

Considerations for Crossing the Darien Gap by RV

When considering travel from North America to South America, one inevitably has to think about crossing the Darien Gap. What is the Darien Gap? It is the 60-mile-wide geographic region between Panama (in Central America) and Columbia (in South America) and it consists of jungle forest, swamps and mountains. The Pan-American Highway stops just before the gap and picks up again after the gap. In between, there are no roads to travel. The Darien Gap is a notoriously dangerous part of the world due to its rough natural landscape (think dense rainforest, swamps and poisonous snakes) and organised crime violence (think kidnappings and political ransoms).

If you are considering travelling by RV from Central down to South America, the safest method is to put your RV on a commercial shipping boat and to fly yourself over to meet your RV. Sounds simple enough. However, there are a number of considerations before making this decision. Let's take the scenario where you drive your RV down to Panama and you want to get to Columbia, past the Darien Gap. Here is what you will have to think about: (1) the administrative complexity, (2) the timing impacts on your trip, (3) the safety of your RV, and (4) the costs of the crossing.

1 – Administrative Complexity

Getting your RV from Panama to Columbia will require many steps in the administrative business of getting your vehicle transferred from one country to the next. You will be dealing with commercial shipping companies as well as with government agencies including port authorities, local police and customs agencies. This complicated process is burdensome and it all takes place in Spanish.

Luckily, there are private service providers that can assist you in navigating the administrative process and figuring out the shipping logistics for your RV. For a fee, these companies will explain the process to you and help you fill out the appropriate forms. Some companies will even have their agents physically accompany you to the port and to the various offices that need to be visited to obtain the approvals for having your RV shipped from Central to South America. If you don't speak Spanish or are unfamiliar with the shipping requirements, having these agents by your side can be very helpful in getting your RV on to the shipping boat.

It should be noted that once in Columbia, there are also a number of administrative hurdles to jump to get your vehicle back in order to continue your travel journey. This process can take two to three days in order to obtain all the paperwork and approvals to be able to drive your RV out of the Columbian port.



2 – Timing Impacts on your Trip

Shipping an RV across the Darien Gap is time intensive. Shipping companies say to expect a three-week period between the moment that you drop off your RV in Panama to the moment where you can pick it up in Columbia. With the frequent operational delays that can happen, this can quickly run that timeframe up to four weeks where you will not have access to your RV.

Unless you are on long-term travel, this three to four week travel pause can have significant impacts on the logistics of your trip. It is a period of time where you will not be travelling within your RV. Rather, you will have to stay put either in Columbia to wait for your vehicle to arrive. If you have the time to do this, then it may be a moot point. However, if – like us – you have time constraints to consider, then being immobile for any extended period of time may not be feasible for your adventure.

3 – Safety of your RV

Generally speaking, containers are approximately 8 feet wide and 9 feet high. For smaller vans and overlanders, there is an option of putting your vehicle in a sealed container. In this case, the driver of the vehicle personally assists in sealing the container and is given the “key” to the container thereby ensuring that it remains closed for the duration of the travel on the ship.

RVs are wide and tall so a sealed container is not an option. For example, our Class C RV is too big to put into a container, even if it is considered one of the smaller models of motorhomes out there. In the case of RVs, the only option would be the roll-on-roll-off service. This means that you hand over the keys of your RV to the shipping company and they have access to your vehicle for the duration of the trip. Shipping companies do not take responsibility for theft if anything goes missing from your RV and testimonials of people who have gone through this experience indicate that theft of materials and objects is quite frequent.

One way to reduce theft is to shutter off your RV from the inside, thereby limiting access to your living area from the driver’s seat. However, the reality is that handing over your keys and having your RV accessible to anyone who is on the ship or in the port over a three-week period can raise safety issues.



4 – Cost of Crossing

The last but certainly not least of the considerations is cost. Putting an RV on a boat is expensive to travel cross the Darien Gap. The quote we got for our roll-on-roll-off situation was USD \$5,500 to ship our RV from Panama to Columbia.

Other costs will include the purchase of plane tickets for your travel party to go from Panama to Columbia and the cost of accommodations for the three to four week period of time where your RV will be in transit. Taken together, costs of shipping your RV from Panama and meeting it for pick up in Columbia can easily reach USD \$10,000. If you plan on driving back up to get home, then you can double those costs for the trip northward.

When planning to cross the Darien Gap, there are challenges related to the administrative complexity, timing, safety and costs of shipping your RV across the Americas. The idea of driving down the Pan-American Highway from North America to explore the countries of South America is alluring. However, reality brings considerations that may moderate those ambitions. What is important is to think it through before jumping into big decisions to cross the Darien Gap!

