

PANAMA

Special Report



El Valle, Panama:

The Cool And Peaceful Mountain Town...



PANAMA
SPECIAL REPORT

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INSIDE

The Famous Panamanian Chef, Lourdes Fabrega... page 9

Street Art Of Panama City... page 10

Back To His Roots: An Interview With Pedro Fabrega Jr....page 12

Panama 101: How To Set Up Your New Home... page 14



El Valle: Mountain Fastness Of The Sleeping Indian

By Jocelyn Carnegie

Nestled within the majestic confines of an extinct volcanic crater and overlooked by the Sleeping Indian mountain range and cloud-capped mountains, about 90 minutes from Panama City lies the bustling market town of El Valle de Anton.

As you climb the hill from the Pan-American Highway, you pass through a number of landscape changes where the subtle hues and colors of nature transform as you pass through small, neat settlements and villages with sellers of artisan flower pots, garden furniture, or flourishing plant nurseries.

Explosive History

Around 15 million years ago, the area around El Valle formed part of a volcanic island. More volcanos sprang up around the El Valle massif to begin connecting the dots between North and South America. By about 6 million years ago, the cataclysmic eruptions in this area began. By 3 million years ago, it is thought that the crater had become dormant and was home to a hot volcanic lake, until this also drained into the Anton River around 20,000 years ago.

Continued on page 2...



Today, the base of the crater—now dry, of course—is close to the watershed. It is said that you can dig anywhere in the valley and reach water in only a few feet. There are several mineral hot springs dotted around the crater floor, serviced by an underground river heated by magma from a tiny fracture deep in the subterranean rock. There is geological evidence which suggests that the mountain erupted again around 300,000 years ago. We know there was some activity during the draining of the lake around 13,000 years ago, but the last volcanic activity was documented as recently as 1987. This slight activity allows features such as the hot springs to function and facilitates exploration of the many historic paths around the volcanic remains dating from around 11,000 years ago.

The cataclysm created an avalanche of rock, lava, and ash from the top of the mountain to the ocean around 20 miles away. It is thought that the original height of the mountain may have been around 6,500 feet, most of which was blown into the air as the mountain collapsed, leaving only the surrounding mountains seen today. The imposing Cerro Gaital, looms densely forested over the town and Cerro Cariguana, whose summit pokes above its jungled skirts. Cerro Pajita and Cerro Caracoral complete El Valle's mountainous collar.

The current crater of El Valle extends to around 7 square miles—the largest inhabited volcanic crater on earth. El Valle sits at around 1,800 feet above sea level, enjoying a year-round spring-like average temperature at night of around 68°F. There is little variation in temperatures throughout the year, and the days enjoy highs of 82°F to 85°F.

Gardens Of The Holy Spirit

This sounds like a biblical reference but it refers to Panama's national flower, the Flor de Espiritu Santo, or Holy Ghost Orchid—a fine and graceful flower somehow reminiscent of a type of lotus. The flower grows freely in El Valle's upland climate, and, as you climb up the steep wooded slopes of El Gaital amid the birdsong and dense jungle foliage, you can find many species of wild orchid, bromeliad, and epiphyte thriving in its cloud-forest environment.

El Valle is home to Aprovaca, a nonprofit that seeks to preserve and reintroduce threatened rare and endemic species of orchid. Their nurseries and important work are on show every day in the town.

As soon as you start down the inner slopes of the volcano, you will notice how lush the vegetation becomes in contrast to some of the surrounding bare volcanic hills and pine forested southern slopes on the steep ascent.

Its gardens and the sheer proliferation of flora must be one of the joys of living in a place like El Valle de Anton. You get the feeling immediately that you could stick a twig in the ground and it will flourish into a stately tropical tree in this enchanted valley.

In fact, enchanted is an apt description for El Valle, as it has grown in recent years into somewhat of a spiritual mecca for expats and Panamanians alike.

The realization of tranquility with ourselves and the world around us is a goal we must all hold somewhere within ourselves, deeper in some than in others. El Valle seems to have attracted expats and retirees whose ambitions are to live a serene, healthy, community-spirited life with many artsy activities and community-based events peppering the year.

The town is expanding but still sticking to its roots as a mountain community. It is close to major routes to the city and the new malls and services of Coronado or the coast and beaches of the Pacific. Even El Valle now has its own El Rey supermarket and new commercial center.

As you travel around the valley's lush floor, you can experience its volcanic past in the giant boulders and spectacular waterfalls. El Valle is a paradise for nature lovers and the great outdoors, for getting back to a simpler, more peaceful existence amidst some of nature's most spectacular assets.

Painted Rocks And Magma Springs

El Valle is a must-see lifestyle destination for anybody considering a move to warmer tropical climates far from the madding crowd of modern existence and outside the big-city hustle.

No less than eight rivers flow down its surrounding mountains into the crater's base and eventually down to the Pacific Ocean, less than 4,000 feet below Gaital's highest peak.

Mineralized springs give rise to healing mud, which removes toxins from the skin and allegedly takes years off you. Many elderly people suffering from complaints such as arthritis

travel to the public hot springs to bathe and heal, while others create naturally heated swimming pools in their backyards.

Evidence of El Valle's earliest settlers can be found on the spectacular petroglyph of Piedra Pintada (Painted Stone). This huge boulder is located close to the town's center and depicts many scenes from pre-Colombian times, although coherent interpretations have not been made.

Other popular natural attractions located close to the town are its five main waterfalls, led by the 100-foot El Macho as well as The Maiden, Hidden, Lovers, and Frog Leap falls.

Flower Of The Air

El Valle bears out the fact that an indigenous culture flourished in the area from as far back as 1200 B.C. until the Spaniards arrived and wiped them out in the 16th century.

Urraca was a legendary fighter, famed for never surrendering to the first waves of Spanish arrivals on the Isthmus of Panama in the early 16th century. Urraca was the chief of the Guaymí Indian tribe of Coclé, the region to which El Valle belongs. It is thought that Urraca and El Quibian, who visited Columbus on an earlier expedition to these shores, were one and the same. In any event, Urraca managed to unite a number of tribes against the Spanish and hold them back for a decade or longer, escaping from custody at one point after having been trapped on board a Spanish ship bound for Europe.

An account of Urraca from 16th-century historian and friar Bartolomé de las Casas states, "He was so brave and courageous, wise and skillful in war, not just to defeat the Spaniards who oppressed him ... being a man of judgment and courageous, and knowing full well how it is a war against the enemy..."

It is told that Urraca's daughter, Flor del Aire (Flower of the Air), fell in love with a Spanish soldier, a sworn enemy of her father. Flor's complications were further compounded by the fact that one of the fiercest warriors of the tribe of which her father was chief who went by the name of Yavari, also courted her attention. But his love for Flor was unrequited and, his heart broken, he threw himself from a cliff in full view of his love.

Flor was most sorrowful having witnessed this terrible event and the princess wandered from her home dejected, never to see her Spaniard again. For ages, she wandered the mountains, forests,

and valleys, weeping bitterly, until she reached the area almost at the top of the mountain. Overlooking the beaches and mountains of her native Caribbean shores, she promptly fell dead, gazing towards the land of her birth. The surrounding mountains were touched by Princess Flor's tale of woe and formed themselves into her recumbent shape to remind us all for posterity of her lost loves, hence The Sleeping Indian mountain range.



Sleeping Indian Mountain Range

Fanciful locals tell the story that at dawn on a clear day, as the sun rises over the crest of the mountains and dappled light begins to filter through the dense forest around the Maiden Falls, Flor del Aire is said to appear at the river's edge with other local maidens. Gazing into the clear pool at the foot of the waterfall, the princess tells her sorrowful story and of her endless grief for the loss of both of her lovers. As the light gathers and the day grows in stature, Flor and her companions dissipate into the ether as she returns to her sleeping position on the mountain range.

Fountain Of Youth?



Healing Hot Springs

The healing hot springs are open to the public, their minerals and mineralized muds often helping to cure, heal, and soothe the skin, bones, and muscles, promoting health and youth. The main minerals appearing within the 100°F waters are

sodium, potassium, calcium, magnesium, bicarbonate, sulfates, chloride, boron, fluoride, and silica.

In terms of medicinal mud, further analysis reveals silica, magnesium, titanium, iron, sulfur, phosphorous, sodium, potassium, and calcium, with trace elements of copper, zinc, selenium, cobalt, magnesium, and molybdenum.

El Valle is the go-to place for health tourists to recuperate after traveling to Panama City clinics and hospitals such as the state-of-the-art Johns Hopkins Hospital and several other international standard medical care facilities for treatment.

A Thriving Community

El Valle town and surrounding area consists of a thriving community of around 6,000 people, located around 75 miles from Panama City. The town lies about 15 miles up the mountainside from the Pan-American Highway, a picturesque drive through small villages and changing countryside.

The community has grown over thousands of years from a small gathering of local villages centered on the local market. Many of Panama's oldest families own second homes in the cool and healthy mountain air of the valley, weekendng regularly to disengage and relax within easy reach of the city.

A growing number of shops and services have been built, including a new commercial center and El Rey supermarket; however, the real focus of El Valle's community is on its market.

The market is a focal point in the town for its unbeatable quality produce—much of it naturally organic—at unheard of prices. Every day, local farmers arrive before sunrise with their chosen fruits and vegetables, creating the unusual situation in Panama of a traditional farmers market available to residents every day.

There is nothing that starts the day off better than jumping in your golf cart and driving five minutes down the road to assemble the fresh ingredients of an energizing gazpacho smoothie at the market...take ten minutes to buy a bag of tomatoes, a cucumber, garlic, celery, spring onions (or red onions), a small chili, and local cilantro. Go home and throw all the ingredients in a blender, squeeze in some lime juice, add a few cumin seeds, a dash of balsamic vinegar, and some naturally cooled mountain water (from your kitchen faucet), and blend for a few minutes. You may, of course, wish to take your

time in the choosing and buying of your daily produce, relishing the fact that you can. But if you'd prefer to relax with your smoothie on the terrace to the backdrop of the morning mist rising up the mountainsides and, the chorus of up to 500 species of bird in your ears, then it's best to take advantage of the fact that you can do all this in a short time. I challenge you to get in your car, drive to the mall, and get around the supermarket in less time.



Coronado Mall

The market also has a selection of fine local artisan products and traditional craft items at reasonable prices. For example, a locally made family-sized hammock for under US\$50, and an intricately carved and beautifully painted ocelot pendant is as little as US\$15. The quality of craftsmanship and artistry in many of these carvings is exquisite. The best carvers are from the Embera tribe, who collect the fruit of the Tagua Palm for carving. The nut is also called palm ivory because it behaves like elephant ivory in terms of its properties for carving and how it looks and feels. Colorful and skillfully woven Kuna molas and elaborate baskets are also on show, and, in fact, you could decorate your home from top to bottom with local art and collector items for a fraction of the cost of interior designed pieces from the city.

Wellness And Gastronomy

National parks, such as the National Monument of Cerro Gaital, protect the rare atmosphere and environment for both man and nature. In fact, the surrounding walls of the crater are home to what is thought to be one of the last populations of the now critically endangered golden frog, a national symbol of Panama.

Therefore, just as the environment surrounding the town is protected, so is the environment for El Valle's human inhabitants.

The number of spas, wellness centers, and yoga and wellbeing clubs and gatherings around town are testament to El Valle's commitment as a community that promotes a healthy lifestyle.

Yoguini Spa, Crater Valley Adventure Spa, Cariguana Spa, and the spa at Los Mandarinos offer a range of different treatments and cover the spectrum of health and wellness options.

Wellness is matched by a number of establishments specializing in good, wholesome food using natural, locally grown produce. In addition to the seven-day-per-week market, there are suppliers of organic food who may even deliver to your home. One such supplier in town is the Biodiversity Corner, run by Tomas Garcia and Michael Ducharme, where you can order more greens and leaves than you may be able to find in the supermarket on a daily basis.



El Valle Health Center

The residents' propensity towards healthy organic produce and the increasing number of tourists have led to around 30 eating venues springing up around El Valle.

The most famous and established gastronomic venue is Casa de Lourdes. Developed and run over decades by Lourdes Fábrega de Ward and her husband, Casa de Lourdes is famous throughout Panama for innovative and consistently delicious five-star dishes, created and driven by Lourdes and her French chef. Casa de Lourdes formed the basis for the development of Los Mandarinos spa, now the largest hotel in El Valle.

The town is well served with affordable local fondas, and several of El Valle's other hotels offer walk-in dining, such as the Golden Frog Inn, Hotel Valle Verde (formerly Los Capitanos),

and Hotel Campestre. O'Pedro's Irish Pub and Triana at Los Mandarinos also provide consistently good food, while Pekin adds a much sought-after Chinese menu to the town's options.

Carlito's offers a sound Italian and pizza alternative to the town, and the well-established Bruschetta serves classic Italian dishes, as its name would suggest.

The town's main local coffee outlet, El Valle Gourmet Coffee, has developed into a good deli and supplier of fine teas, local baking, oils, vinegars, and a small selection of high-quality frozen deli foods.

Spoiled For Choice Of Accommodation

There is now an excellent range of hotels, B&Bs, hostels, and self-catering options within and around the town. The largest hotel is the multiphase Los Mandarinos, which began several years ago as El Valle's first full-service spa. Around 15 hostels offer everything from affordable dormitories and camping areas in the US\$5 to US\$45 range to comfortable self-catering cabins that you are able to rent for extended periods.



Los Mandarinos

We always recommend renting a place for a three to six month period before jumping into a new life as an expat or picking a final retirement destination. There are many factors to bear in mind, so you should not put yourselves under any pressure to make a decision immediately. You may find that your dreams of living a life in the city were ambitious, or you may find the tranquil pace of life in the countryside or at the beach a little stifling. After all, who knows what it will be like until you try it? It is also critical to get to know your neighbors and fellow

residents and decide for yourself, through experience, how you will fit into a fulfilling life in that community.

Los Oleandros offers monthly rentals on smaller self-catering cabins for around US\$550 per month, including water and electricity and intermittent maid service. The Swiss owners of Casa Mariposa, near the center of El Valle, offer a beautifully furnished luxury three-bed apartment attached to their private guesthouse for around US\$750 per month.

A higher specification, furnished rental of a 350-square-meter house on 5 acres of garden grounds for US\$1,800 per month.

Smaller boutique hotels include the Anton Valley, Golden Frog, Campestre, Cariguana, Rincon Vallero, and the characteristic Crater Valley. Crater Valley offers the ultimate mind, body, and soul vacation, and the resort and adventure spa aims to provide a holistic service, incorporating the valley's unique natural assets.

There are estimated to be more than 300 hotel beds in El Valle, ranging from US\$50 to US\$300 per night.

How To Get There

El Valle is perfectly located just over a 90-minute drive from Panama City, thus an excellent visiting distance for guests and visitors coming from overseas, providing a welcome contrast to the constant bustle of the city.



Landscape before you get to El Valle

For much of the local population, the chosen mode of transport within the town is the bicycle. Expats of normal retirement age living in El Valle tend towards the golf cart as a cost effective and easy way around town. The town of El Valle is well spread out across the valley floor, giving a feeling of space to breathe and enjoy the surroundings.

There are frequent bus services into and out of Panama City. The journey is usually undertaken in a minibus, taking around 2.5 hours. The last bus generally leaves just before 3 p.m. and costs just over US\$4. I use words like “generally” and “usually” when it comes to timetables and costs, which raises a point that needs to be made. While advances have been and are being made in this area, departure and arrival times can be somewhat random in Panama. Flying in the face of traditional logic, it is expected for buses to turn up or leave when they are full and not according to any printed schedule. If there is indeed anything printed on the matter, it's best to disregard it.

You will be able to get most anywhere in Panama by buses of various different shapes and sizes and of wildly varying quality. The general rule is that you'll need to change in San Carlos on the coast. San Carlos is a small coastal and beach town famous for its surf, with a few sleepy restaurants and a fishing village mentality. This will be your local public transport hub, and you can get here from El Valle until around 6 p.m. If you are heading into Panama City for a night out at the theater or just for a good dinner and some city life, you can leave your home in El Valle around 5:30 p.m. and be in the city in time for cocktails and dinner.

Residents And Real Estate

El Valle's local residents are mainly from the Ngäbe-Bugle peoples of north-central and western Panama. There are many older inhabitants, and the oldest resident is 102 years old. As El Valle has been discovered and has now grown in popularity, there are now some 20 different nationalities calling El Valle home.



Fine home

It is thought there are now at least 50 expat families making El Valle their home. There is a concerted effort to court more international tourists, and agreements are being negotiated with larger tour operators to bring tourists to El Valle directly

from European and North American charter flights into the new international airport at Rio Hato, recently opened and only about 40 minutes (30 miles) from El Valle.

This new facility bodes well for investors and residents of El Valle as it will provide a boost to values in the area and bolster occupancy rates, which rely heavily on weekend and holiday traffic from Panama City. The El Valle tourist office registered around 10,000 walk-ins in 2013, more than 50% of which were overseas visitors.

El Valle's rare qualities have not been lost on the real estate market, and prices have been rising steadily as more people jump in; however, interesting deals can still be had. Like anywhere, a premium is charged at the top end of the market. By its nature, El Valle boasts a number of multimillion-dollar residences, and many homes come on generous lots and expansive grounds. At the time of writing, there are one or two properties on the market for around US\$2 million, but these sit on lots of 5 to 10 acres, with sprawling homes and gardens. At the sensible end of the market, a three-bedroom home with a reasonable sized garden might be had for around US\$250,000. Of course, there is a simple fact about investing in El Valle property: It's a finite resource in a unique location.

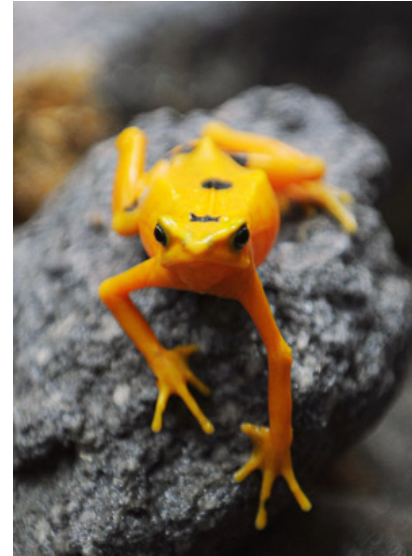
Commercial amenities are growing in El Valle itself, with the completion of the new commercial center, including the El Rey supermarket. This is the first center of its kind here, located just before the market as you enter El Valle. A number of other supermarkets, mini-supermarkets, clothes shops, farm supply shops, insurance brokers, salons, and other services are available in the town.

The Golden Frog And El Nispero

Being in the proverbial cradle of nature, El Valle offers a number of natural attractions such as a serpentarium, operated by knowledgeable staff, if you like that sort of thing. A somewhat more peaceful butterfly farm is also popular. Of course, the canopy tour is available for those of a less sedentary persuasion.

On the face of it, El Nispero could be described as a somewhat down-at-the-heel zoo or perhaps a safari park without the safari, but there are areas within the park that are rather peaceful and beautiful. Yes, there are some rather sad exhibits, such as the tapirs and other animals that are expected to live on stone and concrete flooring despite there being plenty of land to provide half-decent living conditions. On the other hand, the place is well

kept and presents a peaceful setting, albeit busy at the weekends.



Golden frog

The amphibian house at El Nispero is housed in a new building and is home to the amphibian conservation center, EVACC, and several of Panama's endangered species of frog. Funded through an international effort involving Houston Zoo and the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI), the center is involved in critical work to save several species from extinction, especially one of Panama's national symbols, the golden frog.

There are many species of frog and toad in Panama. Many of them have violent colorings and are extremely small in stature, with deadly poisonous secretions on their skin used as a method of self-defense in the wild. Most of the vibrant colored species are popularly classed as poison dart frogs due to indigenous peoples collecting poison from the skin of frog and dipping the tips of their arrows in it. The skin of the golden frog is especially toxic with around 500 "mouse units" of toxin, implying that the skin of one tiny golden frog contains enough toxin to kill 500 mice.



Nispero gardens

But a fungal disease is threatening to wipe out the species at an alarmingly rapid rate. There are now a total of 20 species on the endangered list. Too many to save, according to scientists.



Amphibian center

This frog is in fact a toad and its scientific name, *Atelopus zeteki*, reflects its official discovery in 1933 by James Zetek, one of the original founders of STRI's first-ever stations in the canal, on Barro Colorado Island. The toad is distinct not only because of its striking color; as part of its courtship and its warning system to predators, the frog uses hand signals. It is thought that this method allows the frog to communicate visually as it lives on the banks of rushing streams in its native habitat in the Continental Divide.

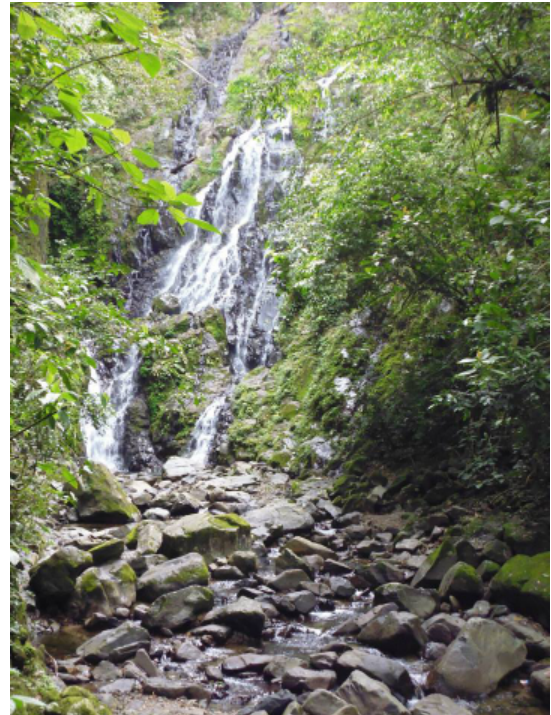
The plight of the golden frog is close to the bone of the Panamanian psyche. As one of their national symbols, every effort must be made to save the golden frog from extinction. Superstitions abound around the animal, perpetuated throughout centuries, even perhaps millennia. When a golden frog dies, legend says it turns to gold. In fact, the toad is one of the earliest pre-Columbian creatures to be fashioned into golden huacas. Golden frogs are said to bring good fortune to those lucky enough to see them. In fact, although not a date to appear on my radar as a national holiday yet, Aug. 14 has been designated as National Golden Frog Day. However, it is bound to appear on yours as a resident of El Valle because the day is marked with a parade through the streets to raise awareness.

At present, there are more than 50 breeding programs within Panama and North America for captive reproduction of the golden frog.

In Summary

It is good to see people getting behind the struggle of a small amphibian and no more so than in El Valle, home of the golden

frog. It is very characteristic of this small mountain community to pull together to solve an issue, and I feel that El Valle's climate, health-promoting environment, and lifestyle is perfectly suited for expats and retirees.



Peacefulness and tranquility

There are parcels of land available on the southern side of the crater rim for as little as US\$12 per square meter, but it's not the same. Once you get over the rim and into the secret world of El Valle itself, an immense feeling of wellbeing washes over you. The pace of life changes measurably, and it seems as though the community spirit reaches out to welcome you in.

If there is one place in Panama you would consider settling outside of the city, but yet close to its amenities, culture, entertainment, and medical facilities, it should be El Valle. **PL**

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.



The Famous Panamanian Chef, Lourdes Fabrega

I could not visit El Valle without including a set meal from one of Panama's most celebrated and dynamic chefs, Lourdes Fabrega. La Casa de Lourdes was founded many years ago and has grown into a legendary Sunday lunch venue for Panamanians and visitors alike. The house has been converted into a charming and well put together boutique hotel, exquisitely furnished and surrounded by delightful mature gardens and wooded grounds. Casa de Lourdes sources only the best of local produce—meat, fish, fowl, and greenery. Start with a light tart of eggplant, tomato, and zucchini, with Gruyère and Manchego cheeses, drizzled with basil oil. Then treat yourself by diving into a pan-seared tournedos with warm watercress and sesame sauce. Round it all off with the Casa's signature Sundae Heart Attack—chocolate hearts bathing in a chocolate sundae swimming in chocolate sauce. True indulgence.

Inspirations Of Lourdes Fabrega

Carne Entomatada

Many Panamanians from the rural areas have developed this dish in a similar way using fresh local ingredients. However, there can be subtle and interesting variations in flavor using the same ingredients.



Carne Entomatada



Pesada de Nance

Ingredients

- 1 lb jerked beef loin steak cut from the tri-tip
- ¼ teaspoon of fresh or dried oregano
- 4 medium sized tomatoes
- 1 medium sized onion
- 2 tablespoons of beef fat or oil
- salt and pepper to taste

Instructions

1. Clean the beef and crush it dry.
2. Add the salt and oregano.
3. Keep the marinated beef in the open air to dry it a little.
4. Roast the beef.
5. Meanwhile, slice and fry the onion until transparent.
6. Sauté the tomatoes. Add the beef to the onion and tomatoes.
7. Cook on low heat for few minutes.
8. Sprinkle with some fresh oregano leaves and serve.

Pesada de Nance

Nance (or, *Byrsonima crassifolia*) is a common tree grown for its fruits in the tropics and subtropics. It is used from Mexico to Peru in a number of desserts and sweet or alcoholic beverages.

Ingredients

- 1 jar of fresh nance
- 6 tablespoons of corn starch
- 6 cups of water
- 2 raspaduras (Blocks of brown cane sugar. It is completely unrefined, being the liquid squeezed straight from the sugarcane, cooked, and solidified)
- pinch of salt
- crumble white salty cheese

Instructions

1. Rinse the nance then put it aside in a glass bowl.
2. Add the 6 cups of water to the bowl and squeeze the nance through your fingers to capture all of the pulp juice.
3. Pass the pulp through a strainer and place the liquid in a pot, adding the corn starch, raspadura, and salt. Cook over a high heat, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon.
4. Meanwhile, prepare 8 to 10 ramequins. Bring the mixture to a boil until transparent and jelly-like. Remove from the heat and slowly pour into each little ramequin. Leave to cool. Crumble and sprinkle the white cheese over before serving.

STREET ART

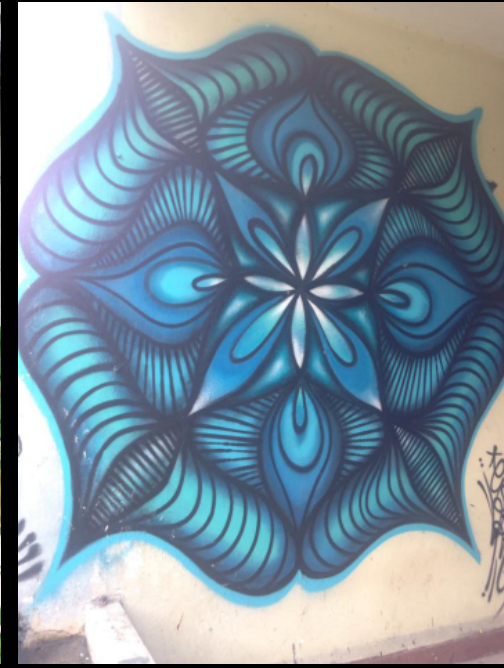
Of Panama City



Whatever your opinion on graffiti (illegal eyesore, or innovative street art?) nearly every city on the world has got it. Panama's rolling metropolis is no different. Taggers and artists paint the streets with their own designs, some with now recognizable styles and tropes, and some whose ambitious works would rival those of well-famed artists working on walls in Manhattan or LA.

The word graffiti actually comes from the Italian *graffito*, simply meaning "a scratch," or *graffiti*, "many scratches," the term referring to the scratches people made on public walls in ancient times, usually to either advertise, promote, discourage, or mock. Today, a can of spray paint goes much farther than your pocketknife would towards defacing walls.

This month, our art-lover's eye was drawn to the riotous colors and creative designs on every *calle* in Panama City...



10



11

Pedro Fábrega Jr.: Back To His Roots In El Valle

When I was last in El Valle, the first thing I did was look up a Panamanian friend, Pedro Fábrega Jr. A town like El Valle is popular with visitors and expats, but it still needs all the help it can get to put it on the national and international tourism map. There are few people more actively at the vanguard of creating a sustainable tourism model for El Valle than Pedro.

Having lived the life of an expat himself in various different countries, including the United States as a child, teenager, and young adult, Pedro returned to his native Panama. Immediately, he felt drawn to his native land and the country he never knew he missed, where his extensive family has interests in everything from real estate to orange groves.

Panama can be like that. It's a small place, but it has a huge impact when you visit. Panamanians are family minded people, and they tend to look from within the castle walls when there's work to be done.

I called in on Pedro for breakfast at the hotel he has helped develop into El Valle's largest hospitality venue. As renovations were being completed on the latest phase of building at Los Mandarin, the building which houses the hotel's main restaurant, Triana, we sat chatting on the terrace of the temporary restaurant in O'Pedro's Irish Pub. I might have been tempted to have a Guinness had it been any later than 8 a.m., but I think the pub's namesake might have raised an eyebrow at bringing my big-city ways to the country.

Where were you born and raised?

We left Panama when I was 3 years old, so I remember very little of that time. Basically, I grew up in other countries...Costa Rica and the United States mainly. My father worked for Xerox and we ended up in Connecticut.

How did you end up back in Panama?

I was schooled in the United States mainly, well, for high school and college. I attended the University of Virginia where I studied communications then majored in philosophy. Both my parents are Panamanian, and I have a big family back here, so it was a natural progression really in the end.

What made you come back and stay?

I had not intended to stay. My intention had been to finish college then get a job and settle in the United States. I came back to visit family and wrap a few things up here then head back to fame and fortune, but best laid plans so often don't go the way we think they will. The family needed some help with some aspects of the business, and I ended up in an orange grove near Penonome, but that's another story.

I enjoyed being back with my family more than I expected and I found very quickly that in the United States you are a number, but here in Panama you are a still a person.

So how did you come to be in El Valle?

Many years ago, my Aunt Lourdes next door founded her restaurant and began amazing Panamanians with her culinary talent. She has run the restaurant ever since and always had a few beautiful guestrooms upstairs. Casa de Lourdes is now famous throughout Panama and very popular with visitors and expats. My uncle is British and my aunt's head chef French, so we already have a little international community here.

I had an offer back in the United States, and an opportunity came up back here, so I thought to myself, "Just stay." Many years ago, my father came to eat at Casa de Lourdes, loved it so much he bought the next door lot and began to plan Los Mandarin. The design of Los Mandarin has always been modular. I always thought it was very clever of the architect—one of Panama's best—so we could build as the demand increased rather than the normal "build it they will come" approach. "Build it when they come" is a better motto for us.

El Valle is popular but hidden. In that way, it has probably managed to preserve its very unique atmosphere. The approach seems to have been good on a number of fronts, certainly from an investment point of view as well as sustainability and environmental. How did the hotel evolve?

The hotel has evolved into a number of buildings, so we've been able to develop it organically. A spa was built first, sixteen rooms followed, and, by the time I came, we had 56 rooms. To cater for that number of rooms we needed some onsite hospitality amenities. Hence, we've included Triana restaurant and O'Pedro's

in the mix, and, with 70 rooms, we're the largest hotel by far in El Valle with resort-style amenities.

We are happy with our current size and we'll see how the new international airport at Rio Hato develops. We are already in talks with them, the tourism department, and nearby beach resorts, so we consolidate our position as the go-to mountain-resort spa town.

What's the lifestyle like?

There are a growing number of expats here—around 50 families permanently resident in the Valley. There is an awful lot to do—not least organized by my aunt and uncle. They love to entertain, and there's always something to do.

You really need a car, golf cart, or at least a bike, but that may be a bridge too far for some as the road surfaces can be interesting in places. The town is somewhat spread out, so it can take some time to walk from place to place.

One thing I would say is that the town is normally very quiet during the week. Everyone is pretty well done by around 10 p.m. All the cabs seem to go to bed after about 8 p.m.

Are you here all the time?

My job is head of sales and revenue management, so I spend half my time here and half in the city or travelling.

Our demographic at the moment is about 80% from the Panamanian resident expat community, 10% international, and 10% local in terms of guests. Many Panamanians have weekend houses, so we do get very busy at the weekends.

Most amenities are here, so actually you would not need to leave unless you chose to. There is even a great private school in Penonome, about 40 minutes away from El Valle, called San Agustin, but that's the closest bilingual international private school apart from Panama City.

Do you ever get back to the United States or miss anything about it?

I do go there but only on business. If I miss anything, it would be the convenience of everything in the United States. It's more of a struggle to get things here, and sometimes there's an extra hoop or two to jump through, but generally it's fine. Life here is a lot less monitored. I prefer to go places I haven't been before. Actually, there are many places to visit in Panama. I like to get something cultural from a holiday or visit to a new place.

What would you say are the most remarkable differences about being in Panama?

There's little formality, particularly in business. If I say I will meet someone at 9 a.m. then it will be at 9 a.m.

The polite Panamanian is the one that bothers to phone 15 minutes late to say he'll be late. I was brought up in a different world. You do what you say you'll do—not say you'll do it when you know full well you won't.

Panamanians can be very touchy. People can be quick to take things personally. I had a situation the other day where I told someone that I would be forced to find another supplier of something or other, having been let down three times over the course of as many weeks. I heard later from one of my managers that he'd been mortally offended that he'd been spoken to like that. I had been very careful not to raise my voice.

We all complain about these things and there are sociocultural reasons for some of it, so one has to have patience and be a little flexible. People here are used to picking a fruit from a tree when hungry. They pick, they eat. No more forward planning required. It is why we all have to call ahead of time to check if a meeting is still on.

How do you find staff out here?

Finding people of a certain level in El Valle is indeed difficult. Most of our manager-level staff is from outside the valley. We do a lot of training—around 45 to 50 people at any time—but 30% of the workforce is transient.

What is your favorite thing about El Valle?

Proximity to mountains, beach, shopping—and all within 30 minutes. It is one of those rare places you can do it all in one day and still be home for dinner.

Because El Valle is a small and fairly close-knit community, security is good. Of course, there is some petty crime, but that is tedious, not traumatic, and it's normally someone everyone knows, so it can be cleared up pretty easily.

What would your best advice be to an expat or retiree considering El Valle?

Learn Spanish. Things are different and you may need it, even if only to keep your wits about you. You will get along better and faster if you try to mold to them, not the other way round. **P**

Panama 101: How To Set Up Your New Home

By Kaitlin Yent

Panama offers expats an Americanized culture and Panama City has many stores and restaurants that you may recognize from back home...but when it comes to buying appliances, quality furniture, high-end bed linens, and a myriad of other home requests, sometimes things aren't so easy to find when you first arrive.

There are no Targets or Wal-Marts in Panama, but there are some close rivals... [Machetazo](#) is a souped-up grocery superstore much like Wal-Mart, Conway is like a more expensive Target, and Do It Center is the closest thing to a Home Depot we've got.

Where do we recommend you go to find the essentials you'll need to make your new house a home?

Get a [Pricesmart membership](#) as soon as you get settled in the city. You may be surprised at what you'll find at this bulk shopping store with two locations in Panama City. There is a revolving selection of furniture, appliances, bed and bathroom linens, electronics, and other household goods.

Appliances

White line appliances are called *linea blanca*. There are several stores that specialize in appliances. All have websites that allow you to browse products and sometimes order products online.

[Raenco](#)
[Casa Gala](#)

[Confort](#)
[Rodelag](#)

Washing machines are not common in Panama, not every store or every location of the store will carry them.

Hardware And Gardening

The closest thing to a one-stop shop for hardware, gardening, cleaning, and outdoor supplies is Do It Center. There is a small selection of furniture and appliances here, but usually not a

large selection. Some locations are much larger and stocked with more variety, so check more than one store before finding your favorite.

Novey is also a general hardware store but is better than Do It Center for home goods. Most stores have a decent selection of kitchen and bathroom goods (including linens) and a small decor section.

Melo is a pet store chain with a large gardening section and Comasa and Cochez are larger-scale building supply stores.

[Do It Center](#)
[Novey](#)
[Melo](#)

[Comasa](#)
[Cochez](#)

Furniture

Good quality, affordable furniture is not easy to find in Panama. Unfortunately, for decent quality goods, you generally have to pay quite a premium. An IKEA is sorely needed here...

[Econos Precios](#)
[Furniture City](#)

[Conway](#)

Antiques And High-End Furniture

[El Atico](#)
[Deja Vu Consignment](#)
[Furniture](#)
[Casablanca](#)
[Antigüedades Yate](#)

[Lifeplus](#)
[Natalia's Antiques and](#)
[Modern Furniture](#)
[BBK](#)
[Roche Bobois](#)

Linens, Kitchen, And Bathroom Goods

There are several department stores covering varying price points that offer selections of towels, linens, kitchen and bathroom supplies, and some furniture and decor. Here is a basic list in order from economy to luxury:

[El Costo](#)
[El Titan](#)
[Aliss](#)

[Conway](#)
[Steven's](#)
[Felix B. Maduro](#)

[Multicentro](#)
[Multiplaza](#)
[Albrook Mall](#)

[Metromall](#)
 Westland Mall

Lighting

[Luz Decor](#)
[limatec](#)

[Lumicentro](#)

Electronics

[Multimax](#)
[Audiofoto](#)

[Panafoto](#)

Second Hand Buying

[Encuentra24.com](#)
[Craigslist.com](#)
[Mundoanuncio.com](#)

[OLX.com](#)
[Facebook Group—Garage Sale PTY](#)

Nearly all of the above stores can be found in these malls in and around Panama City:

If you aren't interested in figuring all this out on your own, look into our [Panama Circle membership](#). This VIP hand-holding service will take you from store to store, translate for you, and help you find anything you need in Panama. **PL**

Kaitlin Yent has been an expat since the age of 8 when she moved with her parents from the East Coast of the United States to Ireland. From Ireland, Kaitlin moved to Paris, where she graduated high school. After completing her university studies in the States, Kaitlin chose to continue her expat adventures in Panama, where she has been living and working full-time for the past three years. A ballroom dancing enthusiast and an avid horse rider, Kaitlin practices Foxtrot, Tango, and competitive show jumping in Panama City.



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

**Long-Term Living In
Panama**

Read all about visas, residency,
and citizenship options in
Panama [here](#).

PASSPORT

Read all about visas, residency,
and citizenship options in
Panama [here](#).

PASSPORT



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Every month, subscribers to the ***Panama Letter*** receive an honest, current, and complete introduction to one of the places we've identified as offering tremendous advantages for the would-be retiree, investor, or part-timer in Panama. These are the locations that should be on your radar, either for your immediate retirement or as places to invest today as part of a longer-term plan in Panama.

Each of these comprehensive reports addresses not only the pros, but also the cons of each destination featured. This is critical if you want to make a smart, informed choice. You'd be hard-pressed to find this information anywhere else in the world.

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- **“What's On In Panama This Month”**...a guide to events and activities in the country this month. Where to go to watch the playoffs...how to plan your Carnaval adventure...who's appearing live in concert this month... and what's playing at Panama City's English-language theater...

Plus much, much more, including:

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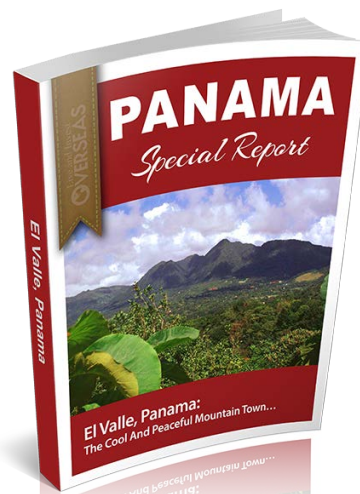
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Additional Two-Year Bonus Report #1: Top 5 Medical Insurance Options for the Expat in Panama (a US\$19.95 value) introduces you to Panama's health care systems, both public and private. This country boasts some of the best health care facilities in region. In fact, Panama is increasingly recognized as a leading medical tourism destination. And the top-notch medical facilities aren't limited to the capital city.

Certainly, you'll find the best services in Panama City, but some smaller towns also offer good public and private hospital and clinic options. This report shows you where, beyond the capital, you can find them...plus it also details your top in-country health insurance options (including policies that could provide all the coverage you need for as little as US\$50 per month...

Additional Two-Year Bonus Report #2: Sunsets, Surfing, And Serenity--Early In On The Azuero Sunset Coast (a US\$24.95 value) is your guide to where the smart money is headed in this country...the "other" Azuero, the only western-facing coast in the country, sitting smack dab in Panama's path of progress (the new president hails from this province and already has is pushing ahead for serious infrastructure improvements in his home region)...

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