



REPÚBLICA DE PANAMÁ

— GOBIERNO NACIONAL —

AUTORIDAD DE TURISMO DE PANAMÁ

USTOA's President Participates in Panama's Final Event for its Innovative Community Tourism Experiences Contest

This past May 19th, USTOA's President Terry Dale had the opportunity to participate as a keynote speaker in the final event for Panama's Innovative Community Tourism Experiences Contest, organized in partnership between the Panama Tourism Authority, Panama por Naturaleza, and the UN World Tourism Organization, which concluded with great success, with the community of Mata Oscura in the province of Veraguas as the winner with their experience "Turtle Eco-Route."

The objective of the 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 Sustainable Development Goals, supporting the positive transformation of Panama's tourism economy.

A total of 41 applications were received from all 10 provinces of the country and 4 of the 6 indigenous regions. Twenty-five experiences qualified as semifinalists, whose representatives underwent an intensive two-day training by the IE University, one of Europe's most prestigious universities, to optimize their experiences.

The international panel of judges was composed of three members: Greg Takehara - CEO of Tourism Cares, 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 5 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 Cooperativa 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 de 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; Arena 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 in USTOA's Annual Conference & Marketplace 2023 in Los Angeles, as well as an annual membership to USTOA. There were other attractive prizes for the 5 finalists and 25 semifinalists, which helped 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 over 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.

Also in this final event, during Terry Dale's keynote presentation "Leveraging the US Tourism Market to Strengthen Panama's Economy", he referred to the great position Panama is in to attract a significant portion of the US\$11 billion in annual expenses by USTOA's members' travelers. "I believe Panama represents the next opportunity. We want to make that happen".

Terry Dale also referred to the fact that Panama has recently entered into a partnership agreement with USTOA, something that heralds a new era of possibilities for Panama's attraction of US visitors, especially considering the very unique and differentiated experiences that Panama is focused on developing and promoting.

Panama's Minister of Tourism, Ivan Eskildsen, highlighted that "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."