

PANAMA

Special Report



Churches Of Panama:

A Look At Panama's Awe-Inspiring Churches...



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PANAMA
SPECIAL REPORT

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LETTER

Volume 8, Issue 3

INSIDE

From The Desk Of Kathleen Peddicord:
Continued Good News From The Hub Of The Americas... p. 3

Reader Questions Answered: "Is David City Safe?"; A Bank Tip For Panamanian CDs; Can You Recommend A Valuator?; "What's The Weather Like On Azuero?"; How To Qualify For A Friendly Nations Visa; Moving To Panama With A Criminal Record; And More Of Your Letters Answered... p. 5

Photospread: Corpus Christi In La Villa De Los Santos... p. 17

Restaurant Review: Best Places To Eat Out On Sunday In Panama City... p. 21

Panama 101: Staying Safe in Panama—Slips And Falls And How To Avoid Them... p. 24

¿Cómo Se Dice?: From Decadence To Deprivation—Panama Turns The Page From Carnival To Lent... p. 26

Expat Interview: "Shifting Gears To Comfort Zone"... p. 27

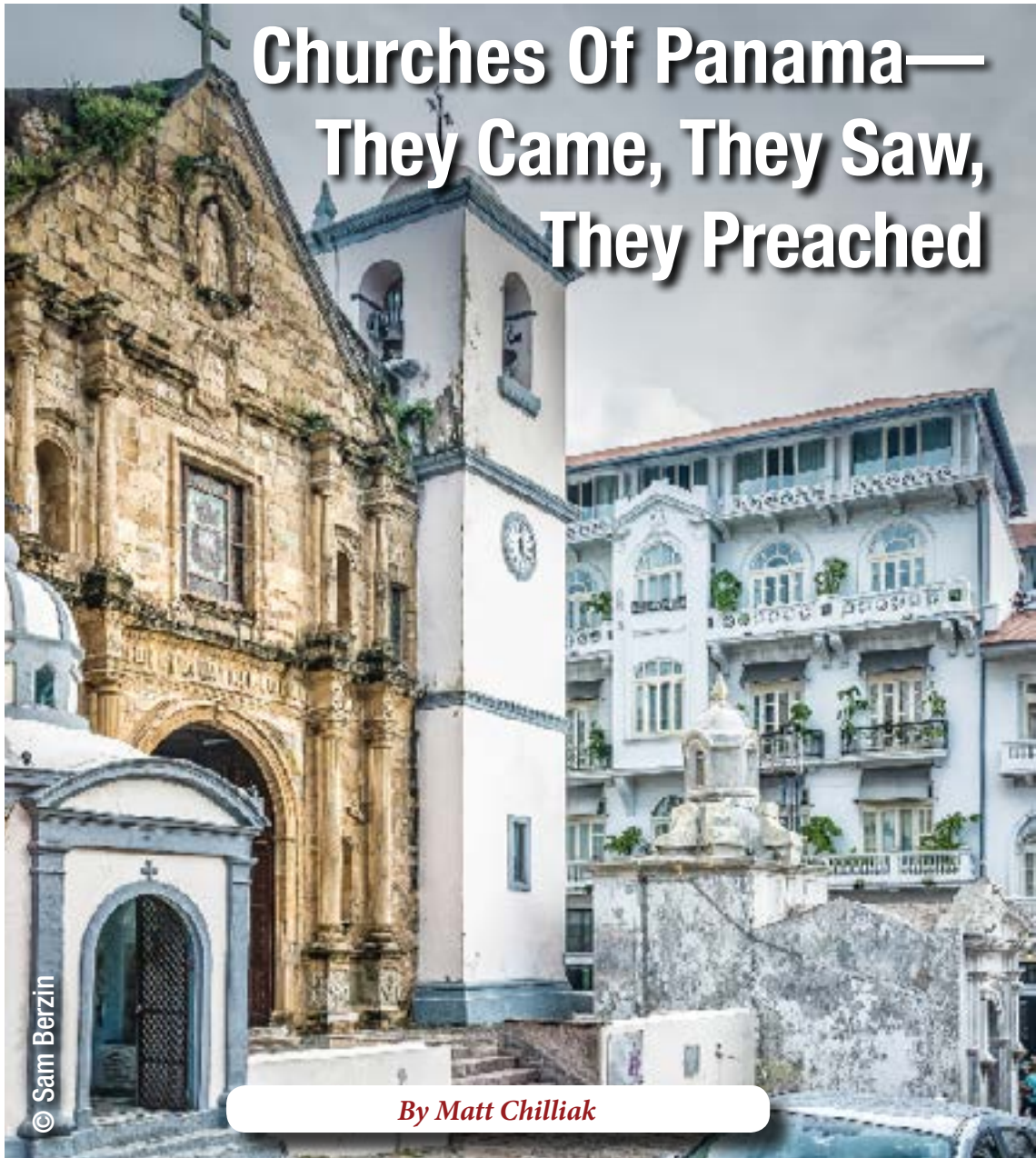
Property Picks: Pre-Construction Plays Across Panama... p. 29

Out And About In March: Access Panama Tours; Congos And Diablos Of Portobelo Festival; Semana Santa; Justin Bieber's Purpose World Tour; And More... p. 36

In The Headlines: Amador Gets A New Marina; Panama Goes Organic; Copa Loses On Bid To Partner With Avianca; Copa Is The Second Most Punctual Airline In World!; Metro Expansion Plans Continues; New Public And Private Partnerships To Promote Tourism; Superintendency Takes Over FPB Bank; Panama's Odebrecht Probe And Political Fallout Continues... p. 41

March 2017

Churches Of Panama— They Came, They Saw, They Preached



By Matt Chilliak

Panama is as Catholic a country as they come in Latin America. In a 2014 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, 70% of respondents identified as Catholic, just off the average of 69% for the whole of Latin America. The percent of people that identify as Protestant is also on par for the rest of the region, at 19%.

Continued on page 7...

...Continued from page 1

The influence of the Catholic Church in Panama dates back to the first European invaders, accompanied by Franciscan missionaries in the early 16th century. In 1513, they established the Diocese of Santa María de La Antigua del Darién, the first established on the mainland of the New World. In 1520, the diocese moved from its location in present-day Colombia to Panama City.

The mission to convert the native populace was as violent as it was successful, though many of the converted natives retained and infused traditional practices into their adopted Catholic faith. A similar situation developed when African slaves were forced to adopt Catholicism but still retained some of their own traditions, developing into modern forms of Santería and Voodoo, still practiced in parts of Panama today. Despite these unorthodox intricacies, the Catholic dominance still prevailed. In true colonial fashion, the missionaries built immaculately designed houses of worship not only for prayer but also as a reminder of their wealth and power.

Today, the influence of the Catholic Church embeds itself into everyday life in Panama. During the 2014 national election, they displayed this influence with no remorse. The three major-party presidential candidates signed a pact promoted by religious leaders, saying that, if elected, they wouldn't pass equal marriage rights for same-sex couples. Additionally, during the capital city's annual gay pride parade, puritan protesters show up in full force. Even Halloween zombie walks—events where participants dress in zombie costumes and stagger as a group through the streets—receive harsh reprimands from some of the country's staunchly conservative clergymen.

There's no reason to fret about the omnipresence of religious influence in Panama, though. It's not all doom and gloom, hellfire and brimstone. Many of Panama's churches serve as centers for charitable, community-building endeavors, as well as for public holidays and celebrations. Furthermore, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and countless other belief systems coexist harmoniously with the Catholic majority.

For those who aren't as religiously inclined or don't profess the same oaths of faith, these churches are still a magnificent sight to behold. It doesn't take a leap of faith to witness the architectural magnificence of many of them, especially those from the 17th,

18th, and 19th centuries, with the intrinsic stained-glass scenes, towering steeples, and centuries-old stonework. And while some aren't miraculous aesthetically, the historical stories and significance are captivating nonetheless.

The website for the archdiocese of the province of Panama lists some 100 Catholic parishes in the province of Panama alone, with many more found throughout the rest of the country. Many of the grandest churches are located in the colonial center of Panama City, Casco Viejo, as it was the center of commerce and religion for the early European invaders. Beyond the old city walls are other marvels, too—some older by more than a century, others built as recent as mid-20th century. This report takes a look at some of these churches and the architectural, historical, and other interesting tidbits associated with them.

Catedral Metropolitana

– Casco Viejo, Panama City



Catedral Metropolitana is located in Plaza de la Independencia, the heart of the colonial-era Panama. The plaza has been present throughout important stages of the nation's development, serving as the site of declarations of independence, first from Spain in 1821 and then from Colombia in 1903. The plaza was also a site for entertainment, hosting bullfighting until 1887. Today, the plaza is busy with tourists, pop-up markets, and musicians.

The cathedral's construction began in 1688 and took more than a century to complete (the front façade from 1688 to 1741, the

rest of the building until 1762, and the two towers until 1796). The first Panamanian-born bishop of Panama, Francisco Javier de Luna Victoria, son of a freed slave, is credited with personally funding much of the construction. He wouldn't get to see the final product of his contributions, as he would leave to Peru in the 1750s and pass away in 1777.

With towers reaching 118 feet tall, the cathedral stood as one of the largest in the Americas when it was built. The building still impresses today, with its weathered stone façade, massive wooden doors, and marble altar. The statues decorating the front of the cathedral are made of wood, an uncommon feature that amplifies in its worn features. The towers are encrusted with mother of pearl from the Pearl Islands and hold the bells from the cathedral Henry Morgan and his pirate crew ransacked in the fall of Panama City's original location in 1671.

The cathedral held the funeral ceremony for the beloved national hero General Omar Torrijos, who led the country from 1968 until his untimely death in a plane crash in 1981. In 1990, President Guillermo Endara went on hunger strike in the cathedral for two weeks, protesting the lack of U.S. financial support for redevelopment following the 1989 U.S. military invasion.

After renovations in 2003, the cathedral reopened to the public and has since become a favorite for Sunday worshippers. The site is a favorite among tourists, too, who can enjoy the historic items on display in the front foyer. Recently, the government announced funds for more renovations and rehabilitation for this site.

Iglesia De Santo Domingo

– Casco Viejo, Panama City

After the fall of the original Panama City to pirates, the Dominican friars set out building Iglesia de Santo Domingo and, perhaps unbeknownst to them at the time, played a role in the decision to build the Panama Canal.

The now ravaged church is nothing but a shell of stone and rubble, destroyed by fire in 1756. However, while all the church's wood material burned to ash, the building's flat stone arch in the interior survived. Spanning almost 50 feet across with no supporting beams or pillars, the practically flat arch was said to



be something of an engineering marvel and proof of a lack of serious seismic activity in Panama, bolstering the case that this was the place for an interoceanic canal to be built. (Ironically, an earthquake would be felt in 1882, though the arch would survive that, too.)

The church hosted a bakery, carpentry shop, and public toilets throughout the years, all while the flat arch remained in place. Eventually, the flat arch succumbed to time and gravity and collapsed in November 2003, more than 300 years after being built.

A 1912 traveler's guide to Panama mentions future conversion of the building into a "modern apartment house" that never materialized. Future plans for the site now include a cultural and artistic presentation space, similar to the ruins of the original city at Panama Viejo. Next to the church ruins is the Museum of Colonial Religious Art, which houses artifacts from the 16th and 17th century that survived the 1671 plundering.

Iglesia De San José – Casco Viejo, Panama City

Built after the fall of Panama City in 1671, Iglesia de San José contains one of the most treasured stories related to the attack on the city's former site: that of its golden altar.

The story goes that a local priest, upon learning of the imminent invasion by Henry Morgan and his gang, took it upon himself to disguise the golden altar by painting it black with a mixture of mud and an oil-like substance. When Morgan arrived to the church and questioned the priest on the whereabouts of the altar, the priest convinced him that previous pirates had already taken it.

The clever priest took his ruse even further and convinced Morgan to donate to its "replacement," leading the infamous buccaneer to remark that the priest was perhaps more of a pirate than he. The altar was saved, moved to the new city, and forgotten about until many years later, when the black coating began to fade and chip away. In 1915, a complete restoration returned the altar to its former glory.

This story is part legend and should be regarded with a hint of skepticism. Critics point out that the style of the altar is from the 18th century rather than the 17th.

Aside from checking out this legendary piece of Panamanian history, visitors can admire the church's stained-glass windows depicting images of various saints.

Iglesia De La Compañía De Jesus – Casco Viejo, Panama City

After establishing themselves in Panama in the 16th century, the history of the Jesuits and their church was one of repeated trial and tribulation.

Having had their original church destroyed with the rest of the city in 1671, the Jesuits moved to the city's new location and established a church. But that church would also be destroyed, this time by a fire in 1737. The reconstructed building would again be damaged by fire in 1781, and then once more by an earthquake in 1882.

Over the years, the Jesuits hosted a school and later the Royal Pontifical University of San Javier, which was the first university on the Isthmus. They were driven out of the country by Spanish decree in 1767, leaving the building vacant for many years after. In 1948, the university reopened at a different location, behind Iglesia de San Francisco de Asís.

The crumbling ruins of the Jesuit church were later used as tenement housing and then as a stable for horses and cows in the 20th century. The ruins were restored in 1983, but it still remains as only a shell of a building.

Iglesia De San Francisco de Asís – Casco Viejo, Panama City



Located at Plaza Simon Bolivar next to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade building and the National Theater and overlooking the waterfront, Iglesia de San Francisco de Asís is steeped in national history.

Built in the 1670s, the church is one of Panama City's oldest. It provided housing for a battalion during the independence struggle with Spain. In 1826, the church and plaza hosted the Panama Congress. The congress, organized by revered Venezuelan military and political leader "El Libertador" Simón Bolívar, was an attempt to form a union of American nations. The goal of the Panama Congress was to develop unified policy toward Spain, as well as to prevent U.S. military incursion into Latin America. This was the first attempt at a Pan-American union, with delegations arriving from Peru, Gran Colombia, the United Provinces of Central America, and Mexico. An invitation was sent to the United States, but they showed up late and missed out on any trade-deal benefits, which Great Britain, there as an observer-state, thus capitalized on.

In its later years, the church would serve as a hospital, school, and general meeting spot, but eventually fell into disrepair. The church underwent exterior and interior restorations during the past two decades, finally reopening to the public in March. Visitors can now admire the tall windows, archways, and stained glass from within this fantastic piece of history.

Iglesia De La Merced – Casco Viejo, Panama City



Another church with a storied past that goes back to the looting of Panama City's original site is Iglesia de la Merced. One of Casco Viejo's oldest buildings, the church's baroque façade was reconstructed in 1680 using stones, moved hand by hand by slaves, from its former location in the city's original, destroyed location.

The church was located at the entry of the wall that once surrounded Casco Viejo, making it one of the first things seen upon entering the city. It endured multiple fires in the 18th century and the earthquake in 1882, but eventually a fire in 1963 destroyed much of the original interior.

The church features its historic stone front with two simple towers on each side on the outside, and exposed wooden ceilings and statues of religious figures inside. One statue is of Saint María de Cervelló, a 13th century figure invoked for her protection against shipwrecks, with a ship clutched in her arms. The church is home to a painting of the Virgin de la Merced that dates back to 1600.

At one point in the city's early history, Iglesia de la Merced housed all of the city's birth and baptism records. Today, the church has a museum that still displays some records, such as those for the marriage of former President Manuel Amador Guerrero, the first president of Panama after declaration of independence from Colombia; the baptism of General Tomás Herrera, president of Panama during its first attempt at independence in the 1840s; the marriage of Panama's national poet, Ricardo Miró; the 1796 Act of Consecration of the Metropolitan Cathedral of the New Panama; and a replica of the 1904 Constitution of the Republic of Panama.

Iglesia De San Felipe De Neri – Casco Viejo, Panama City

Iglesia de San Felipe de Neri was inaugurated in 1688 and throughout the years housed a school, seminary, and shelters for the homeless and elderly. A fire destroyed the original interior woodwork in 1756, which was later restored. Further renovations took place in 1913 and unearthed numerous tombstones under the building.

The church was built at a time when pirate invasions were still a concern, the original city's ransacking still fresh on everyone's minds. An account from Wolfred Nelson, printed in 1891, notes, "When closed from within, persons in the church could stand a siege very successfully," and that the walls were made 5 feet thick and the windows placed 25 feet above the ground for similar defense reasons.

The renovations of the church covered over its former exterior architectural glory. And while the church isn't much to look at from the outside today, the interior is bright and beautiful, with a winding staircase, delicately decorated columns, and tall arched ceilings.

Iglesia De Santa Ana

– Casco Viejo, Panama City

Technically located just outside Casco Viejo's former city walls, Iglesia de Santa Ana was originally intended for the poorer classes living in the Santa Ana suburb. Being located outside of the city wall proved difficult for many, as the gate to the city closed every evening until the next day. If someone were late coming or going from the city, they'd be out of luck.

Consecrated in 1764, the church was an extension of a hermitage established in 1678. The Spanish granted knighthood to the man who put up much of the funds for the church's construction. The man, known as the Count of Santa Ana, is honored with an effigy and portrait displayed in the church.

The church was rebuilt after a fire in 1854 and received other renovations during the 20th century. In 1882, the earthquake brought down the church's tower, destroying some nearby shack houses.

Plaza Santa Ana, where the church is located, served as a bullfighting ring in the mid-19th century and became a park by the century's end. As the city boomed and expanded during the Gold Rush, the plaza bustled with economic activity. Economics turned to politics in the 20th century, and the plaza became a hotspot for rallies and protests. Today, the plaza is still a busy spot along the popular shopping strip Avenida Central.

Iglesia Del Carmen – El Cangrejo, Panama City

For all the grandeur of Panama City's colonial-era churches in Casco Viejo, the grandest of the city's churches is one of its newest... yet oldest looking.

The unique, ornate neo-Gothic design of Iglesia del Carmen makes it stand out, drawing thousands of visitors every year. The detailed, towering spires reach high in the sky and are said to



represent extended hands embracing and sending prayers up to God. In the church's interior, a distinctive, beautifully painted Byzantine-style altar stands just as tall.

Construction of the church began in 1947, with the towers not complete until 1955. The bells weren't added until much later, as local hotels had reservations about noise. The bells first rang for mass on Dec. 31, 1999, which coincidentally was the same day that the United States handed control of the Panama Canal to Panama. Today, the church location's intersection has a metro station and is one of the busiest and loudest spots in the city.

Santuario Nacional Del Corazón De María – Campo Alegre, Panama City

Santuario Nacional del Corazón de María doesn't see a whole lot of tourists, though it is one of the most attended churches in

Panama. The church is so popular that since 1952 it's even aired its own radio show.

The church's Romanesque style gives it the appearance of an old, colonial church, however, it wasn't built until the 1940s. The aged appearance is a contrast to the surrounding modern office buildings, hotels, and skyscrapers.

Visitors here can look forward to detailed stained-glass windows, a landscaped courtyard, and a stone façade adorned with a statue of the solemn moment of when Pope Pius XII crowned the Virgin Mary as Queen of the World.

Basílica Menor Don Bosco

– **Calidonia, Panama City**

Built in 1950, Basílica Menor Don Bosco's Romanesque style features minaret-like towers stretching into the sky. The church is located along the less touristed Avenida Central and is said to be the only basilica out of Italy donning Don Bosco's name.

The church recently had the honor of receiving a relic of Don Bosco. In April 2016, an effigy of Don Bosco in a glass casket arrived to the church, with the arm bone said to be from his actual body. (Perhaps this is a reappearing feat for this, the patron saint of magicians.)

Balboa Union Church

– **Balboa (Former Panama Canal Zone), Panama City**

During the U.S. occupation of the Panama Canal Zone, many U.S. workers there were from the Southern United States, mostly protestant, and almost entirely English-speaking. They first held religious services in the YMCA and other recreational areas, which quickly became central to social and community life in the zone.

After the canal and its zone passed to Panamanian control, many of the U.S. employees left, so the church began using some Spanish interspersed in its service to attract a wider audience. Today, it is one of the few in the city that conduct bilingual service.

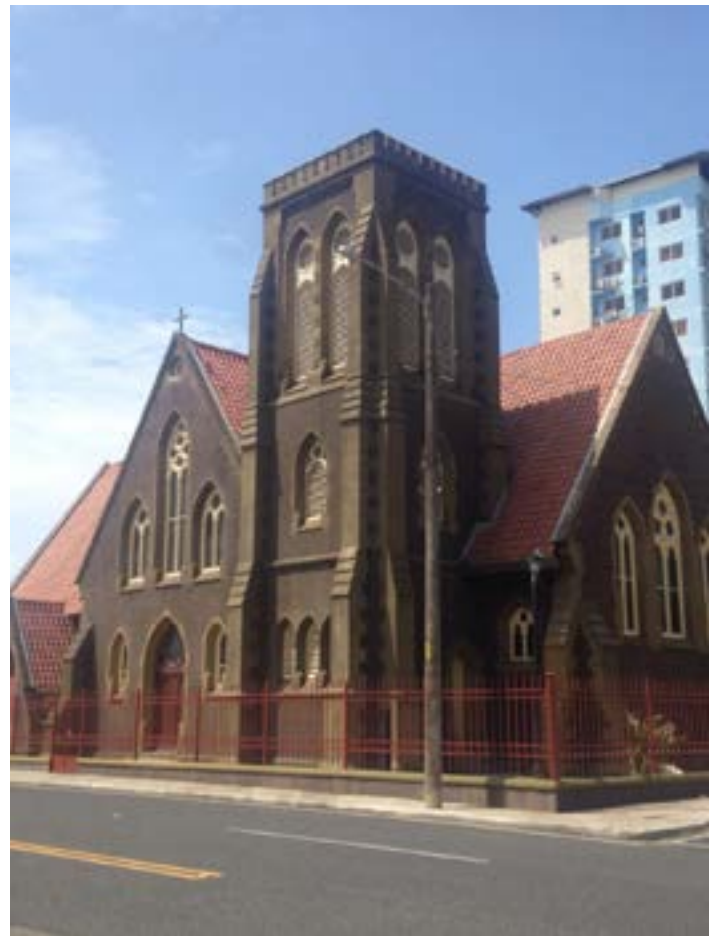
The oldest church in the former Canal Zone, Balboa Union Church was founded in 1914 and built by 1917 with a US\$10,000

contribution from John D. Rockefeller. The church is one of two in the world established by an act of U.S. Congress (the other being the church within the Capitol building, established in 1800, shortly after Congress moved into the new building, and used until 1857).

Sometimes referred to as “the big pink church on the hill,” the church's ornate stained-glass windows, red-tile roofs, and pink color make it stand out among the other military-era buildings in the former Canal Zone.

A memorial plaque sits on the church's corner near the road, in remembrance of a milkman who was driving down the hill, realized his brakes weren't functional, and crashed into the hillside, killing himself in order to avoid hitting children playing further down the road.

Christ Church By The Sea – Cristóbal, Colón



Built to accommodate the influx of people in Colón as a result of the Gold Rush, Christ Church by the Sea was built by the Panama

Railway Company in 1864. The church was the first Protestant church in Panama and is the second oldest in Central America. It is also the oldest Episcopal church in Central America.

The stone building was one of the first neo-Gothic buildings constructed in Panama, designed by one of the most successful architects of the era.

Catedral Imaculada De La Concepción – Cristóbal, Colón



Like Iglesia del Carmen in Panama City but on a smaller scale and with less decorative detail, Catedral Imaculada de la Concepción stands out with two neo-Gothic spires stretching into the sky. Also like Iglesia del Carmen, this cathedral was built relatively recently, with construction finished in 1934.

Like many buildings in Colón, the cathedral fell into disrepair, closing for multimillion-dollar renovations from 2011 until the end of 2015.

Iglesia de San Felipe – Portobelo, Colón

Built in 1814, Iglesia de San Felipe isn't much to look at. But the draw of this church isn't what's on the outside, but what's on the inside.

The church's statue of Cristo Negro (Black Christ) is a highly revered religious object. It first arrived to Portobelo in the mid-1600s, though its exact origins are unknown. One account claims the statue was retrieved by fishermen after being thrown overboard a ship during a storm. Another claims the statue's arrival was simply a mistake, and that it was actually intended for Isla Taboga. In both accounts, the statue arrives, is prevented from being removed, and is given reverence for its miraculous traits. The church adorns the Cristo Negro in a robe and crown, with the robe changed multiple times throughout the year.

Some 60,000 people from across the country make the pilgrimage to pay their respects to the statue during a festival held every October. Some walk hundreds of kilometers to get there, and many others take to crawling the last stretch of the pilgrimage.

During this festival, the town comes alive with a festive atmosphere. Some people camp out in tents in the streets and main square because of the lack of spare beds. For the festival's mass, the statue is carried on a four-hour parade around the town. Many wear their own robes, purple like the statue's, as well as gold jewelry. Being chosen to help carry the statue brings great respect in the community.

Catedral De San Juan Batista

– Chitré, Herrera

The recently renovated Catedral de San Juan Batista was built between 1896 and 1910. Figures of saints, teak crosses, and vivid stained-glass windows adorn the walls. The altar is carved in rosewood and coated in gold leaf. The church houses a life-sized statue of Christ that's borne through the streets during the town's Good Friday parade.

One event worth partaking in in Chitré is the town's Saint's Day festival, which is second only to carnival. While carnival is a wild weeklong wild event, Saint's Day festivities span two weeks and are more family friendly. Thousands of people arrive, taking in folk

dances, costumes, performances, parades, music, bullfights, and more. *Zaracundé* dancers and *mojiganga* performances are two local peculiarities in the parades.

Iglesia De San Pedro – Isla Taboga

Built in 1550, Iglesia de San Pedro is one of the oldest in Panama and the entire Western Hemisphere, though it is often incorrectly billed as the second oldest in the Americas. Another debatable claim is that Santa Rosa de Lima, the first saint born in the Americas and still the only female American-born saint, was from this island (note: Santa Rosa *de Lima* (as in Lima, Peru) is her name... not Santa Rosa *de Taboga*). A less contested claim is that Isla Taboga was the birthplace of the mother of Saint Martín de Porres—patron saint of mixed-race people, barbers, innkeepers, public health workers, and all those seeking racial harmony.

If you're visiting the island, it's definitely worth the visit; however, making the boat trip from Panama City for this reason alone may not be worth it. The simple building and questionable histories leave something to be desired when compared to the architectural splendour and historical significance of Panama's many mainland churches.

Iglesia San Francisco De La Montaña – San Francisco, Veraguas

Built in 1727, Iglesia San Francisco de la Montaña is a small stone church located in the interior mountain town of San Francisco.

While the exterior of the building might not impress visitors, the interior of the church amazes, with a finely detailed, hand-carved, baroque wooden altar and figurines depicting biblical scenes, portraits of saints, and imagery of dragons and foliage. The carvings also depict indigenous folklore and traditions, and it's said that indigenous carvers helped in the artistry.

The church's bell tower collapsed and was replaced in the 1940s, and the church has required further work more recently. In 2002, a construction company tasked with repairing the roof failed to appreciate the sensitivity of the church's artefacts and left the church partially

exposed without a roof for months. During the presidential administrations of Mireya Moscoso and Martin Torrijos, more than US\$1 million was invested with little results.

The roof is again under repairs, and an entire new church is under construction behind the current one. When these works are done, there are plans for the current site to become a museum of religious art.

Basílica Menor Jesús Nazareno De Atalaya – Atalaya, Veraguas

Located 5 km south of Santiago, Basílica Menor Jesús Nazareno de Atalaya was built in the early 19th century (the tower in the 1920s) and houses a highly revered statue of Jesus.

The statue of Jesus is said to have either been a gift from the Spaniards as conciliation to an indigenous group after winning a war or simply found on the bank of a nearby river. The statue was already housed in a grass hut on the church's current site in the 1730s, when the celebration of Jesús Nazareno de Atalaya began. The festival takes place during the first Sunday of Lent and brings thousands of visitors from around the country. Like the festival of Cristo Negro in Portobelo, some worshippers walk to the town for the celebration, some even barefoot.

Basílica De Natá – Natá, Coclé

Founded in 1519, the town of Natá is one of the oldest continually populated European settlements in the mainland Americas. Likewise, construction of Basílica de Natá began in 1522, making it one of the oldest churches in the mainland Americas—and one that is still in use today.

The basilica appears as a simple whitewashed façade with some detailed decoration, and a single tower on one corner. There are several hand-carved wooden altars in the interior, a lavishly decorated, elevated pulpit, and some oil paintings of religious figures.

The basilica is said to have been an important facility for the Spanish during war. Lookouts from the tower provided the town with advance warning of incoming enemies, and a network of underground tunnels from the church served as escape routes.

While these tunnels are off-limits for visitors, it's rumored that weapons and graves still line their walls.

Panama City Panama LDS Temple

– Corozal (Former Panama Canal Zone), Panama City

Usually, the U.S. presidential candidate most associated with Panama is John McCain, given that he was born at a military hospital near Colón in the U.S.-occupied Canal Zone. But his successor, Mitt Romney, has his own link to Panama—through his Mormon faith and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

In 1961, Mitt's second-cousin Elder Marion G. Romney of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles gave Mormon literature to Panamanian President Roberto F. Chiari. Four years later, the Mormon LDS church was formally recognized by the Panamanian government, and missionary efforts began. By 1970, the first meetinghouse was functioning and, in 1989, the Panama City Mission was created, already numbering more than 10,000 members in the country. Today, the LDS church preaches in Panama to more than 50,000 members in 70-plus congregations.

From 2005 to 2008, the LDS church built its first temple in Panama, which is the third in Central America after those in Costa Rica and Guatemala. This “temple in the jungle,” as some refer to it, covers 18,943 square feet. It stands out among the lush surroundings, with its China-white exterior stone and the figure of angel Moroni looming above from the temple's single spire.

Prior to the religious dedication by the LDS church, the temple's open house welcomed some 33,000 visitors. It would be tough to visit the temple now, though, as Mormon rules about nonbelievers entering the temple are much stricter than with Catholic churches. But even if you can't enter to appreciate the interior design, the marvel of the building's exterior is impressive nonetheless.

What's Missing?

When visiting Panama's religious historical gems, a word of warning needs to be said: Don't believe everything you hear. Plenty of overzealous tour guides, travel bloggers, or braggadocious locals might tell visitors that their town's church is the oldest in the New

World (it won't be), or is the resting place of a certain saint (possibly a relic, but probably not the body), or was haunted by the spirit of some politician or local hero (sure, I guess?).

These claims are common, but many often won't hold up to a little research. That's not to say these churches aren't brimming with history—they definitely are. Just remember that there are a few claims that don't hold up under scrutiny.

It also needs to be said that there are many churches and religious buildings that this issue didn't cover. Historically captivating, architecturally stunning, and religiously significant—but not covered here. There's only so much space to write!

Of course, Panama isn't a strictly Catholic or Christian nation, either. There are communities of other faiths, too—Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Baha'i, Buddhist, Rastafarian, and many others. And many of them have their own houses of worship, which can be just as architecturally stunning and steeped in history as those of the Catholic and Christian faiths.

In Colón, the mosque's spires reach almost as high in the sky as the city's cathedral's spires; in Panama City, the Hindu Temple is as ornately decorated as any of the city's colonial-era Catholic cathedrals, if not more so; the Jewish synagogue is topped with a large menorah; and the Baha'i temple is an oddly shaped white dome surrounded by lush jungle. All of these buildings are worth seeing. **PL**





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The Feast of Corpus Christi In La Villa De Los Santos

By Charles Conn





The Feast of Corpus Christi (Latin for Body of Christ) is a Catholic celebration that has been observed in Panama in La Villa de Los Santos for hundreds of years.



The town's youth embody Biblical personalities, with Archangel Michael and the Diablo Mayor symbolizing the struggle between good and evil, each with a supporting cast of dazzlingly dressed characters who parade around the town square outside the Iglesia de San Atanasio.



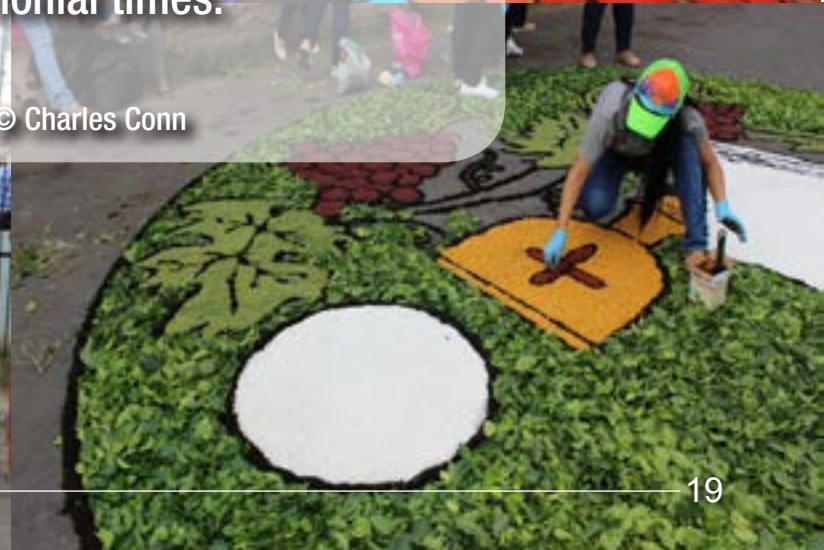


At the end of Holy Mass, a procession of the Blessed Sacrament takes place, tracing a route around the plaza whose streets are painstakingly decorated with flowers and colored sand in elaborate religious imagery the size of murals.



It's one of the best places to witness one of the country's more unique traditions handed down from colonial times.

Photos © Charles Conn




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Best Places To Eat Out On Sunday In Panama City

By Charles Conn

Panama City is, hands down, a foodie's paradise. Not only can you enjoy fresh and tasty local dishes from street food vendors all the way to award-winning, five-star restaurants, the international cuisine is superb, as well, brought in by the many ethnic groups that have long called this country home (some even before Panama was a country).

So much variety can seem daunting, but a good way to begin exploring the city's restaurants scene is on any given Sunday, when the traffic is flowing and the town becomes your oyster.

Located on Vía Cincuentenario near the Atlapa Convention Center is [Parrillada Jimmy](#), a mainstay for those looking to gather in the open atmosphere over a wide array of Greek and international dishes. They rate high for their grilled octopus, fried eggplant, and *saganaki* (grilled Greek cheese with lemon), and their outdoor patio is perfect for enjoying the ocean breezes over dessert or drinks.



Another Greek-owned eaterie, [Niko's Cafe](#), has locations throughout the city. While they make an awesome gyro (having been the first to introduce the famous pita sandwich to Panamanians in the '80s), they're better known for their cafeteria-style setup featuring a good variety of Panamanian staples. The French fries are some of the best in town, but don't pass up on the *sancocho* (Panamanian chicken soup) or, when available, the chicken lasagna.



Also good value for the money is [Restaurante Don Blas](#) (Tel. 264-0343), with locations on Vía España and Calle Uruguay. Here you'll find yet another example of Panamanian-international cuisine, with an exhaustive menu that features everything from pizzas and sandwiches to seafood, steak, and pasta. I always order the *patacones* (fried green plantain medallions) to share. Their *pollo a la plancha* (grilled chicken) never disappoints and, for seafood, the *corvina al ajillo* (pan-fried sea bass with garlic) is hearty and satisfying.

[Pesquito Grill & Restaurant](#) caters to the sports crowds, and if there's ever a major soccer match being televised, it's a good bet all of their city locations (San Francisco, Brisas del Golf, Centenial) will be filled with fans cheering their respective teams. Known for their *cubetazos* (beer bucket drink specials) and fried fish, Pesquito's qualifies as a greasy spoon where you can get your fix for burgers and fries.



For a more refined atmosphere, try [La Papa](#), a Colombian import located in Bella Vista. For starters, the typical Colombian *empanaditas de carne* or the Cartagena-style ceviche are good for sharing. They're

also known for their quality meat and seafood, delectable thin-crust pizzas, and wide array of specialty cocktails.



It seems there's an Italian restaurant on every corner, but [Napoli](#) in Obarrio scores high for the family-friendly ambience and quality, flavorful dishes, which have kept this place in business for over 50 years. Their pizzas are crowd-pleasers, especially with the kids. My adult friends rave over their clam or langoustine cocktail appetizers.



The Chinese tradition of dim sum has become so ingrained here that *desayuno chino* (Chinese breakfast) is a “must” for anyone who wishes to see the real Panama. The best places to hang out for Sunday brunch over bit-sized, steamed dumplings and congee are the palatial [Lung Fung](#) in the neighborhood of Los Ángeles, or [Golden Unicorn](#), located on the fourth floor of the Evergreen building in Atlapa, with nice views overlooking the Bay of Panama.

For Mexican, a visit to Multiplaza Mall is in order, to indulge at [Sanborns](#), the department store owned by billionaire Carlos Slim—just make sure to bring a hefty appetite. The enchiladas, for example, are gargantuan. It's also one of the few places in town where you can enjoy authentic Mexican *chilaquiles* (fried, corn tortilla strips covered in a variety of sauces and melted cheese), *pozole* soup, and enchiladas in mole sauce. A friend recently went there with his wife and kid and spent only US\$50 for lunch. **P**





SIMON LETTER

Taxes are a complicated and confusing thing for many... as is understanding banking overseas, residency and second citizenship, currency fluctuation, foreign property purchase, and many other aspects of administration overseas.

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Staying Safe in Panama— Slips And Falls And How To Avoid Them

By *Leighton Garner*



Some things we take for granted living in the United States, Canada, and other developed countries. Things that tourists and new expats never think about when traveling to countries where infrastructures are less developed and building codes less sophisticated than what we are used to...

The streets and sidewalks may not be paved with gold in North America, but they are paved... and, generally, they have even surfaces. This cannot be said for many of the walkways here in Panama.

I always thought of myself as sure-footed, but, now, 11 years into living in Panama, I've lost all confidence in that assertion. (Though my pride obligates me to mention, the series of accidents I'll unfold would never have occurred in the United States.)

In my first few years in Panama, I tripped over broken paving, uneven sidewalks, or other debris while walking down the street regularly, it seems. I fell fully on my face or rear about five times in those first exploratory years—one fall injured me enough to require six stitches in my hand.

If you like to run or walk... you must always be looking down in Panama. Always. My Panamanian wife once made fun of my odd walking posture, saying I looked like a hunched-over old man, always looking down... but it's a necessary safety precaution!

There is no conformity to sidewalks in Panama. One short stretch of sidewalk can consist of several different types of paving materials, each with its own texture and height, and often not meeting at any level point. Aside from lack of

planning or forethought in uniform creation, anything that was once nicely paved or tiled is likely to be in a sorry state of disrepair—even if it was only created in the past year.

Panama City's seaside location and heavy rains for most of the year mean that road and sidewalk maintenance is a Sisyphean task. Add to that the fact that Panama is jungle country—the city carved out of otherwise pristine rain forest—meaning that Mother Nature is constantly pushing back to reestablish herself. Tree roots push up under the concrete, breaking and distorting the pavement, grass will grow out of any crevice—or create one where there was none previously. If left unabated, vines and creeping plants will take over a building and its surrounding infrastructure within weeks.

None of this is quickly or easily repaired... if at all. The city is not falling-over itself (pardon the pun) to fix its groundwork. Either due to lack of will or funds, maintenance like this always takes a back seat to Panama's more ambitious infrastructure projects. Some of the money-making areas of the city have been recently renovated, namely the ever-popular Casco Viejo and the touristy Amador Causeway... but upgrades are few and far between.

Take a careful walk down Via Argentina... Or stroll Via España near Plaza Concordia... Promenade down Calle Ricardo Arias between the Marriott Hotel and the El Rey supermarket... Or try a jaunt between Via España and Via Argentina on Via Veneto...

But do so with caution.

All these streets are popular walking areas. Via Argentina could be called restaurant row. Via Veneto is populated with tourist shops, cafés, hotels, and casinos. The Plaza Concordia strip of Via España is a popular shopping district, lined with stores selling all manner of goods. Ricardo Arias is home to some of Panama's best restaurants and several high-end hotels and casinos. Yet all of these streets and their sidewalks are in deplorable condition.

I mention these streets because they represent my home turf; this is the area where I walk. And the places where all of my accidents occurred.

But almost all of the streets in Panama are the same: dangerous for pedestrians. Combine that with the fact that most expats and tourists to the city are older and not as sure-footed or sharp-eyed as they once were, and you've got a potential disaster for the unobservant.

Luckily, there is a respite from shambles of concrete and mislaid brick. The city's gleaming, new Cinta Costera (new is a bit of an overstatement, the project was inaugurated in 2009 and Phase III was completed in 2014). This 26-hectare (64-acre) bay-side park offers lanes for bikers, runners, and walkers, as well as fitness equipment, sport courts, art installations, and lots of green space.

You may think the danger is over once you've made it inside. Not so!

Interiors of buildings, restaurants, and stores are not always designed with a mind to safety—certainly not with the care and regulation that buildings up north would be.

Recently my wife and I went to an event at the new Jacaranda Gastobar restaurant located at the also-new Plaza Downtown. The contractor seems to have thought that two feet outside of the patio door and directly in front of it would be a perfect place to put the propane pipe and raise it an inch off the floor—just enough to catch your shoe and send you flying.

I tripped just outside the patio door. I caught myself (I wasn't there long enough to get drunk) but had I not caught myself, I would have crashed face first into the four-foot-high patio glass wall in front of me with sangria flying everywhere. It made me look foolish and klutzy in front of a lot of people... though I try to take it as a chance to embrace humility.

And that's not all. Three propane tanks were located just a few feet on the other side of the patio glass wall where everyone goes to smoke. Whatever happened to the "no smoking within 20 feet" rule? One flick of a cigarette butt in that direction could have made the party more explosive than they hoped it would be.

Happily, I found no other life-threatening hazards during this particular dinner outing.

Then there are the stairways in Panama... Like snowflakes, it seems that no two are created alike. I tripped over, banged my

knees on, or stubbed my toes countless times on stairs in the first few years of my residency here.

In more developed countries, there are building codes and standards regarding stairway construction. The risers must be so-high and the steps must be so-deep. When you climbed the stairs you never had to think about it.

Not so in Panama. If you go up or down the stairs without looking, you're liable to trip all over yourself. This is especially true of the older buildings, of which there are many.

Lastly, nearly every hotel, mall, apartment building, and business complex has inexplicably paved their entryways, surrounding sidewalks, and outdoor pathways in marble, porcelain, or some other kind of highly polished tile. If you've been to Panama and stayed at a hotel, you've no doubt noticed the beautiful exterior tiling.

Beautiful, but completely impractical. Treacherous, even.

When these kinds of tiles get wet, they are slippery. Hence the signs that every litigious country uses profusely. And when are they not wet in Panama, except maybe a couple months in the dry season?

Rain isn't the only factor... the unrelenting humidity adds to the problem. And, of course, these floors are mopped with water and cleaner daily.

The entire world has been plagued by wet-floor-slip-and-fall accidents, resulting in serious personal injury to clients, customers, employees, and the general public passing by... Panamanians don't seem concerned.

In the United States, over 1 million people suffer a slip, trip, and fall injury every year. Approximately 19,565 people die annually due to injuries caused by falls in the States. With the added hazards of uneven walkways, oddly sized stairs, and the abundance of hard, polished floor in Panama, proportionally to population, the statistics have to be higher.

While I want to ensure that you are prepared, I by no means want to discourage you from coming to enjoy Panama City and all it has to offer visitors and residents alike. Be careful when walking or exercising in Panama, and safely relish all its treasures. **PL**

From Decadence To Deprivation— Panama Turns The Page From Carnival To Lent

By Charles Conn

As Fat Tuesday gave way to Ash Wednesday in this Catholic country, the mood turned from raucous to somber. In Panama, the weeks leading up to Easter are marked by religious festivals in honor of patron saints attended by thousands of devoted followers.

Other signs of the season are more subtle. Don't be surprised to find fish making consistent appearances on the menu of your local eatery, especially on Fridays.

With piety, propriety, and prudence in mind, we've compiled a list of vocabulary words that will come in handy as you make your way around town during these (as compared to *carnaval*) more restrained times. **PL**

- Church = *Iglesia*
- Chapel = *Capilla*
- Cross = *Cruz*
- Altar = *Altar*
- Lent = *Cuaresma*
- Easter = *Pascua*
- Bell = *Campana*
- Steeple = *Campanario*
- Tower = *Torre*
- Father = *Padre*
- Priest = *Sacerdote*
- Nun = *Monja*
- Convent = *Convento*
- Parrish = *Parroquia*
- Choir = *Coro*
- Pilgrims = *Peregrinos*
- Pilgrimage = *Peregrinación*
- Pope = *El Papa*
- Catholic = *Católico*
- Saint = *Santo*
- Relic = *Reliquia*
- Candles = *Velas*
- Incense = *Incienso*
- Hymns = *Himnos*
- Prayer = *Oración*
- Abstinence = *Abstinencia*
- Mercy = *Merced*
- Kindness = *Bondad*
- Brotherhood = *Hermanidad*
- Fellow = *Prójimo*
- Sacrifice = *Sacrificio*
- Penance = *Penitencia*
- Confession = *Confesión*
- Forgiveness = *Perdón*
- Fish = *Pescado*
- Wine = *Vino*
- Bread = *Pan*
- Fast = *Ayuna*
- Ash Wednesday = *Miércoles de Ceniza*
- Palm Sunday = *Domingo de Ramos*
- Good Friday = *Viernes Santo*
- UNESCO World Heritage Sites = *Sitios de Patrimonio de la Humanidad de la UNESCO*

Shifting Gears To Comfort Zone



Two years ago, New Yorker Michael Curtis sold his home, packed up the moving trucks, and was ready to move to Panama with his wife, two kids, two cats, and a dog. The hustle and bustle of one of the most exciting cities in the world had become too much for this young family.

With dreams for a better life, Michael took a leap of faith and moved his family to a new city across the borders, far from home. He knew little about Panama. He didn't speak the language. On this new adventure together, the future of his family was open-ended...

Panama Letter: Why did you move and why did you decide on Panama?

Michael Curtis: It was becoming increasingly difficult to balance the stress at work and a healthy personal life. I was focused on earning money for my family and was missing out on quality time with my kids.

When we first thought about moving from Long Island, we looked around other states like Texas and Georgia. Our goal was to find a peaceful lifestyle... more country-like. Then the idea of Panama crossed my mind. Panama is close to our hearts: my wife, Nena, is Panamanian, she has family here, and we got married here 13 years ago. When I first suggested it, Nena was skeptical about moving home but ultimately realized the potential opportunities. After more discussion, we agreed it was worth pursuing our careers and lives in Panama.

PL: What were the first few days like?

MC: Relocating to anywhere in the world is challenging—especially when you arrive in a new city without definite plans. We had our fair share of difficulties. Because we didn't know Panama City well (Nena is from Colón), we rented an expensive apartment and ended up losing thousands of dollars. Visas and work permits were difficult to get... the process was endless.

We hired a lawyer who came highly recommended by the company that had shipped our stuff from the States. Unfortunately, it didn't have a pretty ending. This lawyer (who was also a local pastor) lost my birth certificate, kept the down payment, and never performed her duties.

The disappointments weren't fun but made us wiser. I learned to keep on my toes.

PL: Let's talk about your transition.

MC: Despite those early setbacks, it went remarkably well. One of the main reasons we moved was to give the kids a better life. They've received a lot more attention over these last two years. Nena has been able to stay home with them, and her family is always around. Seeing them grow here has made it all worth it.

However, I'd have done better had I read the free emails I was getting from Live and Invest Overseas—the worst deletes of my life.

The biggest challenges for me were adapting to the heat and humidity and the language. I wasn't so worried about Spanish, as Nena is fluent. But I wasn't prepared for the humid heat. It's like having a bath with your clothes on. (On the upside, I lost 15 pounds in the first month.)

PL: How do you envision your future in Panama?

MC: Moving to Panama has opened many possibilities for my family. Of course, I have moments when I miss the United States. But this feels more like home than New York. Together, as a family, we're experiencing new worlds, new food, new music, and new languages. Our future is here in Panama.

I'll admit I cringe when I look at the lessons I've learned so far... and those that are sure to come. But, I breathe a little easier in the time I spend with my kids doing what we love to do best... going to the parks and the malls.

PL: What are the lessons learned?

MC: 80 percent of the time, your perceptions are wrong and your facts are inaccurate. But living in a place removes all those misgivings and misperceptions. The best part about moving overseas is the chance to discover and learn from a whole new culture and make new friends. That's what makes it all worthwhile. Just be sure to plan as much as you can before you move—it will save you a lot of time, money, and frustration down the line. **PL**



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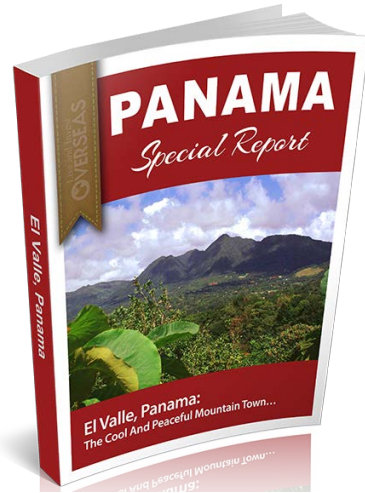
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