

A Tour of Panama a Second time

Day 1:

We have our plane and hotel reservations, are all lined up, and our plan is to leave at 5:15 AM so we can get to the airport two hours before flight time. It had snowed and according to the city they had been planning for this, and the roads will be clear. NOT !!!

Driving on ice is Diana's specialty as she grew up in Michigan plus, she is concerned my eyesight might lead to issues when I drive. We arrived at the parking lot, and the pickup driver did a great job marking where our car would be even though the parking lot was snow covered.

We checked in and my mind was contemplating the issue of ice on the wings as it had snowed all night, and the plane had landed in ABQ the evening before. Oh well, they know what they are doing. The plane backed away from the gate and then stopped, and the pilot said we would be de-iced in half an hour or so as one of the two de-icing trucks used by United was down. Next notice, about half an hour later, the second truck had lost its heater, so it was down and we would have to wait for an American de-icing truck to get to us. It finally did but this made us late for our connection in Houston. The airline changed our connecting flight to a later flight so we are OK except Diana has booked larger seats for the flight from Houston to Panama City but due to the change in flights we will have seats made for midgets and with a four-hour flight it would make me tight as a drum when we landed. Immigration is the usual pain-in-the-butt as they use facial recognition and passports to make sure who we are. Geez...

The plane ride was OK, but I was tight when we arrived in Panama City and Panama Immigration again at the airport. Diana retrieved her bag but mine was not there. So, after a discussion with the lost luggage people, they promised delivery to the hotel sometime tomorrow evening. We got an Uber at the airport to the hotel "Courtyard by Marriot" using the airport WiFi, as our phones with the esim card from "Consumer Cellular" would not work in Panama. The hotel was next to a "Malti Plaza" mall so we could walk and do some shopping and eating as there were many fast food and large dining facilities. The mall is 100,000 sq meters in size.

As we arrived at the hotel around 9:30 PM most places, even in the hotel, were closed for dinner, which prompted us to walk to an all-night dinner "Niko's Cafe" which had a good selection of foods. It was interesting crossing the streets as they did stop for pedestrians without much distance, but they did stop.

Day 2:



After a good rest we were up and dressed and headed downstairs, second floor, for breakfast. Interesting selection but coffee for Diana is a necessity! We were then off to visit a lawyer which they said was 18-minute walk, so we can get temporary

visa(s). The walk was warm and 30 minutes and a little hard to find as we had to walk around the mall. The offices were on the 37th floor of the building with very tight security. We had to show our passports and they photographed us etc., just like immigration. We got an elevator and it only took us to the 22nd floor. A gentleman explained to get on a specific elevator to get to the 37th floor.

At the lawyers' office they took our passports and gave us a copy as they needed to do checking on us and took our money for the process. On Friday of this week, we will get our temporary 6-month visas. Why the visas? , for one, I what to visit with an Eye Doctor in David, Panama so I can get a second opinion on my eyes and Diana really wants to move to Boquete, Panama, which is in the mountains about 4,000 feet, as she does not like the USA politics and needs to get away from the idiots in Washington. Also, her son will be losing Medicaid soon due to the new rules in the U.S. After our visit with the lawyers, we are free till Friday when we visit the immigration office which is somewhere in the city.

Being free for the rest of the week gave us time to walk around and stuff our faces with food and I needed to pick up a few shirts as what I brought are way to warm. We also purchased a sim card from "Tigo" for my phone so we could make calls like Uber if not in a WiFi area. It is interesting as our text messenger service used in the U.S. (protocol SMS) is not supported in Panama or a lot of other countries so we must use "WhatsApp." Diana used "WhatsApp" with all communications with Panama from our home here in New Mexico.

Day 3:

We are off to take a walking tour of old churches and the history of Old city of Panama. We arranged for the tour to pick us up and we somehow got the wrong hotel, so we took an Uber to a central location in the old city where the tour began. It was little confusing as the tour guide kept referring to the streets of Panama. Here are some of the sites we visited on the tour.

The Tour:

We met at Plaza Tomas Herrera and the tour guide discussed Casco Viejo (Old Town), also known as San Felipe, a historic district of Panama City, the tour guide explained the history of the area. We walked by artisan products such as hats, dresses, souvenirs etc.

The discovery of Panama from a European perspective involved several key Spanish explorers in the early 16th century. While Indigenous peoples like the Cueva, Guna, and Chocó had lived on the isthmus for thousands of years, the credit for "discovering" the land for Europe is shared among three main figures:

Rodrigo de Bastidas (1501): He is officially recognized as the first European to explore the Isthmus of Panama.

Christopher Columbus (1502): On his fourth and final voyage, Columbus sailed along the Panamanian coast.

Vasco Núñez de Balboa (1513): While Bastidas and Columbus explored the coast, Balboa is famous for leading the first European expedition to cross the isthmus. On September 25, 1513, he became the first European to see the Pacific Ocean (which he named the "South Sea") from the American mainland, proving Panama was a narrow bridge between two massive oceans.

The first Permanent Settlement: Balboa founded Santa María la Antigua del Darién in 1510, the first stable European city on the American mainland. The first Panama City was founded with the name of Our Lady of the Assumption of Panama on August 15, 1519, by Pedro Arias Dávila, with a population of one hundred inhabitants, this was the first Spanish city on the coast of the South Sea or Pacific Ocean, becoming the capital of Castilla del Oro. Its foundation replaced the previous cities of Santa María la Antigua del Darién and Acla. And on September 15, 1521, it received, by Royal Decree, the title of City and a Coat of Arms conferred by Charles V of Spain.

While many examples of old colonial architecture exist, Casco Viejo in Panama City includes several other styles. You may also find neo-classical and Afro-Antillean architecture in the area. This diversity of architectural styles makes Casco Antiguo unique among other "old towns" of Central and South America.

We noticed a lot of French architecture around the old city and realized it had come from the original French people who started working on the canal. The French began their attempt to build the Panama Canal on January 1, 1881. Led by Ferdinand de Lesseps, the project officially commenced after a ceremonial groundbreaking in 1880, but actual construction work began at the start of 1881. The effort lasted until 1889, plagued by disease, poor planning, and financial scandal.



We toured the Legsia de San José (church of Saint Joseph) famous for its ornate, 17th-century Baroque Golden Altar (*Altar de Oro*). Legend says the cedar-wood, gold-leafed altar was painted black to hide it from the pirate Henry Morgan in 1671 before being moved to its current location in 1675. We viewed the Arco Chato (Flat Arch) is located within the ruins of the 17th-century Santo Domingo Convent in Casco Viejo, Panama City. It was built around 1678, this 35-foot-high, 50-foot-wide freestanding arch is famous for spanning without structural support, which historically proved the area's lack of earthquakes, aiding Panama's canal bid. It collapsed in 2003 but was restored in 2007. The Iglesia Santo Domingo (or Church and Convent of Santo Domingo) is not much to look at anymore. It has long been a shell of brick ruins. There is no roof, and while there are still walls, they are mostly crumbling. It was built in 1678 but destroyed by fire in 1756. It has

been in ruins ever since. But the most famous aspect is the Arco Chato, or Flat Arch, is the fact that it remained standing was one of the things that local advocates pointed to when talking up Panama City's seismic stability when the choice for where to build a canal linking the Pacific and Atlantic oceans was down to a choice between Panama and Nicaragua.



We did notice some unique buildings in downtown Panama City.



This evening, we enjoyed a fine meal in the hotel with a bit of wine.

Day 4:



Today we are off to visit the Canel Museum

We again used Uber and the traffic to get to this museum was unbelievable as it took us around 30 minutes in almost dead stop traffic. When we left the museum, we walked a few blocks out of traffic and then called for an Uber.

The museum told the story of the Panama Canal construction, which Theodore Roosevelt (TR) considered one of his most valuable contributions to foreign affairs. Most prominent views are of the need for building the canal, the early attempts, the actual construction, and finally the canal in operation. There are maps showing the need for a shorter way from ocean to ocean; the early attempts by Ferdinand de Lesseps; USS Oregon which had to sail around South America from the Pacific to fight in the Spanish-American War; President William McKinley and TR in 1901; Lyman J. Gage, Philander C. Knox, Ethan Allen Hitchcock, William R. Day, Elihu Root, Charles E. Smith, and James Wilson at McKinley's funeral in Canton, Ohio, 1901; Panama Canal; workers clearing the canal of yellow fever; TR's visit to Panama in 1906 and his meeting with President Manuel Amador Guerrero; view of Colonel George W. Goethals, chief engineer and first governor; much equipment were huge cranes, gigantic steam shovels, and men working on the actual construction of the canal; various shots of Gamboa Dike, Miraflores [and Gatun] Locks,

and Gaillard (Culebra) Cut; launch of two barges in lock, boats, and battleships using the canal; final sequence is of President Calvin Coolidge speaking.

Day 5:

The Panama Canal was built primarily to create a vital maritime shortcut connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, drastically reducing travel time and distance around South America. This was driven by significant commercial, military, and geopolitical reasons, allowing the United States to project global power and enhance trade.



Each evening, we had dinner at places like Chili's , Applebee's, Benihana and other food courts all located within the mall next to the hotel. The popular fast-food restraints where also located in the 3-story shopping center and are the same as in the United States

Day 6:



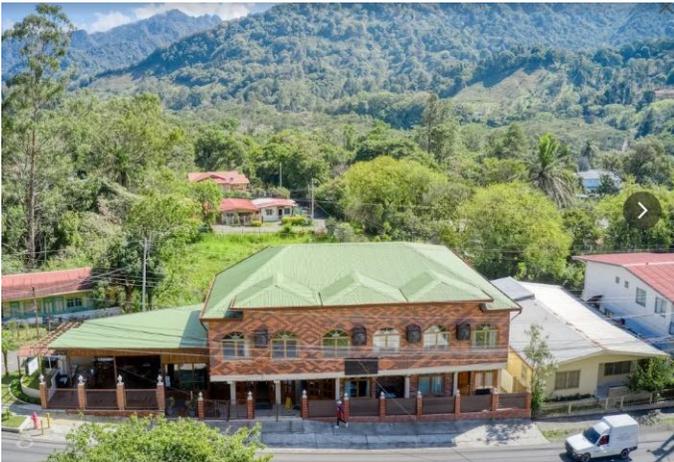
Today is Friday and we again used Uber to the Immigration Office where there were many people. We were to meet at 10 AM with someone who would have our passports and temporary visas for Panama. It was strange as there were at least one hundred people in the office waiting room. Finally, after a long wait a lady showed up and we processed through immigration and she returned our passports and our 6-month temporary visas. We must go back before the end of six months to get our permanent visas. We will retain our U.S. citizenship.

Day 7:

On Saturday we were off to the airport to fly via Copa Airlines to David, Panama. The check-in gates for Copa Airlines were a little bit hard to find but once we found it, we were set other than the check bags one and half hours before flight, so we had to sit with our bags. This airline is good but always late. I was surprised that they fly the 737 max eight-ninths. Anyway, it was a one-hour flight. They gave passenger instructions in both Spanish and English.



Once in David we had arranged to have a vehicle meet us and take us for a one-hour drive to Boquete arriving around 4 PM at our hotel “La Casa De La Buena” (The House of Grandmother). They had a room for us at the front of the hotel. In the room were two queen beds and a bunk bed. The noise from the road was terrible so the next morning we switched rooms to room I the bk of the hotel. There are many restaurants in Boquete, and we visited many of them during our stay.



Boquete is a scenic mountain town in Panama’s Chiriquí province, renowned for its cool, spring-like climate, coffee production, and large expat community. Situated at 4,000 feet elevation in a lush, volcanic valley, it offers a high quality of life with amenities like restaurants, hiking, and the Volcán Barú. It is in western Panama near the Costa Rican border, nestled in the Chiriquí highlands along the Caldera River. It is about a 40-minute drive from David, the second-largest city in Panama. Boquete has

a temperate climate (often 70s-80s°F) that is much cooler than the coastal lowlands. It has a dry season (mid-Dec to April) and a rainy season (April to Nov), with a famous mist known as *bajareque*. The town and surrounding districts have a population of over 20,000–23,000, with a significant, well-established expat community of 5,000 people. The "Coffee Capital": Known for producing some of the world's best coffee, particularly the high-priced and highly rated Geisha coffee. Popular for nature-focused tourism, including hiking the Volcán Barú, (the highest point in Panama), birdwatching, white-water rafting, and visiting the annual flower and coffee festival.

Day 8:

The next day after our arrival we had arranged for a tour guide to drive us around the city and outlying areas and even back into David. The driver was a lit bit different as when we first met, he said, “Tom has beautiful eyes.” Diana whispered, “he wants a date.” I responded, “not with me.” He drove us around but with no real plane and talked about his car wreck the week before and he was now using his son’s car. Geez... He drove like all Panamanian drivers, talking on the phone honking and telling us about the city. He took us to the tourist traps, and we had to mention that we want to see the sites not the tourist traps as we can see those on our own.

Day 9 through Day 14:

Boquete Library

On one of these days, we walked to the local library. It is a very nice modern library. Did read one part of a book on the town of Baquete which told about the town is in a valley that was used when the Spanish explores to bring gold from the mountains. The Boquete Library is a space for learning, culture, and recreation for the entire community. For its part, the Boquete Library Park offers a unique environment of exploration, knowledge, and connection with nature, also accessible to all.



San Juan Bautista Church



The Iglesia de San Juan Bautista (Church of St. John the Baptist) is a central Catholic parish located in the town of Boquete, in the Chiriquí Province of Panama. Situated in the heart of the town, it serves as a primary, accessible, and iconic landmark for locals and visitors exploring the highland region. It is in Central Boquete, easily accessible from the main town plaza. It is a key community and religious center



for the town, which is renowned for its coffee production and mountain scenery. Staffed by the Franciscan Friars.



One of the shops we visited was “The Perfect Pair Specialty Coffee & Artisanal Chocolate”. We had some very strong coffee and a bit of chocolate, and we noticed a dog napping on the floor right in the middle of the store. The dog decided to follow us as we left and seemed to be our friend for a few blocks. The dog left us at the church, must be a holy dog.

For the remaining part of the week, we walked the town and visited many eating establishments and a few bars looking for what they call ex-pats (people from America who moved here). Only a few found. One couple we met was from Canada that were visiting the area to see what it was like. They were favoring Western Canada to get away from the snow as they were from Montreal. We had a wonderful week in this vibrant community, enjoying plenty of walks around the town. Although we experienced some light rain for a few days,

the overall experience was delightful. The temperatures consistently ranged from 60 to 80 degrees throughout the year, making it quite pleasant.



We stayed connected with friends and family back in the USA using WhatsApp and the local Wi-Fi available at our hotels. Our journey to this lovely destination involved flying from Albuquerque to Houston, then to Panama City, and finally arriving in Boquete. One evening we listened to the Lobo game via Alexa on my phone.

On the last day, Thursday February 5th, we packed up, and a driver took us to the hospital in David where I would have Dr. Vega, get a second opinion on my eyes as this was part of our reason for the trip and that was to get a second opinion on my eyes. I was thinking the hospital would be a multi-story facility like I see in the USA, it was a one-story building with many hallways and with the help of the google translator on our phones we got to the correct doctor's office a bit early. They said your appointment is at 3 PM and you are early, wait in the hallway, many chairs available.

They called me in a bit before three and the assistant took notes and ran many eye tests that they ran in ABQ and then asked me to wait in the hall for the doctor. Dr. Vega has the latest equipment and did tests I had never had such as a 3D image of my eyes. Wow !!! He said I had both dry and web macular degeneration and dry eyes and wanted me back in a month which could not happen. I planned to take these results back to my eye doctor in AQB.

After the exam we took Uber to the airport and which time and checked in a Copa airlines and boarded for our flight to Panama City. Once in Panama City we found our bags walked out the door and the bus to the hotel was there, so we flagged it down and headed for the hotel. After some food and drink we had a restful sleep and had to meet the bus to the airport at 6 AM. Flight to Houston was un-eventful and then after 7 hours in Huston we flew home.

******* End of Story *******

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