

PANAMA

Special Report



Boquete:

Expat Paradise And Adventure-Seeker's Playground

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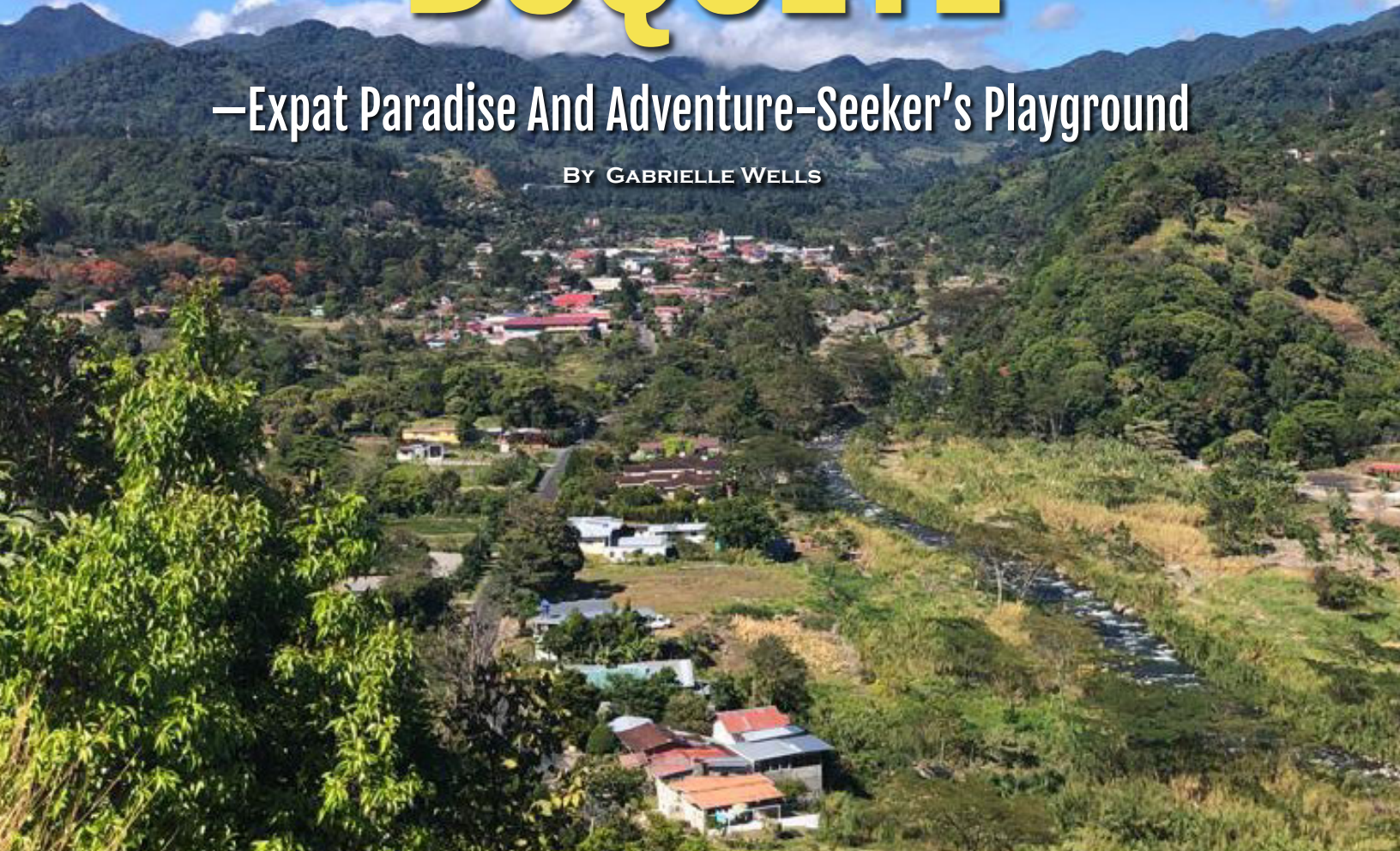


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BOQUETE

—Expat Paradise And Adventure-Seeker's Playground

BY GABRIELLE WELLS



View of Boquete valley

Boquete means “gap” in Spanish—a fitting name for the highland valley nestled within the skirts of the Cordillera Central (Central Mountain Range).

The *cordillera's* highest peak, Volcán Barú (Barú Volcano), towers over Boquete at an altitude of 11,401 feet (3,475 meters) and lies only 12 miles (20 kms) from the town center.

Boquete is a district in Chiriquí Province, home to six townships or *corregimientos*: Bajo Boquete (Lower Boquete), Alto Boquete (Upper Boquete), Caldera,

Jaramillo, Los Naranjos, and Palmira. Bajo Boquete sits at the lowest point in the valley and is the district's center. When people refer to the town of Boquete, they're really talking about Bajo Boquete.

Boquete features accommodations ranging from budget hostels to luxury resorts like Valle Escondido, eateries of every nationality, trendy bars and nightlife locales, medical clinics, massage studios, beauty salons, grocery stores, and every other necessity and convenience you could want nearby.

Boquete offers spectacular views of the volcano on



At 11,401 feet, Volcán Barú is the highest point in Panama

sunny days, the Caldera River flows through town, and the streets are draped with flowers of every species and color. Artisanal markets line the sidewalks, where locals sell their produce and crafts.

This is heaven for a nature enthusiast. Hike the area's numerous trails, observe the birds and other wildlife in Volcán Barú National Park, go ziplining or take a hanging bridge tour, try whitewater rafting or rock climbing, sign up for a Jeep tour to the summit of Volcán Barú, or, if you're feeling up for it, make the trek on foot.

Say goodbye to culture shock—come to Boquete and you'll be welcomed by an enormous and long-established expat community. The district has a population of just over 20,000 and about 5,000 are expats. From events and festivals to meet-ups and clubs, you'll have no difficulty getting and staying connected with your fellow expats. Nearly everyone speaks English, making the transition to life abroad a breeze.

In addition to natural beauty, most expats cite the weather as their motivation for moving to Boquete. Far from the relentless heat and humidity of Panama City, temperatures in Bajo Boquete typically hover in the low- to mid-70s Fahrenheit (20s Celsius) during the day.

The climate and volcanic soil here are ideal for growing all kinds of produce, plants, and flowers. Chiriquí's economy is built on agriculture, and in Boquete you'll find a selection of local fruits and vegetables available year-round. The area is famous for its strawberries, which may be enjoyed on their own, or a local favorite, as *fresas con crema* (strawberries with cream).

Boquete is the heart of coffee country and its many fincas produce some of the best coffee on Earth. Its high slopes are home to the world's most famous (and most expensive) variety, Geisha. In 2021, it sold at auction for over US\$2,500 a pound.

You won't find a better place to savor a cup of coffee while marveling at the breathtaking scenery surrounding you.

Boquete is a land of rainbows, white clouds that cling to the green hillsides, dense jungle, intriguing flora and fauna, and a tranquil atmosphere that permeates every facet of life here. Come visit this charming destination, and I can almost guarantee you'll fall in love...

History

The Ngöbe-Buglé indigenous group first inhabited the Boquete area. Historians believe they settled here over 2,000 years ago, evidenced by petroglyphs. The Ngöbe-Buglé were able to escape persecution during the Spanish colonization due to the isolated nature of the Chiriquí highlands at the time.

In the late 1800s, people began migrating to Boquete from other regions of Panama, as well as from the United States, Germany, France, and Switzerland. The settlers founded farms and coffee plantations. A local told me that a few of the first families to put down roots in Boquete were the Castillo, Landau, Mendez, and Lamastus families. They're still active in the community today.

During the Gold Rush years, fortune-hunters used Boquete as a shortcut to reach California. Impressed with the area, many decided to stay, while others journeyed on to the States, searched for gold, and then returned to settle in Boquete.

As the large farms in Boquete experienced labor shortages and went out of business, the land was gradually converted into coffee *fincas*. The settlers quickly realized that thanks to the valley's microclimates, various varieties of coffee could be grown on the same *finca*.

In the early 1900s, Boquete was considered part of David, but travel between the two areas was difficult, and residents implored the government to make Boquete its own district. Their wish was granted in 1911.

Throughout the first two decades of the 21st century, radical changes have been made in Boquete. The area has seen the arrival of huge groups of expats and tourists and the resulting real estate boom. Significant developments have been made to accommodate these trends.

Cost Of Living

Though the cost of living is rising rapidly in Boquete, it's still generally more affordable than the United States and Canada.

A couple should be able to live comfortably here on a budget of US\$1,300 a month, if they own their home.

You can expect to spend about US\$25 to US\$30 on a meal for two with drinks at a mid-range restaurant. Take away the drinks and it comes to approximately US\$18.

At a local bar you'll pay about US\$2.50 for a domestic beer and US\$4.50 to US\$5 for a craft variety.

If you buy your groceries at either of the two more affordable supermarket chains—Romero and Súper Barú—you'll likely spend US\$150 to US\$200 a month.

Orgánica is a Whole Foods-*esque* chain selling healthy, specialty foods like grass-fed beef. Shopping here will put a bigger dent in your wallet, but you'll have access to a variety of nutritious products.

On the flip side, you can reduce your grocery bill significantly by purchasing locally grown produce. Stopping by the Boquete Tuesday Market to stock up on fresh fruits and vegetables is a convenient way to do this.

Household help is available here, and residents typically hire maids to deep clean their homes once or twice a week. This will set you back about US\$25 a day, totaling US\$200 monthly. You'll pay about US\$300 a month for full-time maid service. Quality varies greatly. Have a look at the Boquete Community Group Facebook page for recommendations.

For my more detailed breakdown of estimated monthly expenses click [here](#).



Look for rainbows after a *bajareque*

Climate

Boquete, like all of Panama, has two seasons: rainy and dry. The rainy season (“winter”) lasts from May to December, and showers are guaranteed every day. The dry season (“summer”) takes place from January to April and is characterized by higher winds and slightly cooler temperatures.

During Boquete’s rainy season, each day follows the same pattern... mornings start bright and sunny, clouds roll in around midday, and afternoons brings rain and thunderstorms.

Bajareque, a light, misty drizzle, is common during the summer, and it’s a good idea to always carry a rain jacket or umbrella with you, no matter the time of year. If you find yourself caught in a *bajareque*, keep your eyes peeled, as they’re often followed by dazzling full rainbows.

Temperatures are usually between 75°F (24°C) during the day and 55°F (13°C) at night and are constant throughout the year. The elevation varies drastically, from 3,000 feet (1,000 meters) to 9,200 feet (2,800 meters), which creates microclimates and means that certain areas will be much colder than others. You can expect that range in Bajo Boquete.

Due to the high altitude, the sun is intense here and you can save yourself from painful sunburns by always applying sunblock and wearing a cap when outside.

Boquete’s climate is mild and severe weather events are rare. Flooding and fires are possibilities, and seismic tremors do occur, although not often. Chiriquí has more seismic activity than the rest of Panama, but the tremors are small and nondestructive.

Panama is well outside the hurricane belt and while the rain from nearby storms may pelt us, that’s the extent of it.

Getting Here

The first and quickest method is a flight from Tocumen International Airport to Enrique Malek International Airport in David. The flight lasts roughly 35 minutes and costs about US\$120 round-trip with Copa Airlines.

Once in David, you can travel to Boquete in a taxi, rental car, or bus. The buses to Boquete leave from Terminales David Panamá (David's main bus terminal) and costs US\$1.75. The trip takes about an hour.

Taxis are risky because they tend to overcharge foreigners and their driving can be unreliable. If you choose this option, proceed with caution, and don't let them charge you more than US\$30.

You can rent a car right outside the airport. In the parking lot there's an office building that houses Budget, Alamo, Hertz, and others. Prices vary depending on the model and brand of the car. The roads in Chiriquí can be rough—full of potholes, speed bumps, and other hazards—you should always drive a larger car with four-wheel drive when venturing outside Panama City.

If driving, you'll follow Route 41 (Vía Boquete) for 28 miles (46 kms). From the airport, use Route 15 (toward David) to access Vía Boquete. It should take about 50 minutes to reach the center of Bajo Boquete.

The drive from Panama City is long, taking about six to seven hours, but the directions couldn't be any easier. Simply cross the Bridge of the Americas and follow the Pan-American Highway until you reach David. Then, follow the previous instructions to arrive in Boquete.

It's also possible to reach Boquete from Panama City via public transportation... although this makes for the longest trip by far. Expect to spend about nine hours on a bus. Your journey begins at the Gran Terminal Nacional de Transporte (National Transportation Terminal) in Albrook. There, you'll buy a bus ticket to David for about US\$10 (for a retiree) or US\$18 (general). When you reach the terminal in David, you'll then transfer to a separate bus to Boquete.



The Flower and Coffee Fair is one of Boquete's most important cultural events

What Makes It Tick

Boquete's economy is strong, as it's built on in-demand industries: agriculture, coffee, and tourism.

The majority of Panama's produce is cultivated in Chiriquí Province, and a large assortment of fruits and vegetables is grown in Boquete. Lettuce, cabbage, potatoes, mushrooms, carrots, papaya, bananas, strawberries, oranges, and endless others thrive here.

Panama produces more than 13 million pounds of coffee each year, and Boquete is the country's coffee center.

Flowers, especially orchids, are grown in great quantities, invigorated by the spring-like climate. When strolling about town, especially during the summer months, you'll feel as though you're

walking through a sea of flowers. No wonder it's known as "The Valley Of The Flowers"...

Tourism is an enormous contributor to the local economy, and Boquete is a top destination for ecotourism. There are resorts, hotels, restaurants, gift shops, bars, and more that cater to tourists from around the globe.

There are various tour and adventure agencies—Boquete Tree Trek, Panama Rock Climbing, Boquete Outdoor Adventures, and Cloud Forest Travel, to name a few—in town that show travelers the best the area has to offer.

Festivals like the Flower and Coffee Fair and the Boquete Jazz and Blues Festival attract both national and international visitors.

With projects on the horizon to bring in more tourists, Boquete's solid economy should grow yet stronger.

Where It's Headed

As pandemic restrictions ease, Boquete is coming to life once again. The festivals and events that were cancelled for the last two years have returned, and the local government is investing in projects that will heighten the appeal of the town to both domestic and foreign tourists.

César Melendez, Panama's first professional rock climber and zipline instructor at Finca El Oasis, tells me that a new park—Parque Central (Central Park)—is in the works and will be put in next to the Boquete Library. It will include a pond and paths for walking and biking, and dogs will be welcome to join the family.

Since early on in the pandemic, the mayor has been fixing the local roads which were previously in rough condition. While I was there, I also saw a construction team repairing a large patch of sidewalk and laying new cement. The mayor is clearly dedicated to making Boquete more accessible for all.

Boquete local and Live and Invest Overseas team member Adriana says that another initiative from the

mayor is the creation of new parking spaces around town. Boquete's popularity means it's common to see cars lined up along the streets, creating congestion and hazards. The project will see several small streets converted into parking areas... the first being the one behind Farmacia Revilla.

Adriana also mentions that Selina—an international chain of hostels with six locations already in Panama—is coming to Boquete and will take over the dilapidated Hotel Fundadores building. While the project hasn't yet been launched, the renovation is scheduled. Selina hostels offer local adventures, work spaces, wellness packages, food, and more. Selina is famous worldwide, and its presence in Boquete will surely bring thousands more visitors to town each year.

As the cost of living rises and retirees begin relocating to more affordable mountain towns like El Valle and Santa Fé, Boquete is experiencing a generational shift. The number of digital nomads residing here has soared since the start of the pandemic and thanks to the area's excellent infrastructure, they can work remotely in a beautiful setting. Young people—Panamanian and foreign—are moving to Boquete, which will continue adapting to accommodate the millennial lifestyle.

Expat Community

Expats account for about 25% of Boquete's population and come from all regions of Europe, the United States, Canada, and various countries in Asia, including China. They're a well-connected group, hosting regular meet-ups and activities.

When moving to Boquete, the first thing you should do is join the Boquete Community Group Facebook page. Here, you can ask questions, request recommendations, discover opportunities, events, and clubs, and stay up-to-date with the foreign community.

Expats gather once or twice weekly at the expat-owned restaurants Sugar & Spice and Big Daddy's. These meet-ups are posted in the Boquete Community Group.

Activities

You'd have to try to be bored in Boquete...

From hiking to festivals, yoga classes to theater, coffee tours to bird watching, rock climbing, ziplining, and whitewater rafting, you could try a new activity every day here and still have plenty left to choose from.

Here are some ideas to get you started...

Go Hiking

Boquete sits at the entrance to Volcán Barú National Park, which encompasses 14,325 hectares and is home to 250 species of birds including the quetzal and toucan, five species of big cats—the jaguar, puma, ocelot, jaguarundi, and margay—sloths, howler monkeys, armadillos, and a myriad of other unique animals.

The park's most famous hike is Sendero Los Quetzales, a 6-mile trail that connects Boquete and the neighboring mountain town, Cerro Punta. This is a moderately challenging hike and you shouldn't go if you have any mobility problems or aren't physically fit. Sendero Los Quetzales winds around the side of the volcano and through the habitat of the resplendent quetzal bird. For the best chance of spotting one, take your binoculars... The quetzal has a green body, red chest, and long tail feathers and is one of the most beautiful birds in the world.

Another favorite is the Lost Waterfalls trail, which takes two to three hours and leads you through thick jungle to a series of three waterfalls. All are massive and powerful, and the last two have pools you can swim in. The first can only be viewed from a platform as it's considered unsafe to get too close. The Lost Waterfalls is also a moderately difficult hike, and there are sections where you must pull yourself upwards using ropes and tree roots. There's a US\$7 entry fee, which is well worth it for this stunning trek.

Volunteering In Boquete

If you're interested in volunteering, there are several organizations you can join. Here are a few popular ones among expats...

Amigos De Animales (Friends Of Animals)

This group is dedicated to reducing the number of unwanted dogs and cats in Boquete through monthly sterilization clinics. They provide spay and neuter services to both pets and street animals in the area and work with several expat volunteer vets.

Casa Esperanza (Hope House)

Casa Esperanza is a nonprofit humanitarian organization fighting child labor in Panama. They have centers across the country and run a school in Boquete for children from low socio-economic backgrounds, to prevent them from falling into underage work.

Buenos Vecinos De Boquete (Good Neighbors Of Boquete)

Buenos Vecinos distributes monthly packages of unperishable food to single mothers, persons with disabilities, the elderly, and other individuals with limited resources throughout the Boquete district.

Fundación Pro-Integración (Handicapped Foundation)

The Boquete chapter's mission statement reads: "We provide handicapped members of our community needed equipment and funds to transport individuals to appointments, and for medications and treatments not covered by Social Security or public health."

The group fundraises to donate hearing aids, wheelchairs, walkers, and other mobility aids to individuals who need them, and they teach the families of persons with disabilities about laws and policies that benefit the handicapped community, as well as how to be more financially independent.

To get in touch with these organizations, click [here](#).

Hiking The Pipeline Trail

I set out on my hiking expedition at 6:45 a.m., as soon as the sun came up. I walked from my Airbnb to Plaza Los Establos and hailed a taxi, and, after several tries to charge me far more than the trip was worth, we settled on a US\$5 fare. *Taxistas* commonly try to charge foreigners US\$10 or higher.

The Pipeline Trail is also in Volcán Barú National Park, and the trailhead is in the Los Naranjos *corregimiento*, on private property. The entrance is marked by this sign:



It took us about 15 minutes to arrive. I got out of the taxi, and, passing the sign, followed a paved path to the large metal gate at the start of the trailhead. I paid the US\$5 entry fee to the owner—she saw me coming from her front porch and walked over to meet me. She wrote down my name and contact information, asking me to please check out with her when I returned from my hike.

This was one of the most enjoyable hikes I've done in a while... usually I favor more intense climbs, but the evenness of the trail gave me the chance to observe



the jungle flora and fauna. The path begins in the open, passing by homes, greenhouses, and rows of crops, and offers unobstructed views of the hills and mountains all around.

After a few minutes, the trail led me to the mouth of the jungle and from there, nearly my entire walk was beneath the leaves and branches of the canopy. I passed by plants with leaves the size of

my body and ancient trees with orchids growing at their tops.

I stopped to marvel at a 1,000-year-old Mexican Elm tree, whose roots alone towered above my head.

The trail follows a creek the whole way and crosses it three times. The first crossing is a solid, arched metal bridge while the second two are more

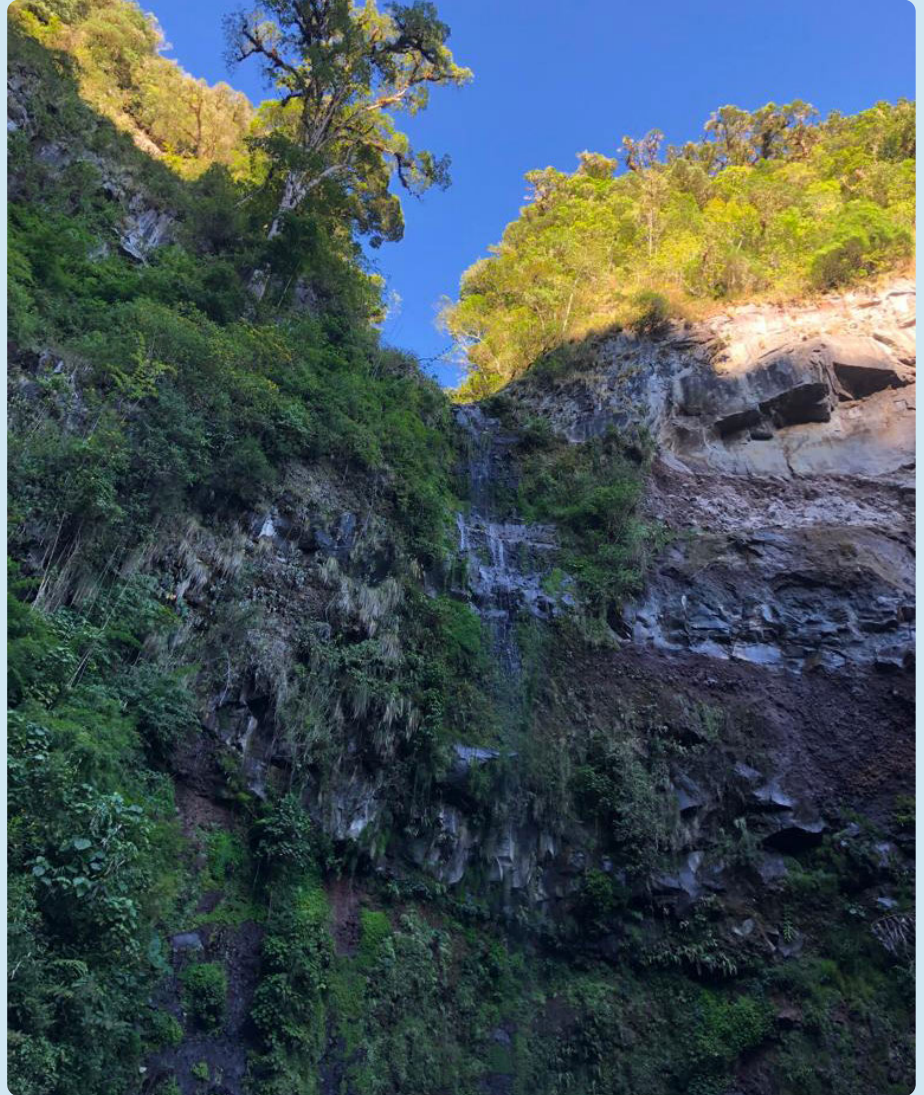
precarious... two pipes bound together and laid across the water with a railing, and a hanging bridge with mesh sides that tipped side to side as I tiptoed its length nervously. These crossings can be slick, so use caution.

About 1/3 of the way in, the trail meets the city's water pipeline and runs beside it the rest of the way. I've heard complaints about it being an eyesore, but I wasn't bothered by it... much of the pipeline is overgrown with moss and I forgot it was even there.

The trail ends in a canyon at the mouth of the creek where two waterfalls—one small and to the left and the other high and directly in front—pour into it.

The hike was quite easy and pleasant, and I'd recommend it for all ages. The last part does require a bit of climbing to reach the waterfalls, and I had to crisscross streams by stepping on rocks, as well.

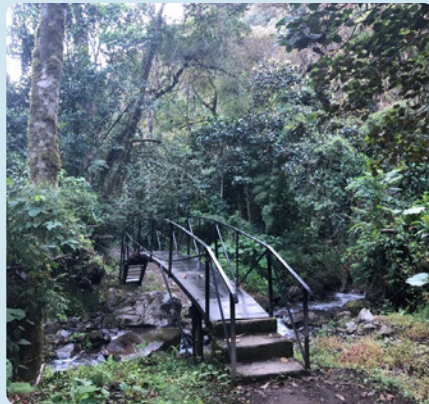
I stopped at several points along the way to take photos and admire my surroundings, and in total the hike only took me about two-and-a-half hours. My favorite part was at 7:15 a.m., when the sun cast a hazy, golden glow over the deep-green leaves and plants and seemingly brought the jungle to life...



A waterfall tumbles from the cliff at the end of the trail



Most of my walk was beneath the jungle canopy



The first water crossing



I'd never seen leaves so big

Visit A Park

Parque El Explorador is a thematic park in Jaramillo owned by 88-year-old Deyanira Miranda and is a must-see next time you're in the area. Deyanira lives on the property and told me that she's spent nearly half her life planting every tree in sight and turning her yard into a garden for all to enjoy.

El Explorador (The Explorer) is impressive, to say the least. There are 5 acres of trails featuring mesmerizing views of coffee plantations and mountains. You'll see hundreds of kinds of flowers in as many colors, streams and ponds, nurseries, eclectic and quirky sculptures, and—Deyanira's specialty—recycled car license plates painted with motivational quotes.

She explained that the sayings—which she collected from literature she's read—are intentionally direct because they're reminders that people need to hear.

I asked Deyanira about her inspiration for creating the park, and she told me that at the time, Boquete didn't have any attractions for spending a day. She wanted to create a place where families could gather and children could be free. She pointed to a sign hung from a vintage sewing machine that read “We're expert menders of broken hearts,” and explained that this is what El Explorador does... it's a space where people leave their troubles behind as they get lost in the beauty of the garden. “They then leave refreshed and like a new person,” she continued.

Sign Up For A Coffee Tour

Several *fincas* offer tours for a modest price, and Finca Lerida and Finca Dos Jefes are two of the most popular choices.

Tours at Finca Lerida cost US\$35 per adult and US\$15 per child and include a visit to the coffee fields, an explanation of the history and particulars of growing coffee, an introduction to coffee production, and a coffee tasting table. You'll learn about the flavor profiles of different strains, how to taste the difference, and they'll teach you to prepare the best cup of coffee possible.

Finca Lerida also provides beautiful accommodations and birdwatching adventures in La Amistad



"The light and the energy of the universe are inside you, spread them to the world..."



"We're expert menders of broken hearts"

International Park where you can observe 500 species of exotic birds.

At Finca Dos Jefes you can choose between a classic coffee tour for US\$30 per person and a tasting tour for US\$35.

According to the website, the classic tour includes “A personal tour guide, explanation of coffee from the cherry to the cup, a guided walk of the farm and facilities, basic coffee tasting, and transportation to and from your hotel in Boquete.”

It says that the tasting tour offers “A barista tour guide, five different coffees for tasting, a guided walk of the

farm and facilities, and transportation to and from your hotel in Boquete.”

You can find more information and sign up for tours on the *fincas*' websites.

Try An Adrenaline-Filled Outdoor Sport

Boquete Tree Trek has terrific ziplining and hanging bridge tours, for US\$65 and US\$30 per person, respectively. You can buy tickets on their website, and tours meet at their office in Plaza Los Establos.

Boquete Outdoor Adventures, also headquartered in Plaza Los Establos, does an exciting whitewater rafting trip for US\$65 per person. Sign up for this tour and your transportation, lunch, drinks, guides, and gear will be included.

Panama Rock Climbing, founded by Luis Serracin, organizes rappel, waterfall rappel, and rock climbing outings throughout Chiriquí province and the rest of the country. I spoke with the team about their most popular tours, and Macho de Monte—a waterfall and canyon near the town of Volcán—is a crowd pleaser. On this adventure you'll be able to attempt rappel, free fall, and wall climbing.

The group gives lessons on the rock climbing wall (Los Ladrillos) outside town in the Los Naranjos area. I'd never tried rock climbing before, and instructor José Pitty had me scaling the beginner wall in less than an hour.

Panama Rock Climbing has pages on Facebook and Instagram.



Plaza Los Establos is home to Boquete Tree Trek and Boquete Outdoor Adventures tour agencies

Take Your Pick Of Cuisine Offerings

The Perfect Pair, on Avenida Central, gets its name from the heavenly combination of coffee and chocolate they've built their reputation on. Come on a Tuesday to enjoy an evening of jazz and wine.

The expat-owned **Sugar & Spice** was voted Business of the Year in Boquete from 2017 to 2019. They have a Tex-Mex inspired menu, featuring dishes like huevos rancheros and breakfast burritos. The brightly-decorated café also serves raved-about sandwiches, omelets, pancakes, and more. I tried the Boquete Ranchero which is a typical huevos rancheros dish, but with a Panamanian twist—the *tostada* is swapped for an *hojaldra*. This is a must-try for lovers of Mexican and Panamanian cuisine.

Inside, they have a full bakery selling loaves of bread, cupcakes, muffins, empanadas, *tres leches*, and a display case full of others. Adriana recommends the lemon poppyseed muffin.

Ngädri ("roots") is a new gourmet Panamanian restaurant that specializes in vegan dishes (they do serve meat, too). Most of their ingredients are sourced within a kilometer. The menu rotates and features dishes artfully prepared in their stone brick oven. Marketing Director Priscila Gómez tells me that her goal for Ngädri is to unite the expat and local communities of Boquete, and the staff regularly hosts events such as art and music exhibitions, chef collaborations, and folkloric events. The restaurant also promotes local artists—Panamanian cultural art decorates the walls and is available for purchase.

Learn more about Priscila's work in the [Expat Interview](#).

Other well-known eateries include **La Casona Mexicana** for Mexican food, **El Valle de Cusco** for Peruvian dishes and ceviche, **Meye Buonore** for Panamanian fare, and **La Pastelería Alemana** for German treats and pastries—the spinach and cheese empanadas are a must-try here!



Hand-crafted chocolates on display at The Perfect Pair



Sugar & Spice's Tex-Mex inspired interior



Ngädri serves gourmet, aesthetically pleasing Panamanian cuisine

Other Activities

Spend the day admiring local talent at a festival—the **Flower and Coffee Fair** and **Boquete Jazz and Blues Festival** are two of the biggest events of the year here.

Wander through the **Boquete Tuesday Market** where you'll find all kinds of locally sourced fruits and vegetables, prepared foods, meats, and artisanal crafts. It's held weekly at the fairgrounds and is an ideal way to get acquainted with the Boquete community.

Spend a few hours at the **Boquete Library** where they hold art exhibits, musical events, and storytelling for children monthly.

Participate in a murder mystery—the Boquete Community Players host interactive performances, which are sometimes based on movies or books and other times are the group's own creations.

Take a yoga, Pilates, or Tai Chi class—local instructors lead sessions at hotels like The Haven, and Ngädri hosts yoga classes.

Join a gym—Istmo Fitness, Gimnasio Boquete, and The Perfect Body are here to get you started.

Language

You could thrive in Boquete without ever learning any Spanish. It's the only destination in Panama where this is the case. The majority of the area's expats are anglophones, and almost everyone working in the service industry—in hotels, restaurants, tour agencies, grocery stores, etc.—speaks English proficiently.

Adriana tells me that the only time it's truly necessary to speak Spanish here is if you're having housework done. Many gardeners, maids, plumbers, and handymen don't speak English.

Of course, it's a good idea to learn at least basic Spanish as a sign of respect for the local culture. They've spent years learning our language... the least we can do is spend some time getting familiar with theirs...

You can learn Spanish through local freelance teachers. Adriana explains that this is the most popular way of doing so in Boquete, and that these instructors can be found on the Boquete Community Group Facebook page. These on-on-one classes are more flexible than group sessions because they can be scheduled to fit your daily routine.



Vibrant flower sculptures at the Flower and Coffee Fair

Health Care

You'll find a few public and private health clinics in town. The preferred choice among expats is the Clínica Especializada del Dr. Chen, which is private.

When I was in Boquete recently, I had an allergic reaction to coffee fly bites and was driven by a local contact to the Clínica Especializada. There was no wait at all, and they immediately took me to a private room and gave me an antihistamine through an IV. Within an hour, my symptoms were gone and I was on my way out the door.

I was impressed with the high-quality care I received and the warm bedside manner of both Dr. Gomez and the nurse. I spoke with two other expats who also expressed satisfaction with the level of care they had received at the clinic, telling me that the Clínica Especializada is their preferred health care facility in town.

A general appointment at a private clinic costs between US\$20 and US\$50.

There's a public MINSA (Ministry of Health) clinic across from the Romero supermarket, which charges about US\$10 for a general appointment. While private and public facilities typically have the same doctors, the quality of care isn't equal. If you go to a public facility, go as soon as they open—if not, you may have to wait in line outside the doors for hours, as it's first come-first served.

César tells me that Boquete's clinics are reliable for regular check-ups, minor emergencies and wounds, suturing, and other conditions that don't require surgery or specialized care. For serious emergencies, specialized care, and treatments for any underlying or preexisting conditions, seek care in David.

David is home to two private hospitals: Hospital Chiriquí and Centro Médico Mae Lewis. The public regional hospital is also here. The care at the two private hospitals is excellent.

You can choose from a handful of public and private dentists, too. You'll pay US\$20 to US\$25 for a cleaning at a private clinic and no more than US\$40 for a filling or other specialized treatment. At a public facility, that cost is US\$8 to US\$10 for a cleaning and no more than US\$15 for a filling or any other operation you may need.

César recommends Dr. Luz Barria-Cruz as a private dentist... her office, Clínica Dental Luz, is next to the Al Punto restaurant on Avenida Porras.

He also spoke highly of Dr. Dagmar Ríos at the Odonto-Smile Clinic in Alto Boquete.

The MINSA public clinic also offers dental services and has different dentists on rotation, meaning you can choose the one you prefer. Once again, expect long lines and wait times.

Boquete's doctors and dentists speak English proficiently, and most are fluent—meaning you'll feel in control of your health care. You have about a 50-50 chance of getting a nurse who speaks English, so keep Google Translate handy.

Pharmacies include Revilla, MEDDEX, El Javillo, and Farma Health.

I've included a list of health care providers and their contact information in the [Rolodex](#).

Families And Schools

More and more families with small children are moving to Boquete, and it's not hard to understand why. With its fresh and natural produce, closeness to nature, lack of pollution, open spaces to run and play outdoors, a friendly small town attitude, and nurturing environment, I can't think of a better place for a kid to grow up...

Boquete's proximity to David means necessary resources are only a 40-minute drive away. Chiriquí's capital boasts exceptional private, bilingual international schools: Cambridge Bilingual School, American School of Panama, and Anglo Panameño International School, among others.

School buses run between both cities—it couldn't be any easier to live in Boquete and send your kids to school in David.

There's also an international school in Alto Boquete—International Academy Boquete—which offers bilingual instruction for elementary through high school students. They also have a campus in David.

You'll find a few public schools throughout the Boquete district, as well.

The Property Market

I sat down with Laretta Bonfiglio, a realtor with Casa Solution, to discuss the market for buyers, renters, and sellers in Boquete.

She tells me that the market is currently the hottest she's ever seen... Boquete is undergoing a real estate boom that started in late 2020 when the David airport reopened. Casa Solution's biggest year yet was 2021, she says.

Laretta says that Boquete has been "rediscovered" nationally, and that as more people flock to Boquete from Panama City, the town is quickly running out of inventory. "Now is the time to buy, while there's still inventory and ideal-sized homes..."

The real estate market is on the rise, and if your dream is to own a home here, you might have only a few years left to make your move...

She suggests that buyers look in the areas of Volcancito, Jaramillo, Alto Quel, Bajo Mono, and Almira as they offer more land, greenhouses, and space between lots.

Keep in mind that these are small communities outside of town... if you don't have a car, life in Bajo Boquete will be a lot easier.

Once you've located your ideal home, the purchase process follows these steps:

1. Make a serious offer (your realtor will help you here, but 10% lower than the asking price is a good starting point).

2. The realtor takes the offer to the seller, they negotiate, and an offer is made.

3. A contract to purchase (*contrato de compra-venta*) is drafted and normally includes an inspection of the property and a re-survey if not performed in the last 10 years. Both buyer and seller are represented by attorneys.

4. Once approved by all parties, the contract is signed and the seller must make a 10% non-refundable down payment (if there's a legal problem with the property the deposit is declared null and void).

5. The buyer's attorney researches the property to be sure taxes and other legal matters are up-to-date.

6. If everything is correct, closing normally takes place in 30 to 60 days.

In Panama, no one is required to be present at the signing. If the buyer isn't in-country, the contract can either be e-signed, or a limited POA can be authorized to allow the buyer's attorney to sign in their absence.

Escrow accounts do exist in Panama, but due to sanctions placed on the country, many attorneys don't have one. Another option is to send funds from your bank account in the States to your Panamanian account. Your attorney will need to send the contract to the Panamanian bank to justify the transaction.

Laretta says it's "absolutely imperative" that you hire an attorney—a reputable one. You should gather references for a real estate law attorney who is bilingual and from a creditable real estate agency. If they're not bilingual, you'll need to also hire an interpreter... but this will cost more time and money.

Throughout this process, the bulk of the responsibility falls on the seller who pays 11% of the sale price to the realtor's commission, lawyer fees, and public registry fees. This figure includes the 5% transfer tax. The buyer only pays documentation and lawyer fees.

Take a look at my [Property Picks](#) to view current properties for sale in Boquete.

Rental Market

Lauretta tells me that the cost of a two-bedroom, 80-square-meter apartment in Bajo Boquete typically runs about US\$1,500 to US\$2,000 a month. These are usually furnished spaces, as unfurnished apartments are uncommon here.

Contracts run from six months to a year, and the lessee pays the first and last months and a security deposit upon signing.

If you rent out a property, you might consider paying a property manager for about 10% of the monthly rent amount. This is an estimate, though, and they charge more depending on the services they carry out. Property managers generally check to be sure rent, electric, and utility bills have been paid, and perform walk-throughs of the home or apartment to be sure everything's in proper condition.

Income taxes are required on rental properties, and you must declare rental income when you file your taxes.

You must also pay a value added tax of 7% of the gross rent amount.

Boquete's rental market tends to be equally landlord- and tenant-friendly, and laws exist to protect both groups. Penalties are charged for exiting a contract early, and tenants can be evicted under certain circumstances. However, an unjustified eviction results in a fee for the landlord.

To get an idea of what Boquete's rental market has to offer, click [here](#).

Doing Business

I asked Lauretta where investors should be looking to buy in Boquete. She says that there's great potential in land where they can build to replenish inventory for sale. There are currently high returns on resales, she tells me.

No restrictions exist for foreign buyers, Lauretta explains, and you don't even need a visa... just money.

We discussed the need for more affordable condos, villas, and duplexes in the district to

accommodate visitors, and she says that building such accommodations would be a profitable endeavor for an investor.

There is a three-story limit for all buildings in Boquete, which you need to be aware of if you plan on building here.

Jobs are increasingly hard to come by, and many Boquete residents are turning to entrepreneurship. Any business or service that caters to tourists—restaurants, bars, tour agencies, Airbnbs, cabin rentals, etc.—is a safe bet.

You could also teach freelance classes... yoga and Spanish seem to be two popular options here... but the possibilities are endless... gardening, health and wellness, cooking, musical instruments, arts, or any other area you have expertise in. You can advertise your services on the Boquete Community Group page.

Boquete's infrastructure is outstanding, and you won't find a better location in Panama for remote work. Internet quality is excellent in town, and while certain areas of the district don't have wires or towers, these are places where expats don't usually live or work.

You have a few options for phone plans, but Tigo gets the best range here. You can buy a SIM card at the Tigo store on Calle 2a Sur. Data can be recharged with prepaid cards that are available at most supermarkets and convenience stores, by recharging directly from your online Panamanian bank account, or with a monthly data plan.

The satellite TV company Sky offers plans for both your home and business, and is the preferred provider in Panama's rural areas.

You can pay all bills—phone, internet, TV, electricity, water, etc.—from your online banking account.

Banco General, Banco Nacional, Global Bank, Caja de Ahorros, and Multibank all have offices here, and there's a Banistmo in David.

To apply for a business license, you'll need to go to the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (Ministerio de Comercio e Industrias or MICI) in David.

You'll find English-speaking accountants, lawyers, and business services in Boquete.

Disabled Access

Bajo Boquete is the most walkable destination in Panama. It's certainly more pedestrian-friendly than the city.

Drivers here yield to pedestrians and drive slower and more courteously than in other areas.

Sidewalks tend to be unreliable—in some parts of town they're smooth and well-paved while in others they're nonexistent or crumbling. It appears that the government is working to improve the walkways.

Thanks to cautious drivers, residents feel safe walking in areas without proper sidewalks.

That said, getting around in Boquete would be a challenge for someone with a disability that affects their movement. Sidewalks and buildings aren't conducive to wheelchairs or walkers, and ramps and elevators are uncommon... I didn't see any, in fact.

Public transportation in town consists of *colectivos* (small buses), which are cramped and have no space or access for a wheelchair or walker.

If you have a physical disability, your best bet here is to own a car and to either drive or have someone else drive you.

Safety

Everyone I spoke to describes Boquete as peaceful and safe. Violent crime is essentially unheard of, and offenses are limited to random petty thefts.

Adriana tells me that break-ins do happen occasionally to both expats and locals, and that the rates of these crimes have increased since the start of the pandemic. She says that the government has advised residents to practice extra caution.

When in Boquete, use the same precautions you would anywhere... don't leave your house unlocked, keep valuables out of sight, don't walk with your cell phone in your hand or back pocket, and stay alert and aware.

When hiking, choose trails that are clearly marked and don't stray from the trail—it's easy to get lost in the jungle and this poses a real danger. It's best to always take another person with you.

The El Pianista trail should be avoided. A taxi driver told me that two young women from The Netherlands disappeared while hiking it in 2014. He explained that it was never intended to be a hiking trail, and it's literally a path through the jungle and mountains with no definite end. It's unmarked and way too easy to get lost.



Boquete is one of Panama's most walkable towns, thanks to polite drivers



Everyone I talked with described Boquete as *tranquilo* (calm)

LGBTQ Community

In Panama, LGBTQ relationships aren't legally recognized and same sex marriage isn't legal. Little progress has been made regarding the acceptance of and respect toward the community.

Although it's no longer a crime, there are many groups who reject the LGBTQ community, with transgender individuals facing the most discrimination.

Hopefully in the near future Panama will be one of the several Latin American countries recognizing the rights of LGBTQ individuals and same-sex couples.

That said, Boquete tends to be more open-minded than other destinations in Panama. I was told by locals that while some hold prejudiced opinions, their opposition to the LGBTQ movement hasn't resulted in harassment or violence here. The attitude here seems to be "live and let live."

If you're a member of the community and plan to visit other rural areas in Panama, stay aware and use more caution.

Inconveniences And Annoyances

The residents of Boquete love their little town, and I haven't heard many complaints about it.

I did hear quite a few comments about the rising cost of living, which is actually driving retirees to other mountain havens in Panama. The number of expats moving to the district has caused prices to skyrocket.

Lauretta tells me that real estate inventory is running out, and high demand and little supply mean that buyers will have to pay top dollar for properties.

Like in any small town, gossip travels fast and there's a lack of privacy. Someone will always know your business and if you appreciate anonymity, this could amount to discomfort.

There are high winds throughout the summer season and power outages aren't uncommon. Be prepared and buy a flashlight and lanterns for your home.

Adriana made a point that I feel is tremendously important: When you come to Boquete, remember that you're still in Panama.



It's easy to forget this when you're surrounded by fellow expats and English is spoken everywhere you go. However, we need to recognize and respect the local culture and norms. You're going to experience longer waits at the grocery store and the bank, and the *mañana* attitude is alive and well.

Don't try to bring North America with you to Panama, and instead embrace a different way of living... Clinging to your old lifestyle is a recipe for culture shock and stress.

Who Wouldn't Do Well Here

If you're searching for a budget destination, Boquete no longer fits that description—you're better off looking a little higher up in the Tierras Altas district.

Boquete also isn't ideal if you enjoy the variety and fast-paced lifestyle of the city. If you're looking for a wide variety of nightlife opportunities, you won't find that here.

To state the obvious, if you want an authentic cultural immersion experience, your best bet is to find a place with less expats.

Who Would Thrive Here

Boquete is a paradise for outdoor enthusiasts, nature lovers, and anyone looking for an adventure-filled lifestyle with new activities to try each day.

Gardeners and those interested in agriculture will find satisfaction in the climate and rich, nutrient-filled soil.

The climate here is perfect for those who dislike extreme heat, cold, and humidity, and who enjoy mild weather.

Digital nomads will be impressed with the Wi-Fi and infrastructure quality.

The tourism industry here provides endless opportunities for the investor and entrepreneur.

This is a safe, peaceful, healthy, and enriching place for families with children.

There's no better place in the world for a coffee connoisseur.

Those who appreciate the familiarity and support of a large expat community will feel comfortable and welcomed here.

There's something for everyone and every interest in Boquete. 🌸



About The Author

Gabrielle Wells graduated from university in May 2021 and relocated to Panama in June. She has traveled extensively throughout Mexico, Ecuador, and Panama, and always planned to one day live abroad. Many of her travels have been solo, and this has given her the chance to fully immerse herself in each place she has visited. She visited Panama for the first time in 2018 and fell in love with its natural beauty and local culture. On the weekends she enjoys volunteering, spending time at the beach, exploring Panama's old town, Casco Viejo, and hiking in the breathtaking natural parks outside the city.



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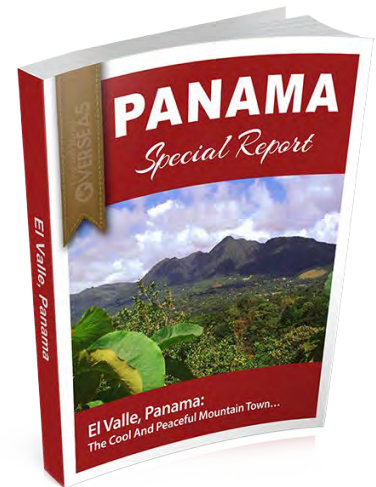
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