

Traveling in Panama

We are trying an innovative approach to visiting another country by planning a tour without a tour guide.

We did a little pre-planning and had our bags checked all the way to Panama City. This avoided the transfer of our bags manually from the main terminal to the international terminal in Houston. We also had pre-assigned seats towards the front of the plane which allowed us easier access on and off the plane. And Diana made all the reservations for the car and hotel assuring we obtained the best prices.

The Adventures of Day 1 – Panama

Leave: Albuquerque International Sunport Airport at 7:40 AM

Arrive IAH · George Bush Intercontinental Airport at 10:48 AM

United Airlines UA462 · Economy Flight time 2 hours 08 minutes

Boeing 737 MAX 9

Layover 1 hour 09 minutes

Leave: IAH · George Bush Intercontinental Airport 11:57 AM

Arrive Tocumen International Airport ` 4:12 PM

United Airlines UA 1250 Economy Flight Time 4 hours 15 minutes

Boeing 737 MAX 9

Customs was easy with the use of Facial Recognition used through the process and the flights were smooth, and now it was time to tackle the next phase of our adventure: driving. We rented a car from Thrifty, completing the usual paperwork to ensure we had the right coverage and medical assistance in case anything unexpected happens.



Navigating in Panama was a unique experience since the country lacks traditional addresses; instead, you often rely on local landmarks. I vividly recall asking someone for directions to our hotel, expecting a street name and number, but instead received the response, “It’s the eight or nine-story white building by the university.” Thankfully, we were able to download maps on our phones, which proved invaluable, as Google regularly updates their map.

The rental company also provided a device for internet access, allowing us to connect our phone to the device and use the Maps app seamlessly as we did not have SIM cards that work in Panama in our phones.

Driving in Panama was quite an adventure, resembling a chaotic free-for-all. The car horn serves as a primary means of communication among drivers. A quick honk is customary as soon as the traffic light turns green, signaling the car in front to "get moving." Another common scenario for a honk occurs when a vehicle might pull out or reverse unexpectedly.

The most frequent sound is a long, aggressive honk, which conveys frustration, as if to say, "You cut me off, and while I’d love to ram you, I’ll just honk loudly to express my annoyance." Taxi drivers also use a quick honk to ask pedestrians if they need a ride.

Hand gestures are another way drivers communicate, indicating their intended direction, especially in traffic jams. Sometimes, a friendly honk is simply a way to say hello or express gratitude, while other times, it serves as a warning to alert someone of their presence in a blind spot.

There was on-site parking within the hotel building but my word, the spaces were tiny. We had dinner at the hotel as well as breakfast the next morning.

I was surprising that Panama City had so many tall building. The story goes that the buildings were used in money laundry frauds.



The Adventures of Day 2 – Driving to Boquete

Today, we embarked on a seven-hour drive to Boquete, Panama, primarily along Highway 1, the Pan American Highway. We continued this route until we reach David, we switched to Highway 44 to complete our journey. Along the way, we encountered some road repairs and had to pass through a police checkpoint, where they checked our passports, though the reason for this wasn't entirely clear.

After some research we learned that the police checkpoints, or retenes, are quite common in Panama, especially at night, serving to deter crime, apprehend wanted individuals, and ensure public safety. When you approach a checkpoint, it is best to lower your driver-side window. Sometimes, the police will wave you through without any questions, but they may also request your driver's license, passport if you are a tourist, or identification card if you are a resident. They might check the validity of your plate and, if necessary, ask for your car's paperwork. If everything checks out, you will be on your way.



After the checkpoint, we stopped for lunch at a place called "El Fogon," which translates to "The Stove."

Located at Pan-American Hwy 2-123 in El Nancito, Chiriquí Province, the restaurant offered a variety of traditional Panamanian dishes, including seafood, fried foods, empanadas, and more.

As most food menus are in Spanish, we used a translation app on our phone to read the menu. The app we use allowed us to point the phone camera at the menu and the menu and it would display the menu in English

The car is running nicely and the diesel engine in our rental car performed exceptionally well, providing great fuel efficiency. It took us a while to remember that speed is marked KPH. When we stopped for gas, it was a full-service station where the attendants came out and filled the tank and washed the windows. Wow, shades of long ago.

After about seven hours on the road, we finally arrived in Boquete. The stretch of road from David to Boquete was lined with shops and businesses, and the town itself had a charming, old-fashioned vibe, complete with street vendors and numerous dining options.

We saw many buses that stopped along the way so people could ride from Boquete to David and return. There are many shopping areas in David.



We are staying at Hotel Val Rio (picture left). The driveway into the hotel was very steep but manageable. We are close to the center of town which allows us to walk to the town to see the sites and have dinner.

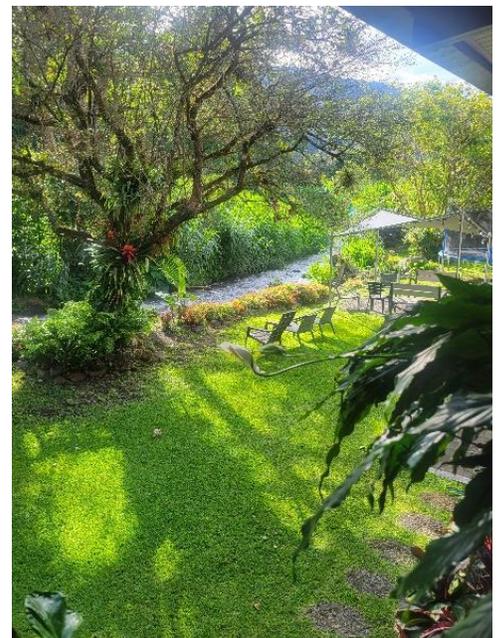
The Adventures of Day 3 - Touring Boquete



Diana had taken the wheel for our journey from Panama City to Boquete yesterday, as my eyesight is not what it used to be, especially on cloudy days. We arrived in Boquete, a charming mountain town, and were greeted by the sound of church bells, which I initially thought were ringing for the Angelus, a prayer commemorating the Incarnation of Jesus, traditionally observed at dawn, noon, and dusk. Strolling through the downtown area, we encountered various vendors along the main street. The vibrant atmosphere and produce made for a wonderful walk along the main street as we found it enchanting. Boquete's laid-back vibe and abundance of music was delightful, although my diminishing vision made it hard for me to manage the uneven walkways and appreciate the full beauty of the scenery.

Diana had discovered a rental option on Facebook, so we visited a small complex featuring apartments with a bedroom, bathroom, and kitchenette. Unfortunately, they were already booked until at least October, as the manager informed us.

These apartments were for a party of two with a very small kitchen, bathroom and bedroom and views like shown to the right in the picture.





We then explored a large park filled with ponds and ducks, where families enjoyed the day, reminding me of the May Day celebrations at my childhood church in Albuquerque. Diana is fond of Boquete, drawn by its lower cost of living and pleasant temperatures ranging from 60 to 80 degrees year-round, along with the convenience of not needing a car. Although I have heard there are many ex-pats in the area, I only spotted a few during our visit as this is off tourist season.



In the evening, we walked down to a restaurant Ngädri Gastronomía Panameña where we had some fantastic food.

Boquete is high altitude, and pleasant year-round weather is only a small part of the picture. The ex-pat community is very active in this little mountain town known as "The little town with the big heart". Boquete has an annual charity event that brings in over \$100,000 to fund local charities. This is a weekly Tuesday Market, where everyone has a chance to catch up on current events.

There is live music at multiple venues several days a week. In addition, they say there are card games, golf, tennis, and pickle ball. There are also art classes, yoga, meditation groups, cooking classes and more. The Boquete Community Players hosts a play or theater event 4-5 times a year. Even though Boquete is a small town, there are more than fifty restaurants, Celebrity Chefs own some, so food choices are amazing in Boquete.

The Adventures of Day 4 - Touring Boquete & Las Olas Resort

We had planned to spend time in the town of David, but we spent more time in Boquete hiking and looking at vacation homes.

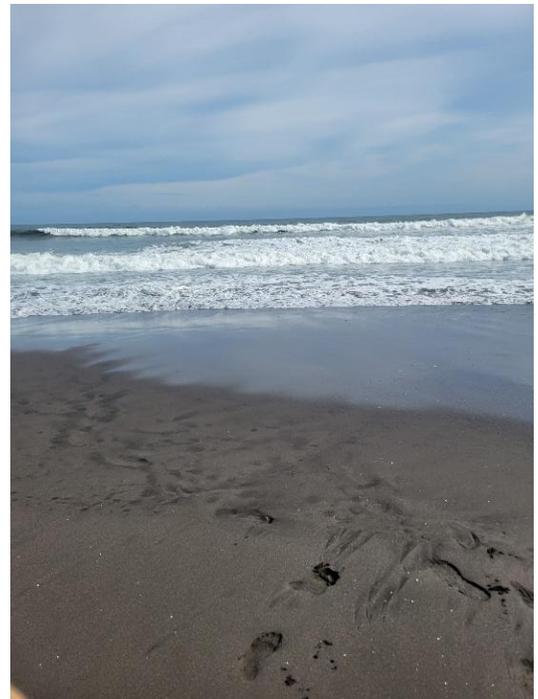
We left Boquete and made our way to the Pacific Coast, enjoying a pleasant drive until we reached the outskirts of David, where the roads became narrower and bumpier than expected. I had anticipated better road conditions since we were heading to a resort.

Upon arriving at the resort, we encountered sweltering heat and an empty parking lot.

After checking in, we found that the off-season meant we were among just a few other couples at the resort. The check in process was interesting in that as we check-in we were given a plastic bag that contained the air-conditioning control, the remote TV control and the room key. On the checkout they wanted the contents of that bag returned to them and they checked the room before signing the checkout form. As we learned, the area is a real party town during the tourist season.

The beach, with its striking black sand, added to the warmth of the day. We walked on the beach for a mile and played in the surf. There were more people at the next hotel to the North of our hotel. Our hotel is a party place during the season when I imagine it is not as hot as they have beach ball courts and many other outdoor sports.

We received wristbands as we checked in to identify us as paying guests, which were later exchanged for different ones for dinner and breakfast the next day.





Dining was served outside, and we enjoyed stunning views of palm trees, the ocean, and a breathtaking sunset. With the soothing sound of the waves lulled us into a deep sleep for over eight hours.

The Las Olas Beach Resort offers a serene escape nestled within a 4,500-acre family-owned finca agroturística, where the rich biodiversity of Panama thrives. Bordering the Pacific coast and near the stunning landscapes of Costa Rica, this protected area is a sanctuary for endangered plants and animals, inviting us to explore its vibrant ecosystems, including mangrove forests, lush trails, and pristine beaches. Discover a world teeming with life, from playful Howler Monkeys to exquisite bird species, all while enjoying the natural beauty of this remarkable location. We wished we had been able to access this part of the facility but all the gates to these areas were closed probably because it was the off season.

The Adventures of Day 5 - Touring El Valle de Anton

Today we are traveling to our next destination which is a town called El Valle de Anto located in central Panama.



As we made our way to El Valle de Anton, we took a detour to a charming spot known as "Birding Paradise," located on the lower slopes of Volcán Barú in western Panama. This picturesque property, nestled in the countryside alongside a rushing river, boasts lush gardens and forests that are home to a diverse array of bird species. The community, aptly named Paraíso, is situated in the District of Boquerón within the Province of Chiriquí. While cattle grazing dominates the landscape in Boquerón, many landowners have preserved significant stretches of gallery forest. At an elevation of around nine hundred meters, Birding Paradise serves as a convergence point for both lowland and lower montane bird species, including several regional endemics that barely cross the border from the Pacific lowlands of Costa Rica. Mishael Rivera, the local contact for Birding Paradise, has documented over three hundred bird species on the property, with an impressive eBird tally of 334 species.

After our tour, we returned to Highway #1 and stopped for lunch at "El Fogon", a familiar spot from our earlier journey to Boquete. However, our progress drive was halted by a traffic jam caused by protestors who had blocked the highway with large rocks and felled trees. We later learned that the demonstration was in response to the Panamanian president's decision to allow the U.S. to occupy military bases in Panama.

Once we navigated past the obstruction, we veered off onto Highway 71. As evening approached, the road became narrow and twisting, requiring Diana to stop at some corners to make the turns safely. In addition, people were walking along the road.

During this challenging drive, Diana recalled that the hotel office closed at 8 PM. We arrived at 8:05 PM, and although the office was still open, they asked for a deposit equal to another night's stay. We mistakenly believed it was just a security deposit.

Fortunately, we were able to get that amount refunded once we returned home.



The Adventures of Day 6 - Touring El Valle de Anton

El Valle de Anton is in the crater of an extinct volcano, surrounded by mountains and cloud forest. To the north, Cerro Gaital National Park protects three hills: Cerro Gaital, Cerro Pajita and Cerro Caracoral. Its trails have ocean views, and the park is home to hundreds of species of native birds, including the red-legged honey creeper, the bay-headed tanager and the blue-crowned motmot.

El Valle de Anton - Hotel Campestre



After a long drive yesterday, we arrived at Hotel Capestra, which features a charming breakfast restaurant where we enjoyed our morning meals. Built in 1939 by its original owner, Mr. W.T. Lum, the hotel boasts unique architecture and is situated at the

base of Caracoral Hill. Its current owner, Mr. Lorenzo Hincapie, has worked diligently to preserve its character over the years. However, we had no water for the first hour or so and we encountered some noise from roof repairs that began early in the morning.

We then hiked Chorro Macho

This is a beautiful place in the Anton valley. We loved taking the hike in the rainforest along its narrow walkways. It was a perfect setting along the contours of the hills. They guide you up and down along the trees and plants while your intake the rainforest scent and the sound of the birds. Along the way, the three suspension bridges take us over the fast-moving crystal-clear water coming from the waterfall. The water finds its way into the manufactured swimming pool. This is where the clear water turns dark but that did not deter some from taking a dip.

The entire trail took us around thirty and the total length of the trail was around two hundred meters, so it was a short walk. This place does not allow you to venture off path. So, we were left to enjoy the view from one of the suspension bridges and an observation deck.



The loose nature of the rope suspended bridges added to the fun. The sound of birds reverberating through the trees is something to behold. Be careful, though, since some of the walkways are steep at times.



The hotel also offered a Unique Live Fog display and a hiking trail known for its unusual Square Trees, which grow in a square shape rather than the typical circular form found elsewhere. This beautiful 1.6 km loop trail winds through the stunning Panamanian rainforest, highlighting vibrant plants, butterflies, and birds, with the hike beginning near a display of the Panamanian Golden Frog. As I started the hike, I found the dim light challenging and decided to turn back, hoping to exit through an unlocked gate. Unfortunately, the gate was locked, leaving me to navigate the trail alone while the others continued. Despite stumbling over roots and stones a couple of times, I eventually made it to the end, where everyone was waiting for me at the trail's start.

After all these adventures we went to an outside bar where they played 60's music, and we ordered some chicken wings. They took a while and were nice and burned.

The Adventures of Day 7 - Driving to Old Panama City

Today we headed to Old Panama City. We are not really interested in the newer part of Panama City but in the original area of Panama City called Old Panama City.

Old Panama City, Panama



We once again took Highway 71 heading east toward Old Panama City, and this time the drive was much smoother, thanks to the daylight and fewer turns. As we merged onto Highway #1 and continued towards our destination, we encountered heavy traffic on some of the narrowest streets I had ever seen. Guided by our reliable GPS, we located a parking lot that charged us \$10. We walked to the hotel and checked into the hotel, we retrieved the car, drove up to the hotel entrance, unloaded our bags, and the staff took the car to a reserved parking area. Once settled in our rooms, we ventured out to find a place to eat. Check out the street width in the picture to the left.

On one corner, a friendly gentleman with menus persuaded us to try his restaurant, which was a bit tucked away and on the upper floor, but the food was exceptional. We enjoyed delicious shish kebabs at the Habibi restaurant.

HABIBI'S MK SAN FRANCISCO

Habibi's MK San Francisco is a Mediterranean restaurant located in the heart of Calle Uruguay. The covered terrace is a popular spot for late-night drinks on weekends, offering a lively atmosphere and serving until well past midnight. The restaurant offers delicious food and excellent service, although parking may be limited. While it can get loud at times due to events like birthday celebrations with DJs, the overall space is agreeable for personal gatherings.

After dinner, we strolled around, feeling as if we were in New Orleans with charming buildings and balconies. We also spotted a few historic churches before stopping at a small store next to the hotel to grab some snacks and a bottle of wine, then returned to our room to unwind.



20250514_191828.mp4



Old Panama City at Night (Use Esc key after watching video to continue reading travel Blog)

The Adventures of Day 8 – Touring Old Panama City and Panama Canal

Panama City, the capital of Panama, is a modern city framed by the Pacific Ocean and manufactured Panama Canal. Casco Viejo, its cobblestoned historic center, is famed for colonial-era landmarks like the neoclassical Palacio Presidencial and bougainvillea-filled plazas lined with cafes and bars. The Miraflores Locks offers views of ships traversing the canal, an essential shipping route linking the Atlantic and Pacific

The Panama Canal was made by building dams on the Chagres River to create Gatun Lake and Lake Madden, digging the Gaillard Cut from the river between the two lakes and over the Continental Divide, building locks between the Atlantic Ocean and Gatun Lake to lift boats to the lake and another set of locks at the end of the Gaillard Cut to lower ships, and digging a channel to the Pacific Ocean.

Walking tour of Panama

We set out early in search of a breakfast spot and stumbled upon a charming hole-in-the-wall café where we enjoyed a delightful meal. Afterward, we wandered through the city, taking in the historical remnants of French influence, including the old capital and churches, with only a few walls still standing.

After a brief rest at our hotel, we made our way to Casa Sucre Coffeeshouse at 1 PM for a walking tour of Old Panama City, followed by a visit to the Panama Canal.

The picture on the left is where we met the tour guide.

We had lunch inside and waited for the tour guide and finally we went outside, and he was waiting for us.



We learned there are two parts to old Panama

Panamá Viejo (Old Panama):

This was the original Panama City, founded in 1519. It was the starting point for many expeditions to conquer the Inca Empire and served as a crucial stop on trade routes. However, it was destroyed in 1671 by the pirate Henry Morgan and is now an archaeological site.

Casco Viejo (Old Town):

This is the current historic district of Panama City, which replaced Panamá Viejo after its destruction. It was founded in 1673 and preserves its original colonial architecture and layout. Casco Viejo is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is known for its lively nightlife and historic charm.

Both Panamá Viejo and Casco Viejo are recognized as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, highlighting their historical and cultural significance.

The Archaeological Site of Panamá Viejo and Historic District of Panamá is a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Panama City. It encompasses both the ruins of the original colonial city, Panamá Viejo, and the Historic District, which is also known as Casco Antiguo. This site is a testament to colonial town planning and architecture.



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, that spans from one side to the other, at about thirty-five feet high and spanning forty-nine feet. There aren't any supports, and 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.

The Flat Arch did eventually fall—in November 2003—and has since been resurrected.

These pictures were taken in France Square

The rooster in Plaza de Francia in Panama City, Panama, is a monument to French efforts to build the Panama Canal. Specifically, the rooster atop the obelisk is a symbol of France. The obelisk and rooster commemorate the French company that initially undertook canal construction in 1881, led by [Ferdinand de Lesseps](#), the builder of the [Suez Canal](#). The French effort failed, but the monument honors those who died during the project.



At the top of the obelisk, built in at the top of the commemoration of those who died during construction of the Panama Canal, is a rooster, France's national symbol. Smaller monuments, each topped by a bust of a prominent French explorer, surround the obelisk.

Looking at New Panama City from the old City



They still have pay phones.



The street of Hats

The Panama Canal

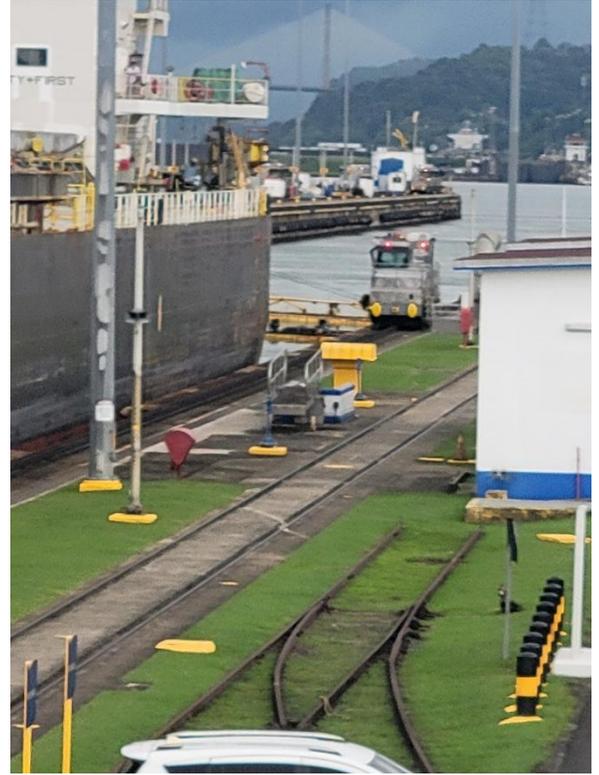


The Panama Canal with the Pacific Lock closed.



A Smaller Boat already in the lock as the larger ship approaches

The Panama Canal is an artificial 82-kilometer (51-mile) waterway in Panama that connects the Caribbean Sea with the Pacific Ocean. It cuts across the narrowest point of the Isthmus of Panama and is a conduit for maritime trade between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.



The large ship is moving into position so the back locks can be closed. The ship has stopped and the lock gates behind it are closing.



The locks are open and the ships head for the Pacific Ocean. About a 10-hour trip from Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean

The experience at the Panama Canal western locks was incredible; we witnessed a ship entering the lock, and as the water was drained, it made its way out to the Pacific Ocean—truly a sight to behold. Additionally, we watched a fascinating film about the canal's construction, which added depth to our understanding of this engineering marvel.

The Adventures of Day 9 – Homeward Bound

Up early today with thoughts of is the driving going to be difficult today, will the car be at the front door of the hotel, will we find the car rental place...

We checked out and the car was at the front door of the hotel for a minute as the cars backed up behind us. We got in the car and headed for a gas station (again full service) and continued the drive to the airport. The roadway was not too busy and we found the rental car rental return, went through customers, got on the plane, and headed for Houston. We had a 6-hour layover in Houston.

Our Flight

Leave: PTY - Tocumen International Airport 10:00 AM
Arrive IAH · George Bush Intercontinental Airport at 2:26 PM
United Airlines UA1031 · Economy Flight time 4 hours 26 minutes
Boeing 737 MAX 9

We had to retrieve our bags in Houston and go through customs as we have done many times as we return from other countries. The layover of 6 hours gave us time to eat and “People Watch.

Once on the plane we taxied a very long time, and it seemed like they were turning the airport in a different direction. The captain said it was a very busy time of day at the airport.

Leave: IAH · George Bush Intercontinental Airport 8:28 PM
Arrive: ABQ · Albuquerque International Sunport Airport
United Airlines UA2037 · Economy Flight time 2h 27m
Boeing 737 MAX 9

We arrived home about midnight and Flash was happy to see us.

[Return to Travel Menu](#)