was then. We left the resort driving a bit through what is left of the town of Gamboa and photographing a beautiful Guayacan tree in full yellow bloom. I kept thinking back how interesting it might have been to grow up in Gamboa, isolated from the rest of the world and with all that bountiful nature around. Not for the weak at heart, I bet. Kids that grew up there must have wonderful memories and tales to tell.

The remaining houses in Gamboa have been refurbished and look very good, as the photos will show. I guess the folks living there are still working for the dredging division, as I believe was the case in the past. Correct me if I am wrong. The place looked very clean and neat.

Finally, we headed for our hotel in the city under a misty rain, which cleared after leaving the Gamboa area. That night I dreamed about climbing stairs and mountains.



With a base as that, this tree is in no danger of toppling over. Another steep climb, but isn't it beautiful?



How's that for braiding? The vine made a perfect twist around another vine. I cheated here. I found this flower on top of Ancon Hill, but I thought you might enjoy seeing it anyway.



We found a few flowers too. This was a tiny one, no bigger than two inches in circumference. This was a variety of small fern new to me.



This is the front of the Lab Building high up on the Barro Colorado hillside. The Plaque reads, "This Centre is dedicated to the memory of Martin H. Moynihan (1928-1996) Director of Smithsonian Institute Tropical Investigations (1957-1974) for his contributions to Tropical Biology". Right: View of Gatun Lake from the Lab.



Going down to the docks to catch our work boat taking workers home at 3:30 PM . I am the last one looking at the camera.