

# PANAMA

## *Special Report*



**David, Panama:**  
**An Expat-Friendly City On The Rise...**

The logo features the letters 'PSR' in a large, bold, black font with a white horizontal bar across the top. Below this, the word 'PANAMA' is written in a large, bold, red font, and 'SPECIAL REPORT' is written in a smaller, bold, grey font underneath.

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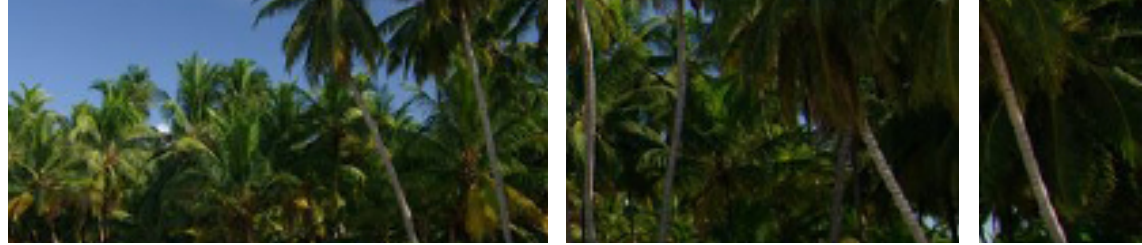
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# PANAMA

## SPECIAL REPORT

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### David: Heart Of The Valley Of The Moon

*By Jocelyn Carnegie*

David is the capital city of the Province of Chiriquí. Its name is said to derive from the indigenous Guayami language meaning “valley of the moon and land of the two big waters,” which is reference to the fact that you can see both the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans from the ridge of the Continental Divide—around 90 minutes from the center of David.

This is indeed a quixotic description, yet there is nothing at all prosaic about how you get 11 words out of one with eight letters...it is beyond my imagination. I go with the second

legend that the province was named after a great Indian leader of the same name.

Let us imagine for a moment that Chiriquí is the Texas of Panama—steers, beers, big hats, and a spirit of independence found nowhere else (in this small country at least). That spirit led to the declaration of an independent Republic of Chiriquí in 1965 when the local Guayami Indian leader Samuel Gonzalez took power.

The province is famous for its agricultural production, particularly its cattle. The capital,

David, a middle-class town built on farming, feels like a down to earth, straightforward kind of a place. The names you see in the commercial centers along the main drag are familiar: Case, John Deere, International Harvester, and Massey Ferguson.

Big tractors for big farming.

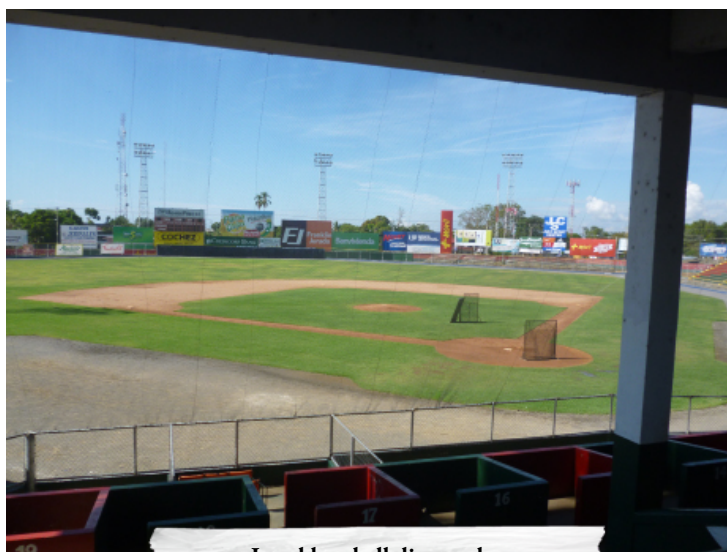
### **San José de David— Panama's western major league city!**

The Yankees just played the Marlins in Panama City's Rod Carew Stadium. The teams split the weekend two game series, with the matches held in honor of former Yankees pitcher, Mariano Rivera.

Baseball is a serious business in the city of David. The home of Chiriquí baseball also boasts one of this small country's most active *beisbol* schools.

Historically, there have been a surprising number of Panama-born big leaguers—more than fifty—and an increasing number of them from David and Chiriquí. In fact, Phillies catcher Carlos Ruiz was recently hailed as one of the best catchers in the MLB, despite a rocky 2012.

Ruiz was brought up in David and I am sure cut his teeth at David's answer to Yankee Stadium. Whilst its 7,000 capacity pales against Yankee Stadium's 50,000, the game is taken no less seriously by the Chiriquanos...with an enviable 12 championships in the Panamanian professional league.



**Local baseball diamond**

The Panamanians' love affair with *beisbol* can be traced back directly to when the United States controlled the Panama Canal Zone and had a huge influence on this country. Of course most of Panama was rooting for the Yankees due to Mo's presence. When I asked one friend he dared say, to the horror of the rest of the room, "Marlins all the way!" Why? "Oh, just to be different." I hope he placed a bet, as he was nearly lynched.

In addition to a number of baseball greats, throughout the years Panama has produced a wide range of athletic talent from an Olympic gold medalist in long jump, an Olympic swimmer, several world champion boxers, two champion jockeys, and, in somewhat unlikely fashion, one of the world's greatest cricket players.

### **Heart of the Chiriquí Province**

Chiriquí is a pastoral province rich in bucolic history and oral traditions, a region of fertile plains and jungled mountains teeming with wild things. Its mountainous areas are still home to rare tribes and cultures, unique flora and fauna.

The other day, I asked a friend what his plans for Easter (Semana Santa) were. "Going back to the Republic" was his instant, matter-of-fact response. Republic? "Yes. The Republic of Chiriquí..."

Culturally, Chiricanos consider themselves different from the rest of Panama. "Valle de la Luna," the name which derives from the aboriginal word Chiriquí, is also the name of an ancient local king.

And speaking of kings...the Naso or Teribe are a little known tribe spanning the mountains of western Panama. They number a mere 3,500 spread astride the border between Panama and Costa Rica.

The Panamanian Teribe are more numerous and have been much more successful in sustaining their language and culture than their counterparts across the border. They are one of the few remaining indigenous groups to retain a monarch as head of state.

Whilst the Teribe live across the border from Chiriquí in the jungled western highlands of Bocas del Toro, their story is also indicative of the autonomy of these western provinces. David and its province live quietly despite the fervor of Panama City and its skyscrapers.

So why does Chiriquí feel so fiercely independent? Well, it could be because it's more than 200 miles from the country's capital, while it's less than 20 miles to Costa Rica from David. It feels like a country town.

The province boasts Panama's tallest mountain, its longest rivers feeding its most fertile valleys. It cradles the highland fastness of forgotten tribes and mystical birds and forms the breadbasket of Panama. Its agricultural land produces a mouth-watering range of fruits and vegetables and the fattest cattle roaming broad-acred ranches. Chiriquí even gives simultaneous views of two of the world's mightiest oceans from the top of the great Continental Divide.

### **The legacy of Urracá and the Ngäbe peoples**

In 1965 Samuel Gonzalez and his Indians took it one stage further when the independent Republic of Chiriquí was proclaimed. A flag was produced, but Chiriquí's new found hegemony was to be a short-lived affair as it was returned to Panama a few days later with the help of the National Guard. The Ngäbe people have been Panama's warrior tribe since their most famous son, Urracá, fought the Spanish for more than seven years in the early 16th century, remaining a free man until his death. By that time the Ngäbe had been forced into the mountains, but they continued to fight until the collapse of the Spanish empire. It was not until the late 1990s that the Ngäbe were granted their own semiautonomous area, now called the Comarca Ngäbe-Bugle, which is still ruled by chiefs and run on very traditional lines.

As recently as 2012 the supply chain and communications between Panama City and David were sorely tried. A protest by the indigenous Ngäbe-Bugle tribe blocked the Pan-American Highway for several days precipitating the cancellation of several mining concessions within the indigenous lands.

The mountains of the Talamanca Range are rich in gold and copper and valuable for their hydroelectric potential. Most of the mineral riches are held within the Comarca area, and both water and mining have become emotive issues.

On a trip to the region of Bocas del Toro I was taken by helicopter to the Cerro Colorado exploratory mine deep in the heartland of the Ngäbe territory. Cerro Colorado is semi-sacred to the 150,000-strong Ngäbe as it provides fresh water to tribal lands on both sides of the Continental Divide. This was no luxury chopper. It was a work-horse with no doors and canvas

bench seats. However, it was the best way to see this impenetrable, forgotten land of thatched-roof longhouses in jungle settlements huddled in clearings on the banks of impossibly green rivers. We landed on a wooden platform perched in the cloud three-quarters of the way up the mountain and walked up a rickety wooden staircase to an equally rickety shed where breakfast of fried eggs on toast was served. I was told that this mountain—pretty well the whole mountain—was made up of high-grade copper close to the surface and was no less than the fifth largest copper reserve on the planet.

Having seen this untouched wilderness for myself, I am glad the Ngäbe fought so hard to protect their land and have managed to repulse the attempts of successive governments to rape it, but I cannot help wondering how long they can hold onto sovereignty of their mountain kingdom.

### **Legends of gods and mermaids**

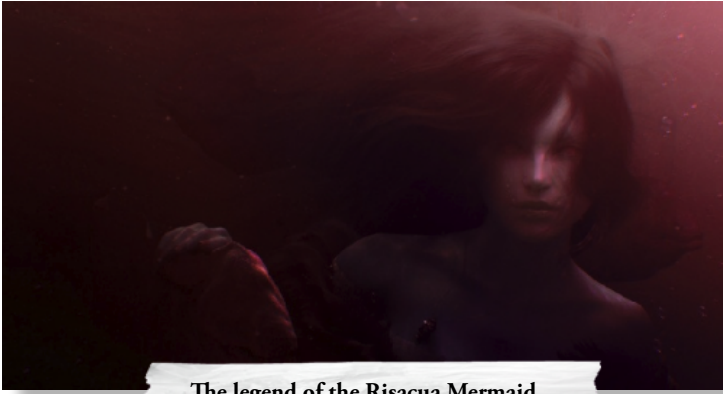
Given this backdrop, Chiriquí is steeped in myth and legend—many stemming from the region's rural and tribal cultural heritage.

Until recently, the Ngäbe peoples were known by the name Guayami, and according to their legend, the supreme deity, Noncomala, created both earth and water—born into darkness and cloud. Noncomala found his consort Rutbe by wading into the river, and the sun and moon were born of their union. Later, Noncomala was irked by the world of the Guayami so he sent a great flood killing everyone. But Nubu, a benign deity, preserved the seeds of humanity which he sowed in the earth after the flood had abated. The good seeds begat a man and a woman, but the bad ones gave life to monkeys.

### **The Risacua Mermaid**

David's rivers tumble for the Panamanian highlands and Volcan Baru, towering some 12,000 feet and often wrapped in cloud. One of Chiriquí's most beautiful rivers, the Risacua, serves as the boundary between the city of David and the village of Las Lomas to the east. The river is a popular swimming spot for the local population and many bathe in its cooling waters, unsuspecting of what is whispered to lie beneath its calm surface.

The legend goes that a mermaid with flowing red hair possessing heavenly beauty lives in the river, luring men, siren-like, into its depths never to be seen again.



**The legend of the Risacua Mermaid**

Through the ages, many inexplicable and unsolved disappearances have been reported in the area.

It is told that the unfortunate objects of her affections are lured by an invisible and irresistible impulse to jump into the water and swim in search of this ultimate, unrequited love. Exhaustion threatens to engulf the hapless swimmer, and as if a glimpse of the heavenly beauty of the deep were not enough, the mermaid appears to be brandishing a silver pitcher full of gold coins. With the last remaining ounce of strength, the would-be lover descends toward his goal whereupon she turns into a vicious monster and drags her prey into a cave deep in the river, never to return.

One particular version tells of the demise of Roberto Puente, an engineer whose car broke down after dark on the road from Panama City to his native hamlet—a home he had not visited for many years. Roberto had his head under the hood, flashlight in mouth, and was setting about fixing the issue when a truck stopped. “I will give you a ride for the short distance into town. Besides, there’s nothing to be done with this now, as everything will be closed,” reminded the helpful truck driver. “You can bring the mechanic tomorrow.” But Roberto was determined and stubborn. He could fix the car himself, and, if necessary, he would sleep in the car. He was close to home and had known the area intimately as a child.

So this latter course of action he took, awakening at first light to resume his travails. First of all, the call of nature had to be answered and the unfortunate Roberto found himself at the river’s edge. He decided to splash his face with water and as he did so, an ethereal sound appeared to come from nowhere. It was more of a feeling than a sound actually, and Roberto was intrigued to find the source of such flute-like allure. It became more audible and was as discernable as the sweetest human voice Roberto had ever heard.

As he approached, the languid tones would fill his ears and excite his senses then cease, but it was as if the notes were coming from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Roberto felt an inexplicable urge to laugh although he felt afraid at the same time. He indulged in the game of hide and seek, closing his eyes to hear the strange, languorous, and yet magnetic draw of the voice. Attempts to rationalize tricked Roberto into imagining the voices of local Ngöbe Buglé indigenous children, the sounds of the water pushing through rock, or the sound the wind might make funneling through a mountain pass.

It was as if the sound were coming from below the surface of the water. Compelled, Roberto waded up to his waist in the water, cautiously feeling the riverbed with his bare feet. The storyteller then recounts a small, pale hand stroking Roberto’s arm. He jumped, but could only distinguish a silver streak disappear into the depths, a charming mane of red flowing behind.

A slight shudder appeared on the surface of the water. A large fish, thought the startled Roberto. He did not believe in legends so he determined to wait and see if the creature dared return. At length, the form appeared downriver. It swam away through the shallows like a fish, but Roberto now discerned a certain shape and form to the upper body and hair. Incredulous, he could do nothing but swim after the creature, whose beauty he had now beheld, always enticing him further into the depths of the river.

We know that Roberto was traveling back to Las Lomas and David after many years of absence, hence we understand from his expectant parents that he never arrived. We also know from the truck driver who returned with the mechanic the next day that Roberto’s car was left there. We know from his employers in Panama City that he did not return to his job. Roberto’s sister, Norma, uncovered nothing but this legend when she toured the whole of David looking for a clue or witness to her brother’s untimely disappearance.

What we can be certain of is that swimming after the Risacua Mermaid was the last thing Roberto ever did.

## **History**

Although Chiriquí was first “discovered” as early as 1519 by the Spanish, the province was only officially founded around its capital, San José de David, in 1849. Before its 16th century discovery, attributed to Gaspar de Espinosa, the region had

been ruled and populated by several indigenous tribes. The Changuinas, Zurias, Boquerones, Buricas, Doraces, Bugabas, and Gualacas were collectively known as Guayami Indians.

The region has always been fiercely independent, considering itself sandwiched between Costa Rica in the west, and an alien, pseudo-South American state to its east. Although Panama is a small country, the doings and concerns of its capital city seem like an eternity away on the average day in David.

It was apparently well known that David was sited to be the center of Linconia, Abraham Lincoln's visionary project to create a colony for freed African slaves.

David itself was founded in 1602 by a Spanish explorer, Francisco de Gama, an advisor to the regional governor. The town grew initially in three sectors—two of which were destroyed by constant attacks by the natives. The remnants continued to grow and thrive around the area that today constitutes Bolivar Park where the Cathedral of San José is located. This became San José de David. The area was to become famous at the turn of the 20th century as being the location of the first battle of the Thousand Days' War between the liberal and conservative protagonists leading to Panama's independence from Colombia. It was not until the mid-18th century that the Spanish colonial government officially recognized the city of David due to its being founded by Jewish converts.

David and its region was always a net exporter of agricultural produce and a 165-mile railway was developed from 1916 to 1949 to improve transport communications to markets. During World War II, David's airfield was an auxiliary base for Howard Air Base (now Panama Pacifico), housing U.S. Air Force reconnaissance and training staff covering the coastline from Honduras to Peru.

David's airfield was later used by a young Manuel Noriega to help in the return of General Omar Torrijos by lighting the runway with jeep headlamps along its length for his plane to land.

## Livability

Chiriquí is a province with a population of more than 450,000. The capital, San Jose de David, is not only Panama's third largest city (after Panama City and Colon) but also a viable and vibrant provincial town with a population of around 145,000.



Access to modern amenities

David has a bit of everything, but not in an overwhelming way. Despite its country-town feel, David is a bustling commercial center growing in importance regionally with banks, malls, commercial centers, business hotels, trade growing around its central spine, and the Pan-American Highway.

David was established in a well-watered spot between the coast and mountains close to both business and nature. David is situated on the ribbon of flat plain lying between the Gulf of Chiriquí with its islands on the Pacific Ocean, and the mountains of the Cordillera de Talamanca.

Communications are excellent to and from the city with an ever improving InterAmerican Highway and David's international airport, Enrique Malek, which has three 35-minute flights a day with Air Panama from Panama City's domestic Albrook Airport. The "international" bit is a little less convincing, but you can fly to San Jose, Costa Rica.

One warning is that David's tropical Pacific climate is hotter and drier than Panama City, with average annual temperatures sitting at highs of 90°F, lows around 70°F, and 75% humidity. Rainfall averages at around 8.5 inches per month (although you'll see little or none in February and more than 16 inches in September), but the sun shines for nearly 200 hours every month.

Most people do need at least some air conditioning, so bank on higher electricity bills.

At this point of the Gulf of Chiriquí, the continental shelf runs very close to the mainland and this area boasts some of the finest sport fishing in the world. Records abound in these waters for both inshore and offshore monster fish.

The city of David is largely made up of middle-class neighborhoods with a low unemployment rate and very little poverty. I am told there is one area in town which people are urged to avoid at night, the Barrio del Sapo (Toad Neighborhood) in the southeast of the city.

There are many neighborhoods to the north of the city with quiet, leafy streets that are an easy walk to smaller local shops or are within an easy 10-minute walk of larger malls and commercial centers.

Several of the larger banks and insurance companies have full-service branches in David.

David was built on a flat plain running down to thick mangrove forest around the port of Pedregal to the south of the city proper. The city is dominated to the north by the mountains and Baru Volcano, but there are few geographic landmarks within the city itself apart from some small hills to the north and south. The estuary of Pedregal is fed by several rivers including the David and Manjagua rivers, the Rio Risacua, and smaller streams.

Unlike many towns and cities in Panama, the center of David is laid out on a general grid system which makes it straightforward to travel around. However, that system does not apply as you move out of the central area where normal Panama directions apply. The principal housing type is single-family detached homes, although there are a few low-rise (three or four floors) apartment blocks in the center. Buildings more than six stories are scarce. In fact, the only one I can think of is the new seven- or eight-story Ciudad de David business hotel.

The newer commercial areas in the north of the city host a number of household-name franchises, stores, and outlets, and many of the higher-end neighborhoods tend to be in this area as well. Although 7-Eleven and Hardee's have now gone (though, Carl's Jr. is here), there are many familiar U.S. brands in Panama that should provide any ground-floor expat or retiree with some comfort against any early nagging "Have I done the right thing?" questions that will always creep into your head.

### **David's hinterland**

Being less than 20 miles from Costa Rica, much of David's wealth is derived from cross-border trade.

The town of Concepcion is around 15 minutes west of David towards the Costa Rican border. The town is sometimes known as Bugaba, the district within which it is located, which covers a large area encompassing Cerro Punta and Volcan. The town itself has several stores and a fairground which hosts an annual cattle show and rodeo with a horse parade known as FERIA de la Candelaria, by all accounts a colorful and very entertaining local cultural event.

Gualaca is located on the "New Chiriquí River" about 30 minutes northeast of David on the road which eventually crosses the Continental Divide towards Bocas del Toro.

Heading due north of David through the 2,500-people-strong community of Los Algarrobos on the new road to Boquete is the town of Dolega. Los Algarrobos is less than 7 miles from David and Dolega, or about 20 minutes away.

It seems that the further west you get, the less people celebrate Carnival. Panama's celebration is second in the world only to Rio de Janeiro's. It's complete insanity, particularly in Panama's central provinces of Los Santos and Herrera. Dolega is a small exception to this rule, and if you want to escape the craziness there's a smaller, more rural affair in the town which is much less commercial. There are no politicians running up the populist votes by appearing in reggaeton videos or having campaign rap songs released. You may still get sprayed with water but you might just get to recognize and understand some of the basic customs upon which Carnival is founded.

Boquete is now very accessible from David and you can be in this quaint highland town in well less than an hour.

There are several yearly events worth a mention.

Fair of the Flowers and Coffee takes place in January each year with a garden and flower show as well as a coffee showcase.

The annual Orchid Fair presents the best of local and international orchid farms. Perhaps you could pay a visit to the Finca Dracula orchid farm in Cerro Punta, near Volcan, on a trip to buy your weekly fruits and vegetables.

Of course, you can tour a number of famous coffee plantations nearby and several have very well organized tours, outlets, and even restaurants and hotels.



The world's most expensive retail coffee comes from this area and can cost up to US\$350 per pound.

## Nightlife

Panama's provincial towns are peppered with local nightspots of differing styles, tastes, and comfort levels—David is no different. A *jardin* or *lorón* is a large, covered, open space for dancing with a bar at one end, playing Panamanian *typico* music for hours on end. Try *Jorón Zebede*, “The *lorón* of love” (it must be if it's in the tagline). If you want to see how the real locals go out on the weekend to drink and dance, then a visit is a must. If you enjoy cards and the like, there are two casinos in town: *Fiesta* and *Crown*.

On a different level, *El Hangar* is a bar with cars, and you'll need a decent car stereo system to get involved. Drive in, park up, buy drinks, and then vie for control of the sound...of course you can just go and have a few drinks and listen.

There are several other clubs for dancing and drinking such as *Unplugged*, *Opium Club & Terrace*, and *Blue Monday* with low cover charges (around US\$5). Bottle service is also possible, with a bottle of local rum, mix, and ice at the table costing around US\$20.

## Restaurants

Many people will tell you that customer service is almost nonexistent in Panama, but I have to say, it does improve as you get further from the capital. People in the provinces are much more welcoming and willing to help than in Panama City, but that rule does not always apply.

I had lunch one day in *Antojitos*, David's equivalent of *Costa Azul*, *Nicos*, or *Meson Prado* in Panama City, with Panamanian dishes served in better-than-fonda (typical Panamanian eating place) surroundings. It'll cost you about US\$10 a head but a lot more in time. It was Saturday of *Carnaval* and the staff seemed to have a severe case of “demotivation syndrome.” Instead, I'll go to the fonda next time for a US\$4 lunch.

After several attempts to find an open restaurant for lunch on *Carnaval Monday* I happened upon *Gallardo's*, a step up from a roadside café, but with an identity crisis with the look and feel of a highway Tex-Mex or steakhouse with gourmet pricing. The food was certainly edible, but the lunch with a glass of wine was about US\$25.



Local eateries

In contrast, *Mosto Bistro* does a fusion-food executive lunch for less than US\$10. I hear dinner is also reasonable. Three courses and a couple of glasses of wine will cost US\$25 to US\$30.

*Cuatro* would be at the top of the range for David (some say all of Panama), offering gourmet dishes based on traditional Panamanian food. The U.S.-trained chef has brought his flair back to David and is beginning to be noticed. A main course costs about US\$15 to US\$20, so I would class it as a special occasion venue. *Cuatro* recently opened a wine bar next door.

Most David restaurants do feature beef and meat on the menu, but there is a thriving Chinese community giving rise to a number of oriental and vegetarian cuisine options.

You can get pretty good tapas at *El Rincon Español* in the center of town. *Smokin' Mammias*, as its name might suggest, does burgers and the rest, but can be somewhat inconsistent I am told.

At the end of a long night, the place to go can be found in the *San Mateo* public market. You could be forgiven for thinking that *Chobeca Burger* sells burgers, as the name suggests, but actually, they don't. *Chobeca* sells traditional Panamanian fried food such as *carimañola*, *almojabanos*, *empanadas*, *hojaldras*, *tortillas*, and *bollos*. *Chobeca* is open 24 hours so you can't miss out on the “*fritura-fest*.” Nothing is better after a long party.

The restaurant scene in David does provide plenty of choice but variety seems a little limited. Looking around at the *Massey Ferguson* and *John Deere* dealerships should give you the clue that dinner is in the fields.

## Tours and activities

You can take many local tours and day trips as exercise options. Cycling, hiking, hillwalking, bird watching, and the coast and beach close by opens up a whole world of opportunity.

Local travel agency Jularmo Travel & Tours can arrange flights and other local tours for you if you need, but everything is very accessible and simply exploring on your own is extremely rewarding in Panama.

Michelle Carrillo of [Kallo Tours](#) offers custom tours and related services combined with event management. A1 Private Tours is mainly centered on Boquete but can arrange pickup for guests in David. A1 offers adventure tourism based in the mountains including jungle adventures, rafting, and canopies, and the larger travel and tour operator, Panama Horizons, can arrange pretty well anything for you.

## Politics, roads, and infrastructure

As we have seen, people who work and run businesses in David and Chiriquí have little regard for the workings of central government in Panama. In fact, it seems they try to avoid it all like the plague. However, David's Chamber of Commerce (CAMCHI) is very active. Each year David holds its International Fair, a showcase for Chiricano produce and services held for 10 days and visited by more than 300,000 people.



Local infrastructure

Naturally, CAMCHI spends a considerable amount of its time campaigning for the region's farmers and making sure a fair deal is had for all. I recently had a look at their newsletter and it does seem that the chamber also needs to press Panama for more infrastructure focus, for example, to finish road

improvement works on the Pan-American Highway between Santiago and David, which is described as a "distant dream" in the newsletter. CAMCHI is further horrified at government proposals to privatize the US\$300 million cold-chain infrastructure project on the table for several years now. Chiriquí produces 80% of Panama's internal food supply and has only 16% of the population.

A report does point to the fact that the new tourism incentive, Law 80, has been released, extending incentives already offered some years ago in Law 8 to other regions including David and Chiriquí. The incentives include tax-free import of materials and other generous tax breaks for investors and service providers.

## Learning

David and its province, Chiriquí, rely heavily on the rural economy. Many courses are targeted towards rural development and agriculture themes.



Bilingual and international schools

There is a choice of bilingual education for all ages from kindergarten to 12th grade, including an American school and a bilingual school.

Tertiary educational facilities give varied options from vocational colleges to full university degrees including Columbus University.

## Healing

David offers several options for health care including a number of private clinics, several medical centers, hospitals, and a polyclinic. The standard of health care is good in David, but for more complicated health issues I would advise traveling to the Johns Hopkins Hospital at Punta Pacifica in Panama City.

## A day in town

Hotels are plentiful here. David has everything, starting with budget hostels for visiting youth and travelers from about US\$10 per night in a dorm at the clean and secure Bambu Lodge, with a pool. Purple House has dorms for about the same with private rooms starting at about US\$25.

City center hotels such as the simple but affordable Cervantes, Puerta del Sol, and Iberia are about US\$40 to US\$70, with the Gran Hotel Nacional at US\$80 to US\$100, and the city's newest business hotel, Ciudad de David's rooms starting at about US\$100. The Boqueron is a small Italian-run B&B about 15 minutes out of town offering rooms or apartments from US\$35 to US\$50.

Most of the main hotels are located around Cervantes Park, right in the central business district of the city. The park is an oasis of cool green shade in the middle of the hustle and bustle—a welcome escape in the middle of your work or shopping day.

David's offerings are much improved in recent years in terms of shopping. There are two big malls with a wide range of options at all budgets. Compared to the more modern Plaza Terronal which has higher end stores and outlets, Chiriquí Mall has more budget stores, outlets, a six-screen movie theater, and a PriceSmart (similar to Costco) nearby.

Most Panama City supermarkets have large stores in David (except, alas, a Riba Smith), but we've chosen the local one, Romero, to price a typical basket of supplies.

If you go to the Swiss Technical University OTEIMA in the very center of town, you'll come across a permanent exhibition of the Quetzal Trail, about an hour by car in Cerro Punta. The exhibits are informative and well displayed and surround the campus's coffee shop forming part of the university's library. This is a great way to take a break or enjoy a precursor to next weekend's trip to the forest.

Arranged in one of the last preserved colonial houses in David, the Museum of History and Art can be found in the Bolivar area. A short distance away in San Pablo Nuevo is the Historical and Ethnographic Museum exhibiting local cultural development. Alternatively, the Museum of History and Antiquities La Casona has some interesting regional objects, paintings, antique furniture, and historical documents.

## A day at the beach

If you like palm-fringed beaches and are not afraid to drive a bit, head to Coconut Beach, about 40 minutes from David and 15 minutes from Puerto Armuelles. However, your easiest beach is the really spectacular Playa Barqueta. Eighteen miles of beach is only about a half-hour drive from David.

One small stretch of Barqueta is being developed as Las Olas Resort, where you can stay in an oceanfront room for about US\$75 or a two-bedroom suite for US\$225. Las Olas also offers a real estate element in a more than 2000-acre master-planned community with prices starting at about US\$150,000 for a basic lot. Not what you would call cheap.

BC's Beach House is an intimate all-inclusive place just along Barqueta Beach. BC's is a fully staffed house with a pool right on the beachfront. BC's is extremely comfortable and beautifully appointed, offering a full-service three-meals-per-day package. The house sleeps four to six people and costs about US\$500 per night. Benny's bar and restaurant is right on the beach and great for a cold beer, fried red snapper, and plantains.

Barqueta Beach is located next to an important turtle nesting reserve of more than 13,000 acres of beach and mangroves. Five species of sea turtle, some critically endangered, have 8.5 miles of preserved beach.

For those of you who like to surf, there are several breaks within 45 minutes of David around Playa Barqueta:

Beach Break at La Barqueta (25 minutes)  
Right Break, "Sandia"—near Estero Rico  
San Pedro Bar—surf this break at high tide  
Mangrove Paddle—paddle through the mangrove forest  
Long Right Break, "Mocha"—again, off Estero Rico

## A day in the mountains

To the north, David's flat plain rapidly gives rise to the Talamanca Range, part of the Continental Divide.

Boquete is a mountain town famous for its fine coffee production and latterly for its growing population of overseas retirees based on its agreeable climate.

On the other side of the mountain and approached through the town of Concepcion is Volcan. This quiet and charming highland



Hidden valleys

town is surrounded by spectacular scenery—cloud forest on the nearby summit of Baru, densely forested hillsides, and hidden valleys reminiscent of Switzerland in the summer.

Keep driving and you'll end up in Cerro Punta where you can fill up on strawberries and other fruits, stock up on vegetables, spend a pleasant day in a local farmers or artisan market, or hike in the cloud forest in pursuit of the elusive and enigmatic Quetzal, Panama's Bird of Paradise.

Being in the lea of a great volcano, there are some undeveloped hot springs such as Los Pozos de Caldera within an hour of David.

### A day in the islands

The coastline around David is split into areas of sandy beach (Playa Barqueta) and dense mangrove forests.

Close to town and the international airport, a few minutes' drive to the south of David is its port, Pedregal, tucked away and



Chiriquí gulf islands

surrounded by the precious mangrove forest of the estuary of many of Chiriquí's largest rivers.

From Pedregal you can set off on an organized tour of several of the Gulf islands on board the [Cocaleca](#) or arrange for a fishing trip with a local captain. Snorkeling and diving can be excellent around the islands in the Gulf of Chiriquí.

The Gulf of Chiriquí National Marine Park is a marine paradise covering nearly 30,000 acres and protecting the area for rare sea turtles, humpback whales, and several species of dolphin. Pedregal has some limited facilities for marina, dry dock, and boat maintenance services.

### Making the move

There are many expats and retirees from North America who have chosen to make their home in David and its surroundings. As such, a good and healthy support network has evolved in recent years—both on and offline. Associations, societies, and online communities are numerous. For example, [Chiriquí Chatter](#) is a good resource for expats and retirees that allows newcomers to orientate themselves as well as assimilate in the local community through locally arranged events and meetings.

David offers everything you could need in terms of supplies, service, and entertainment. Local culture and education are also evidenced, but, occasionally, it can be nice to find some more international culture, and for this a trip to Panama City may be necessary as David can get to feel somewhat provincial. In other words, if it's ballet, opera, or Thai-fusion cuisine that you are looking for, then David may not be the answer to your retirement dreams. If, however, you crave a low-cost but high standard of living, David is for you. **ESP**

### About The Author

*Jocelyn Carnegie has long experience setting up home, family, and business in different countries around the world, from the UK to Ireland, from the United States to France, and from Central Europe to Central America.*



*He and his current endeavors currently call Panama home, and we welcome Jocelyn to our Panama Letter team.*



## Chiricano Culinary Heritage And The Monkey

*By Jocelyn Carnegie*

Being so close to the Costa Rican border, David has much influence from its western neighbor. Paso Canoas is about 45 minutes from Costa Rica. Many people go to the Hotel Millennium to renew their visas or go to the duty free zone, Baru. A bus ride from David to this border town is about US\$2. Cross-border trade has helped to build David and fuel its growth.

Of course, borders and frontiers give no recognition to the fact that the raindrops fall, birds fly, and the wind blows either side of these man-made inventions. Recipes know no borders and many are interchangeable in this region. For example, there is a version of the famous Nicaraguan-Costa Rican dish, Gallo Pinto, in western Chiriqui which employs a different bean, but is similar to that which can be found to the north. Think Louisiana Creole's red beans and rice, but with local ingredients.

The cuisine of this area uses a lot of corn dough. The following dish is typical of Chiriquí and David:

### Almojábanos

#### Ingredients:

- 1 pound fresh corn dough
- 1 pound melted white cheese
- Salt to taste
- A pinch of sugar (you can try local honey or maple syrup)
- Oil

#### Preparation:

- Mix all the ingredients, except the oil, together in a glass or ceramic bowl until you have a homogenous dough.
- Take small portions of the dough and mold into "S" shapes.
- Fry "S"-shaped molds in hot oil.
- Serve with white cheese.
- Optional: Serve with gallo pinto and hot sauce.

Chiriqui produces the large majority (80%) of Panama's food, and the following dish is prepared and eaten on the farms and ranches of the province. It is the traditional lunch of farm laborers to be taken and eaten in the fields. This is primarily because it contains all the necessary nutritional staples to sustain someone on a long, hard day in the heat.





## Recipe

### El Mono (The Monkey)

This dish does not contain any part or derivative of a monkey! Rather, the name derives from the fact that in the past the “peons,” or peasant laborers, used to hang their lunch parcels in the trees to keep the ants off them. During the morning, the food would heat up in the sun and be ready to eat at lunchtime. The parcels looked like small monkeys hanging from the trees.

#### Ingredients:

- Rice
- Local Chiricano beans
- Beef
- Chorizo (sausage)
- Tasajo (beef jerky)
- Chicken
- Tajada (fried ripe plantain)
- Oil

The base of the meal is rice and local Chiricano beans, topped with beef, hot chorizo sausage, beef jerky (called tasajo), or chicken, and fried ripe plantain (tajada).

#### Preparation:

- Soak the beans in cold water overnight, and then cook until soft.
- While completing the following steps, make sure to be preparing your tajadas for cooking. (See end of recipe.)
- Add oil to the pan and lightly fry the rice and remove from pan.
- Drain the beans and preserve the cooking water.
- Add the cooked beans to the pan and stir well, cooking for a few minutes.
- Cook rice in preserved bean water until the water is reduced and rice has the color of the beans. Add a pinch of salt to taste.
- As the rice is cooking, fry the meat in oil.
- Lay out a bijao (calathea lutea) or banana leaf.
- Place the rice and beans on the leaf, then the meat, and lastly the tajada.
- Wrap into a parcel and tie with string.

The monkey is ready to hang in the tree until lunchtime!



#### Tajada

##### Ingredients:

- Ripe plantain
- Oil

##### Preparation:

- Heat some oil in a pan.
- Slice ripe plantain diagonally and fry in hot oil until golden brown.

El Mono is so well known in Chiriqui that each year a Festival of the Monkey in Bijao is celebrated in the village of San Andres, Bugaba District, near the border with Costa Rica and about 50 minutes from David.

# Panama's Brand New Metro

The Panama City Metro is the first in all of Central America. Begun in 2012 under the direction of President Ricardo Martinelli, the new system was inaugurated for use the first week of April 2014. Unlike the canal expansion project which has faced several setbacks, the state-of-the-art rail system came right on time and on budget. Here are some things you might want to know about the system during your visit or your move.



## Benefit And Cost

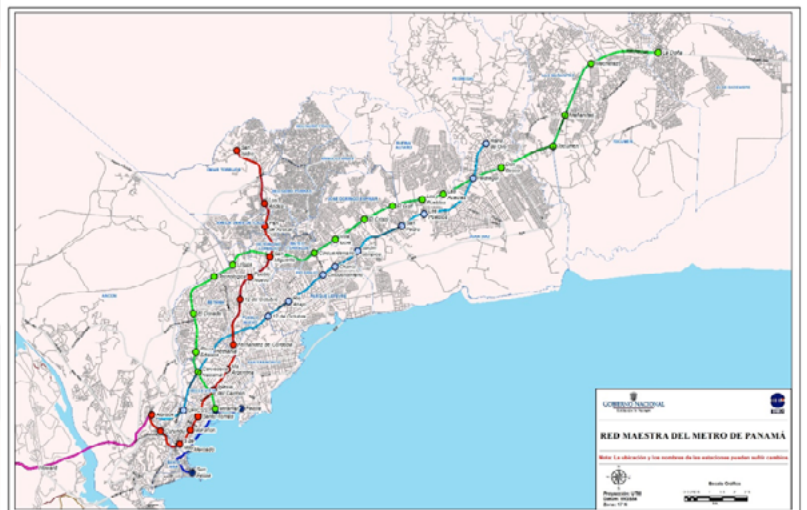
The government of Panama has been investing truckloads of money into the infrastructure of the country. The rail system in Panama City will account for US\$1.88 billion of the total bill. What will that total bill look like? The government is reaching deep into its pockets for the US\$15 billion–US\$17 billion that all infrastructure projects in the country are estimated to cost.

The French multinational Alstom, is under contract for US\$254 million to supply railcars, engineering, and electromechanical support for the project.

To put things in perspective, the total cost for the expansion of the Panama Canal is US\$6.8 billion, including the extra cost after delays in early 2014. The Metro will be one quarter the total cost of the expansion of the famous waterway.

## Figures And Features

- Tunnels were dug totaling 8.8 km, and viaducts were built to span 4.9 km through the air.
- During the first two days of operation, 400,000 passengers were served.
- There are 12 stations, of which five are elevated and seven are underground.
- The Metro currently operates 19 trains that have three cars each.
- Every hour, at full capacity, 40,000 people can be served.
- Each train consists of three trains and measures out 52 meters (the same length as the White House).
- A train stops at each station every 3.5 minutes.
- It takes 23 minutes to ride the train from one end of the track to the other (Albrook to Los Andes.)

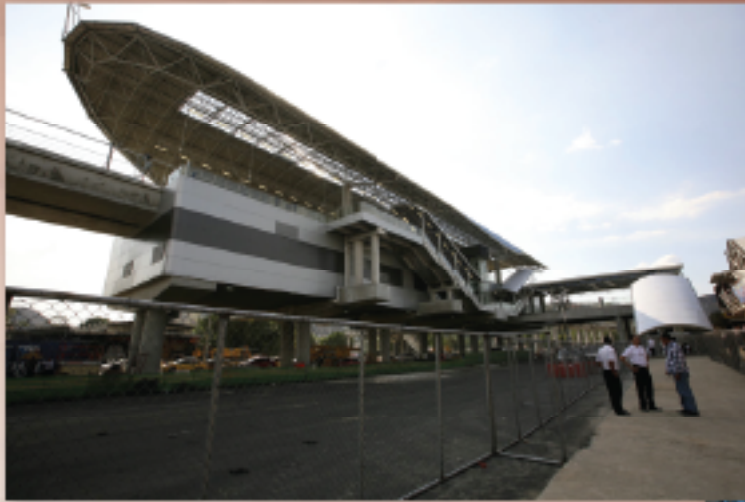


## Plans For The Future

The expansion of this public transportation project is expected to last through 2035. At current capacity, the trains can carry 15,000 people per hour. At full capacity, that number will expand to 40,000. If all goes as planned, this will be a huge relief to traffic congestion inside the city.

The second line of the system has left its planning days behind and has begun to solicit construction bids. The completion of the line is scheduled for 2017. This extension will be 22 km long and run from Albrook to La Dorba.

There is a third line currently in planning stages and a fourth being tested for feasibility. The fifth and final line, the largest project currently being discussed, is a rail bridge to extend the Metro reach to Panama Pacifico. This involves building a new bridge over the canal and presents a huge undertaking to service Panama Pacifico, Panama City's youngest "Special Economic Zone." This already up-and-coming area would see increased, or by 2035, renewed interest as accessibility became even less of an issue.







## Retirement In David

It was about three years ago when Kris Cunningham and husband Joel decided they'd had enough of sustaining the cost of living in Sarasota, Florida. At around 60 and 65 respectively, the Cunninghams were not looking forward to working into their 70s just to keep up.

The Cunninghams chose David as their new home and it seems they've never looked back. Kris speaks with a rare and precious enthusiasm for what was a major lifestyle change.



*Panama Letter* tries to give you a balanced and transparent view of becoming an expat or retiring in Panama; we try to throw away those rose-tinted spectacles. But as much as I asked for the downsides, trying desperately to read between lines and pull at least something other than positivity from their words, I couldn't glean even a hint of negativity. Unusual. Refreshing.

### **Kris, did you have any connection to Panama before arriving?**

None whatsoever. We really knew nothing about the place.

### **Did you consider anywhere else?**

We knew we needed a place that was affordable to live. We were nearing the ages when we wanted to retire, and thought, "There has to be something better out there! No matter how long we work, we'll never be able to retire here."

### **Then what...?**

We began by researching Costa Rica, but became concerned about problems with crime, infrastructure, and the higher cost of living. When we decided that Costa Rica wasn't going to meet our needs, we turned our attentions to Panama.

### **What was your main reason for wanting to move?**

Really, the thought of not being able to retire for another 10 years! The cost of living in the United States seems to be rising exponentially.

### **What drew you to David?**

We were looking for somewhere warm, peaceful, and politically stable, as well as somewhere not overly far from the United States. Panama ticked all those boxes. It just kind of floated to the top of the list.

Our first stop was Panama City. We loved the country and the people, but the city was too much for us at our age. We didn't want to deal with the traffic and freneticism every day. But, since we are city people we thought the next biggest city,

David, might be something to consider. We came here and saw that it had everything we needed to live comfortably and thought, "Yep, this will work."

### **What makes you stay?**

We are really happy here! Life feels much more calm, relaxed, and free. The people are friendly and welcoming. Our life here is affordable so we are able to travel and do more things we enjoy. Panama is really beautiful and though we have been here for 18 months, there is still much we want to learn and explore.

### **How did you choose where to live in David?**

I contacted an agent who had been recommended by other expats and told him what I was looking for. The first house he showed me was perfect. It is in a friendly Panamanian neighborhood with professional and working class people.

Our house is next to some woods and a beautiful river, so there are many birds and other interesting wildlife. We love being so close to nature, yet only a few minutes from shopping and everything we need in the city.

### **How do you get around?**

We have a car for shopping, errands, and local excursions. We have bicycles for exercise and exploring the area. For longer trips, such as to Panama City, we take the bus.

### **Describe your move.**

We brought virtually nothing with us. Literally, we arrived with our suitcases. My husband is a musician so he brought his

guitars and some of his tools—things he might not be able to replace down here.

#### **Are you working?**

No, we are both retired. I was a nurse, but I do not intend to work in Panama (even if I legally could). My husband has his musical equipment setup in one of our rooms for his own enjoyment. He is open to playing with others on occasion but has no plans to have a band or the responsibilities of playing gigs again. It is a privilege to do what we want on our own terms.

#### **You must miss your families back home.**

We did not live close to our families in Florida, so for us this has not been as difficult an adjustment as it is for some others. We actually see more of our family now since we use more video chats than phone calls. My little grandson has learned to recognize me on the computer screen! We have to go back to the United States every six months until we qualify for residency, but even then I expect to go back to the United States periodically to see family.

#### **How has your network of friends evolved?**

We have found it very easy to make friends here. People are friendly, welcoming, and helpful. We have many friends in our Panamanian neighborhood and around town, and have been literally welcomed into some of their families.

#### **What would you say has impressed you the most about them?**

People here are very hard working, but they also love to have fun. Family and friends are more important than anything, and there is a very strong sense of community and working together. People are very non-judgmental, and are not concerned with race, religion, profession, or other things we find so important in the United States.

There is also a lot of respect for the older generation. We both thought, “We could grow old here!” Back in the United States the older generation often has to fight for respect and decent health care.

#### **Are you involved in the expat community?**

David does not have an expat community to speak of. We have some expat friends that we enjoy, but most of our friends are Panamanian. I am glad for my Panamanian friends because they help me improve my Spanish and teach me more about the area and culture, as well as being lovely friends.

#### **What would you say your main challenges have been?**

I am from New York City. Believe it or not, moving from there to Arkansas was more challenging than moving from Florida to Panama. You expect challenges when making an international move, but this one was easier than I expected.

The biggest challenge was the language. I had studied some in the past, and then more intensively for six months before I arrived with Habla Ya (online) in Boquete. My Spanish still wasn't great when I arrived so I could ask questions but I didn't always understand the answers. It took me a week to figure out where to buy a tank of cooking gas for the kitchen! It took much longer before I could talk on the phone successfully.

#### **What do you miss most, if anything?**

I don't regret what we left behind. Thanks to the Internet I can easily keep up with friends and family in the States. My husband misses the quick and efficient mail service that makes shopping online so easy. I find clothes and shoe shopping easier in the United States where people are more my size, but since I'm not much of a shopper I can easily pick up a few things I need on trips back.

What we have gained here is so much more than anything we have lost, so this aspect has not been difficult.

#### **When I ask most people, two words jump out at me: flexibility and patience. Is that your experience of moving to Panama?**

Yes, I agree. Some things are done differently, or take longer than you would expect. Maybe the water is off this afternoon and nobody knows why. But, if you go with the flow and keep your sense of humor, it all works itself out and you'll be fine.

#### **Any words of warning?**

Watch for the mold! Seriously, remember that this is a different country, climate, and culture. Spend some time here before making any decisions, and don't buy property until you have lived here for a year or more.

#### **What advice would you give to anyone thinking of moving to Panama?**

Think carefully about what you really need, and what you cannot tolerate. Daily life is different from being a tourist. Learn as much Spanish as you can. Treat the locals with kindness and respect, and they will respond in kind. Remember that you are an ambassador. Above all, enjoy the experience. 🇵🇸

A red and orange leather passport cover is centered on a dark, textured wooden background. The cover has a white card tucked into the top. The text on the cover is as follows:

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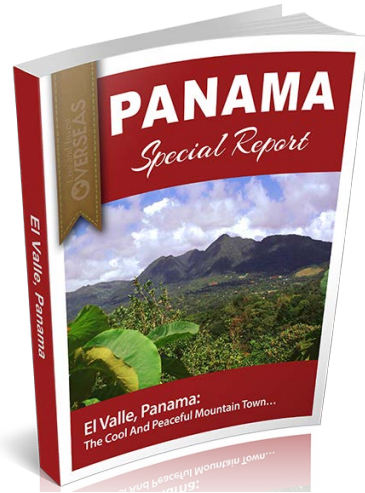
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