

Wounnan and Embera Drua

THE WOUNNAN

Location

The wounnan are one of the indigenous people who live in the rainforest. One such people are the Wounaan. As there are now probably less than 3,000 Wounaan people following the old ways.

They live at the borders of the Chagres River in Stop Chagres, Mocambo Down, Gamboa, the real adventure starts. For water transport, the Wounan use the cayuco, a long canoe made from a hollowed-out tree trunk to go to the San Antonio Island that is now part of a national park.

Food Habits

The Wounaan can obtain a rich diet from the forest and lake when times are good. Fish can be caught in abundance, and the lake also provides turtle and caiman, both of which are edible. Jungle animals are also hunted. The tapir, peccary, deer, armadillo, iguana, and monkey can make a good meal. Some plants are cultivated, including yucca, yams and beans together with fruits such as plantains, bananas, pineapples, papayas, guavas and avocados.

Costumes

The activities and costumes of the Wounnan are similar to the Emberá. The art of the Wounaan is based principally on wood carving and basket weaving, with all of the materials, including pigments, coming from the forest around them.

The Wounaan have their own language, but their village elder, Felipe, speaks fluent Spanish also.

Their houses are they have a dwelling that is basically a platform raised on posts several feet above the ground. Overhead is a roof of thatched palm leaves, the joints tied with vines. There are no walls between the platform and the roof. Access to the platform is up a ladder made by cutting notches into a pole or a log. At one end of the floor, which is made of cane is a cooking area, consisting of logs placed on a clay mound. A small fire can be lit at the centre. Carved wood provides kitchen utensils. The Wounaan sleep on the floor of the houses on beds made from the bark of trees which women have made soft by beating it under water. There is no "bedding". A wooden block serves as a pillow. The people have no protection from the excessive heat, from insects or much protection from the heavy rains.

THE EMBERA DRUA

Location

Emberá Drua also lies within the Chagres National Park, a 50000-hectare tropical rainforest preserve, home to some of the most densely packed animal and plant biodiversity on the planet. The park also protects the historic Camino de Cruces Trail, the land crossing that gave Spanish conquistadors a monopoly on access to the Pacific Ocean during the 16th 17th centuries.

Our Community

Emberá Drua is a small indigenous community of less than 70 individuals in the Republic of Panama. We keep our traditional ways alive by practicing and living them every day. This is our home, and we invite you to learn about our culture, our village, our way of life. We are proud to share it with you. Those of you with a sense of adventure might be interested in visiting us, participating in our daily and ceremonial activities and making new friends.

Activities

In 198x, the Embera Drua faced a new challenge to our traditional way of life when the area where we live, the Panama Canal watershed, became the Chagres National Park. Because of the new restrictions of living in a protected park, we looked for new alternatives to our traditional activities of subsistence agriculture and hunting. Tourism turned out to be a good choice. It has low environmental impact, reinforces and has actually caused a renaissance in our traditional arts and culture, has long-term sustainability and responds to eco-tourism demand for quality experiences.

Costumes

They are very dedicated in the carving they do. Baskets made from native plant fibers, including those from huge chungu and naguala palm leaves, are used for household chores and storage as well as for sale. After the leaves are harvested, their threads are stripped, cleaned, dried, dyed, dried again and finally, woven by the women into beautiful baskets with traditional geometric designs or native animal representations.

The women also create the dyes from natural sources. Embera men are devoted carvers, and talented Miguel has almost completed a perfectly proportioned, 12-inch harpy eagle of rock-hard cocobolo wood. Panama's national bird, highly endangered harpys are the world's most powerful birds of prey.