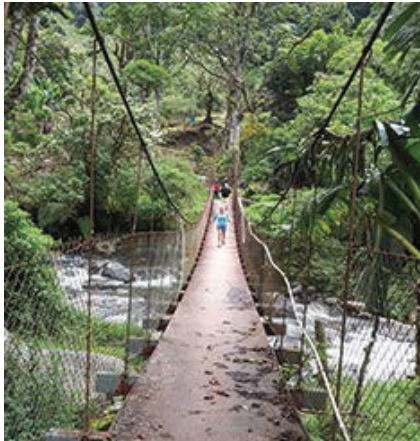


TRAVEL TALK-PANAMA

BY CHASE BINDER

Let's play a game. I say Panama. You say the first word that comes into your head. Quickly now! What is it? Canal...Noriega...even hat? Or do you think "papers" as in this year's Panama Papers scandal? My bet is that the word "vacation" didn't pop right up. Panama certainly wasn't at the top of my Bucket List. (OK, Panama wasn't even *on* my list.) But when travel pals Chuck and Debra Douglas invited us along on a trip they'd won at the 2015 Pope Memorial SP-CA's Fur Ball fundraising event, we couldn't resist.

We spent nine days there in mid-June and now my word association repertory goes like so: Panama? Safe...historical...interesting...lush (as in cloud forest)...yummy (as in world-class restaurants)...exciting (as in zip lines and volcano safaris). Overlay all these words with "inexpensive" and you have a winner. Bud and I have always looked for destinations and itineraries that have a bit of spark. Sure, we like to take naps in the sun and read a good book. But we quickly get itchy feet and look for something interesting to do. Turns out that Panama has lots to offer folks like us...more, in fact, than neighboring (and increasingly unsafe) Costa Rica. Certainly more than most of your typical touristy Caribbean islands.



OVER A RIVER

Let me start with Panama City—the easiest arrival point. The first thing you notice is a substantial skyline. Panama City is a hub of international commerce. As such, it has office buildings, banks, hotels, world-class shops and everything you would expect in a business-oriented capital city. True, like most cities on the planet, it has some unchecked growth and some sketchy sections—most notably Noriega's old stomping grounds.

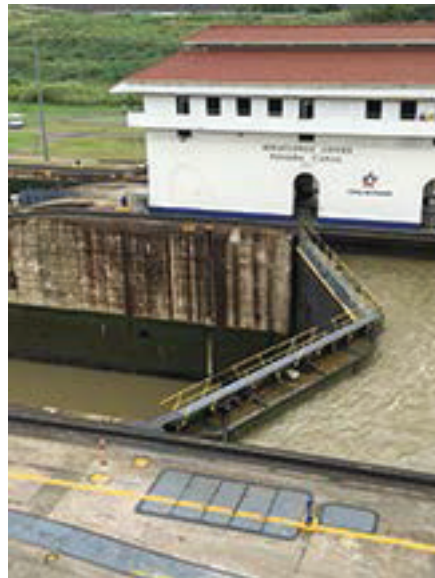
But the historical section, Casco Viejo, is being restored and preserved. It has waterfront promenades, classic colonial architecture, very local upscale restaurants and shops and makes for a very appealing afternoon's visit as well as exceptional dining and shopping. The



Chase Binder

nightlife also rocks. For millennials who love the club scene, Panama City rooftop bars abound in the smaller local hotels in Casco Viejo as well as in the larger international hotels in the newer city proper—some of which have casinos.

The main attraction in Panama City, of course, is the Miraflores



MIRAFLORES LOCKS

Locks, the Pacific entry to the Panama Canal. For history and engineering buffs, it doesn't get much better. The locks are just minutes outside the city and provide not only "almost-can-reach-out-and-touch-the-ships" viewing of the locks in operation, but also a stunning museum that goes into the fascinating detail about the history. The idea of the canal goes back to the Spaniards and the 16th century, but didn't get going until the French arrived in 1880. The construction was fraught with troubles, though, and faltered from lack of sufficient financing and accidents and tropical diseases that killed more than 20,000 workers. In 1903, a newly independent Panama contracted with the US to finish the job. The Canal opened in 1914 and still functions today as originally designed, though on this June 26th, a new set of expanded locks opened allowing for larger ships to transit between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

But Panama is much more than a city and a canal. After two days in

Panama City, we hopped a 33-minute flight to David, then trekked another hour by car to Boquete, a small city of 25,000 high in the mountains.

Boquete sits on the continental divide, prides itself on its flower gardens, its dramatic mountainside coffee plantations, its remarkably content ex-pat community of 5,000 and its stunning 13,000 ft. extinct volcano, Volcan Baru.



BOQUETE

We were a bit concerned about the heat and humidity. After all, June is definitely in the rainy season. Turns out, though, that Panama City was quite comfortable and Boquete sits at 4-5,000 ft. in "cloud forest." This is a good 2500-3000 ft. higher than "rain forest" and thus is much cooler and has few if any mosquitos.

Our B & B, Los Establos, offered the perfect combination of relaxation, excitement and fabulous food/drink. From our cottage we looked across the lush and peaceful gardens to Volcan Baru across the Valley. Each day we selected activities from the interesting (an area tour through the surrounding mountains) to the exciting (zip lining through the cloud forest and taking a jeep Safari to the top of the volcano) and the sedate (heavenly massages in the spa). The food was well prepared in a lovely garden setting and the wine flowed freely.

Bud and I would rate Panama among the most interesting and comfortable destinations in the Caribbean, Mexico and Central America—and I bet Chuck and Debra would agree.

The icing on the cake, though, is the safety level. Panama has by far the best safety record for tourists in the region—and is one of the safest countries in Latin America. Why not go?

IF YOU GO

- Fly the Panamanian national airline, Copa Air (Copaair.com) out of Boston. Nonstop RT flights into Panama City run about \$560 and include a hot meal, alcoholic beverages and two checked bags. Copa Air and Air Panama (airpanama.com) both fly into David for about \$120 RT. Bags are included, but have restrictions which sometimes require an additional fee of \$2 per kilo over certain weights.
- Use your favorite hotel booking website to find Panama City accommodations—but check reviews on TripAdvisor. We chose Hard Rock Panama City Megalopolis (hardrock-hotels.com) for its location, price point, inclusions and their terrific ocean-view king rooms with balconies. Note that boutique hotels in Casco Viejo often have rooftop clubs/bars that rock until 2-3 AM.
- Boquete has numerous accommodations, but we really enjoyed Los Establos (lostablos.net). The views were wonderful, the setting serene and the included activities let us choose to be lazy and self-indulgent or adventurous.



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