

# PANAMA

## *Special Report*



***Boquete:***  
The All-Star Among Panama's  
Expatriate Havens

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## *Special Report*

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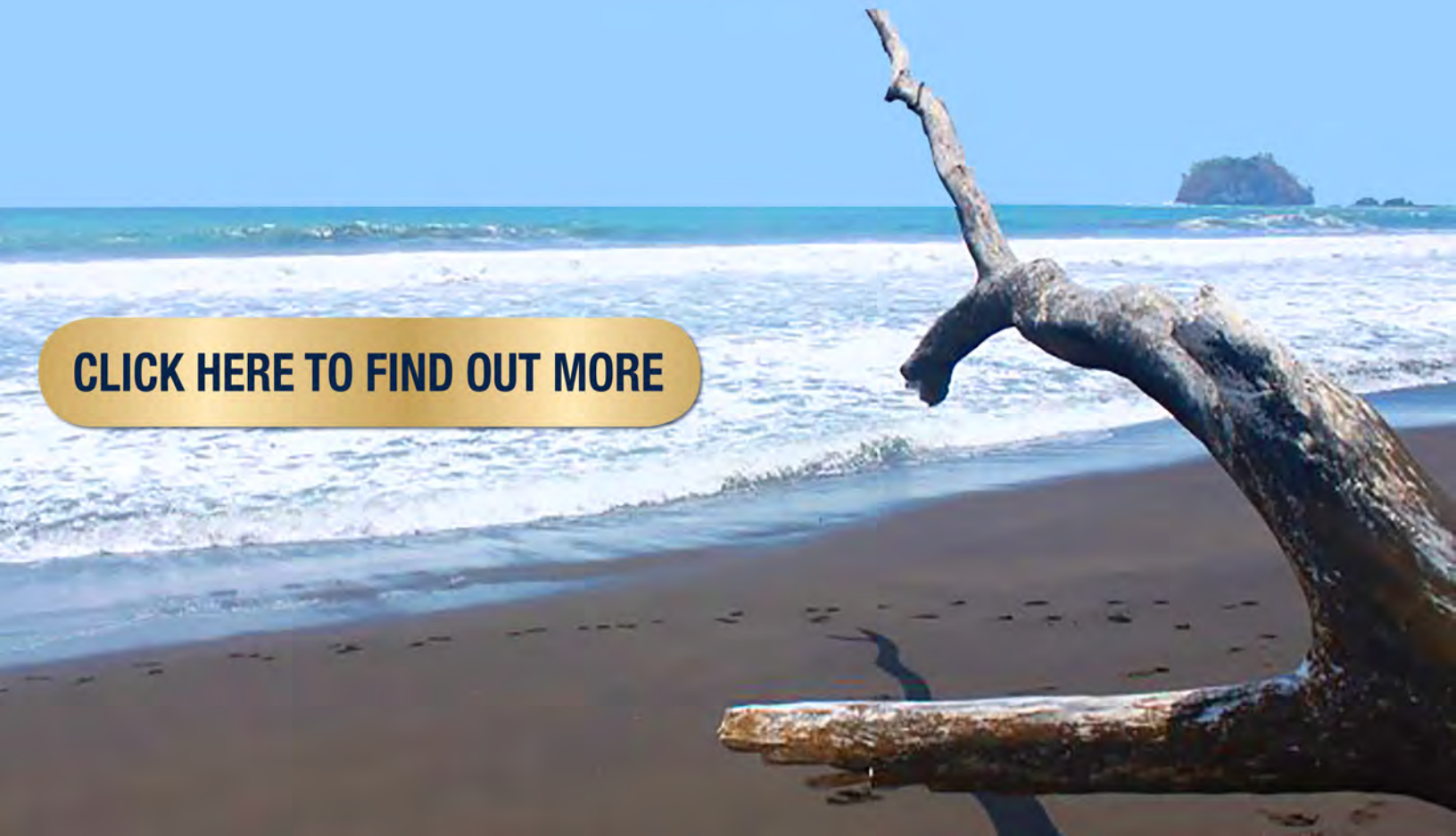
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# Boquete—The All-Star Among Panama's Expat Havens

BY ROBIN POST

Boquete is unlike any other town in Panama. The combination of its stunning natural setting, perfect temperate climate, and large expat contingent makes it a natural choice for those contemplating a move to Panama.

Snuggled into the side of a volcanic crater, surrounded by lush tropical forest, and home to profusions of multi-hued blossoms, Boquete is nothing if not picturesque...

Winding your way down the highway from Alto Boquete above the crater, you'll suddenly arrive at the crest of a large hill. Before you sprawls the downtown core, and the panoramic view is breathtaking. If you're lucky, you'll arrive shortly after a soft rain (called *el bajareque* by locals) and a sweeping rainbow will make this fairy tale portrait complete.

## Where Is Boquete?

Boquete is in western Panama, about 37 miles from the Costa Rican border. It's part of Chiriquí Province, the capital of which, David, lies 30 miles to its south.

Panama City is about 340 miles east of Boquete. To get here by car or bus, simply follow the Pan-American Highway from Panama City to David and then divert north towards Boquete. Busses are inexpensive, air conditioned, and make the trip daily.

If you want to avoid a seven-hour road trip, though, there are daily flights from Panama City that take about an hour. They fly into Enrique Malek International Airport in David where rental cars, buses, and taxis can take you from there on to Boquete.

## Climate

The climate in Boquete is springlike year-round with temperatures hovering between 65°F and 75°F. Nights, especially during the rainy season, can be chilly enough for a sweater or light jacket.

The tropical heat that Panama is famous for is much less intense in Boquete, and thanks to all the rain, it's less dry than lower-altitude areas.



## History: Boquete's Expat Roots

Boquete's history is long and convoluted... Jumping past the ancient, the first settlers in this virtually uninhabited area didn't initially plan on staying here. They flocked to Panama from Switzerland, Germany, Holland, Yugoslavia, and parts of North America by ship during the California Gold Rush.

The railroad was their mode of transport as they crossed the isthmus on their way to California and their dreams of a gold-encrusted future. Completed in 1855, the *ferrocarril* (railroad) journeyed from Colón (then Aspinwall) on the Caribbean side to Panama City on the Pacific.

By the time many of the hopeful travelers arrived in Panama, though, the Gold Rush was coming to an ignominious end. Down on their luck and out of funds, many travelers chose to settle in Panama. A picturesque respite in the mountains was their chosen site and would later become known as Boquete.

This migration occurred in 1890. By 1907 small *caseríos* (hamlets) had sprung up in Quiel and Alto Lino, which is the highest point above Boquete. The rich soil allowed vegetables to be grown, creating the first market gardens of the area.

One such farm, started by the Landau family, is still producing today. Managed by the descendants of the original family, it currently provides all the delicious produce sold in the El Rey grocery chain found throughout Panama.

Next to be developed was the area lower in elevation but still overlooking Boquete. A perfect storm of volcanic soil, temperate climate, and elevation made this area perfect for growing coffee. Coffee plantations sprang up, and Ngöbe-Buglé natives were brought in to work them.

Boquete was officially recognized on April 11, 1911, and is now home to a thriving community of about 25,000. It's famous for its flower gardens, the Boquete Jazz and

Blues Festival, and the Boquete Flower and Coffee Fair (both of which are annual).

Several years ago, a few forward-thinking coffee growers began experimenting with bean varieties and producing artisanal coffees like geisha. As a result, Panama is known worldwide for its high-quality coffee, grown in Boquete and nearby Volcán, another mountain-top town (technically volcano-top).

Every year an international coffee auction is held for exporters and aficionados. Last year, a Boquete coffee plantation broke the record for the most expensive coffee in the world. One pound of their spectacular geisha brew sold for an astronomical US\$803.



## Communities And Amenities

Boquete is divided into different areas or communities, starting at the top of the hill with Quiel and continuing down to Bajo Boquete, which is the downtown area, and on to Jaramillo, Naranja, Volcancito, and more.

There are several supermarkets, clothing, shoe, and dry goods stores, hardware and agricultural supply establishments, hairdressers, computer and cell phone outlets, real estate offices, a butcher shop, and several banks, including Banco Nacional, Global Bank, Multibank, and more.



## Tourist Accommodation

Boquete is a popular tourist spot, so accommodation options are many. They range from hostels for backpackers and budget travelers, such as Bambuda Castle and *Mamallena*, to cozy, well-appointed bed and breakfasts, such as *Casa de Montaña* and *Casa Alegría*, to lovely hotels, like *Hacienda Los Molinos*, Boquete Garden Inn, and Hotel *Valle del Río*.

The most famous of all Boquete hotels is Panamonte, the oldest in town. This elegant establishment was built when the town was barely there and is still welcoming guests today. At one time it was world-renowned and counted well-known celebrities, politicians, and more as its guests.

## Cost Of Living

Not including Panama City and Coronado, the cost of living in Boquete is higher than in other areas of Panama.

Its amenities, small town atmosphere, proximity to David (the largest city in Chiriquí), and large expat population make it well worth the extra expense. (For a more comprehensive look at monthly expenses, [go here](#).)

Panama uses the U.S. dollar, and credit cards are accepted in most places. Debit cards are available, too, although they're most useful for withdrawing cash from ATMs. I've yet to find any establishments in Boquete that accept debit cards as a payment method.

## Boquete's Expat Community

Boquete has the highest density of expats in Panama, and it's fascinating and heartwarming to watch them intermingle seamlessly with third-generation *boqueteños*, indigenous people, and everyone in between.

Members of the LGBTQ community are, for the most part, accepted in Boquete. At least two expat businesses are owned and operated by same-sex couples who are respected members of the community.



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## Volunteer Organizations

Boquete expats embrace their adopted country wholeheartedly and constantly strive to make it a better place, not only for themselves but also for the locals. This is an easy place to become involved with the resident community. Volunteer organizations flourish here and accomplish good deeds year-round, particularly for migrant workers or struggling Ngöbe-Buglé. Joining them is a great way to get integrated here; to name a few...

### Boquete Knitters And Quilters

One such organization is the Boquete Knitters and Quilters, the brainchild of an expat named Brandy Gregory. Each year they knit baby blankets, caps, sweaters, and booties, as well as sweaters and hats for older children. They also make spectacular quilts that they raffle off for money to replenish their wool supply.

The fruits of their labor are donated to local charitable organizations and health associations, and they supply the pediatric oncology department in David with soft knitted caps for the children and teens who lose their hair during chemotherapy. With just one delivery, they supplied 55 baby blankets, 60 baby quilts, 103 hats, 27 sweaters, 18 pairs of booties, and 11 baby washcloths.

Initially only expats participated in the group, but eventually locals and Ngöbe-Buglé became integrated as well. As Brandy points out, being part of this group is a way for them to create community. All three cultures now work side by side for a common cause.



### Buenos Vecinos De Boquete

Other Boquete groups also want to aid the poor and handicapped. *Buenos Vecinos de Boquete* (Good Neighbours of Boquete) provides non-perishable food on a monthly basis to over 100 needy families in the community. Single moms, the elderly, the handicapped, and the unemployed all benefit from these compassionate volunteers and donors.

Rice, cooking oil, beans, pasta, canned goods, and powdered milk are some of the staples purchased every month and delivered to the client families. Community members also donate funds and hold fundraisers, which include food drives, cook-offs, wine tasting, cookbook sales, and the multi-charity Venta de Patio (Patio Sale)—a huge and hugely popular flea market.



### Fundación Pro-Integración

Fundación Pro-Integración (a foundation for the handicapped) operates throughout Panama and has a chapter in Boquete. Their mission statement is as follows: “We strive to support handicapped members of our community, especially those with minimal economic resources. We provide an open, welcoming social environment. We provide wheelchairs, walkers, crutches, canes, and hearing aids.”

### Animal Welfare

Local animal lovers have started two excellent organizations to help stray dogs and cats that’ve been





abandoned because of neglect, poverty, or both. With their assistance, this problem has decreased noticeably.

*Amigos de Animales*' (Friends of Animals) mission is to spay and neuter street animals as well as the local pet population to eliminate the hunger and suffering of unwanted dogs and cats.

The second group, known as ARF (adopt, rescue, and foster), has a similar agenda. They provide for the well-being of all rescued, abused, and injured animals. They provide medical treatment and find the animals homes.

### **Boquete Rotary Club**

The Boquete Rotary Club is very active in the community. Prior to the start of the school year in March, they purchased 600 backpacks stuffed with school supplies and delivered them to students from grades 1 through 6 in 11 schools in the greater Boquete area.

### **Library**

A group of expats donated and fundraised to build a beautifully designed, state-of-the-art library, enjoyed by residents of Boquete and nearby areas.



These are just a sampling of Boquete's charitable groups, and the time, effort, and passion put forth by Boquete residents.

## **Business Opportunities**

The ground for expat businesses in Boquete is fertile, and many who own and operate businesses here do well. Restaurants are on every corner and run the spectrum from *fondas* (local restaurants traditionally run out of homes) to high-end eateries.

Other expat-run businesses include a travel agency (Viaje Vacations), a building materials store, computer repairs, real estate offices, a bakery and coffee shop, and Skateworld (a skating arena). Just outside of town, there is a large self-storage facility, Chiriquí Storage, which also hosts a huge flea market two Sundays per month.

Inconveniences of living in Boquete could translate to business opportunities if the right person came along... Take shipping for example. It's difficult and expensive to ship goods to and from Panama because of the paperwork involved, the logistics, and the lack of brokers. Someone with even a bit of expertise in this area would be welcomed.

Those with an entrepreneurial spirit can head down to the huge market held at the local theater building on Tuesday mornings. Anyone interested in selling their wares can book a table, or shop the native crafts, organic produce, pre-prepared meals, books, handmade jewelry, essential oils, clothing, and more available.

Interesting presentations are also held here, providing expert information on subjects from expat tax laws, medical insurance options, knowledge of the local dormant volcano, Volcán Barú, and countless other topics. This could also be an opportunity for you to share your expertise with other expats.

## **What's There To Do In Boquete?**

Boredom isn't a word in *boqueteño* vocabulary; activities for young and old abound here. Boquete Community Players is an amateur theatre group that puts on plays. They're entertaining whether you're a participant or an attendee.



On the outskirts of town is Lucero Golf and Country Club, with a challenging but scenic course. The complex also has lovely upscale homes and a restaurant. Modern tree houses are also for rent for the more quirky visitor. A less strenuous, nine-hole course is found inside Valle Escondido, a gated community.

Extreme sports enthusiasts will be content with what's on offer in Boquete. There is white-water rafting, nature treks, zip-lining, and hiking to the top of Volcán Barú if you're after a bit of adventure.

For the more sedate, Boquete and the surrounding areas are a bird watcher's haven, home to 989 species of exotic birds. The most coveted and rare among them is the quetzal, once considered sacred by the Mayan.

You can also tour coffee plantations and sample their brews, visit hot springs on the Caldera River, and relax at two lovely resorts, Las Olas and Las Lajas, only a short drive away on the Pacific coast. Bridge parties, dart tournaments, yoga sessions, and painting classes are just a few of the social activities you can participate in. Hotel Valle del Río even has a small casino if you find yourself in a gambling mood.

You might be surprised at the number of excellent and eclectic restaurants this small town has to offer. Thanks to its diverse foreigner population, you could eat out every day for at least a couple of weeks without repeat dining. Visit the traditional German bakery, enjoy authentic Thai, experiment with fun fusions, or go all-American or all-Panamanian, to name just a handful of options. The service here is often better than you can expect in the capital, and the atmospheres they all offer are as unique as they are pleasant and picturesque—especially those with *alfresco* tables. Thanks to all the fresh produce coming from farms just outside of town, the quality can't be beat. This might just be the town's biggest surprise—it's Panama's unassuming foodie haven.

## Speaking Spanish

Boquete is one place in Panama where you can get by with little or no Spanish. But why move to a foreign

country without trying to learn a bit of the local language? Even a rudimentary knowledge of Spanish will make living here easier and further endear you to the locals.

There are many ways to learn Spanish in Boquete. Habla Ya is an excellent school that offers varied Spanish classroom-type classes as well as field trips where you can soak up the scenery, flora, and fauna while learning the language.

Private teachers are also available and teach small classes or do one-on-one lessons. One example of this is Boquete Spanish, taught by a third-generation *boqueteño*, Lisca Bruno. She teaches from her home and offers a friendly approach that emphasizes conversational Spanish rather than memorization.

Lisca's family arrived in Boquete during its inception and were instrumental in much of its development. For example, her grandfather started the Lions Club, the first gas station, and the first store, which, two generations later, is still in operation. Getting your Spanish lesson and your Boquete history lesson at the same time is a bonus of studying with Lisca.

Even if you speak no Spanish at all, there are services available if you find yourself in an emergency or complicated situation. Rodny Moreno is a young Panamanian man who offers 24-hour assistance to those in need, both Panamanian and expat.

His company, Rodny Direct, provides Spanish assistance to anyone who has a medical emergency and needs an ambulance (most ambulance drivers and EMTs only speak Spanish) or is in the hospital. He'll also help you get a tow truck if your car breaks down, if you have to deal with police or government employees, or any other situation where Spanish is necessary.

For US\$80 per family per year, Rodny will compile a database of members' addresses, cell phone numbers, email addresses, medical history, emergency contact



numbers, and any other pertinent information you want to include. You're then issued a small metal plate with your member's number on it, which is mounted on your gate or outside your home. This provides easy location access for emergency personnel as Panama's public address system is inefficient.

## Health Care In The Highlands

Boquete doesn't have its own hospital yet, but it does have an ambulance and is close to David where hospitals are available. That said, there is no shortage of health care options available in Boquete...

Several clinics and doctors' offices offer general practice and specialist services. Rates for doctor consults and medicines are reasonable, and, of course, *pensionado* discounts are available. There are also dentists, chiropractors, massage therapists, several well-stocked pharmacies, and two fully operational medical laboratories.

Boquete Health and Hospice is a volunteer organization mostly made up of medical caregivers. They aid the elderly and the infirm and provide services to the dying and their families as well as those suffering from dementia and other debilitating illnesses.

Meals, transportation to doctor appointments, emotional support, and caregiver relief are offered at no charge. They've also developed a blood donor list and coordinate donors and recipients. A relatively new and attractive assisted-living home is also available for those incapable of living on their own.

### Disabled Access

In recent years, Boquete has made numerous improvements regarding disabled access. Most of the clinics, laboratories, some restaurants, and several of the sidewalks have had wheelchair ramps installed... but much more is still needed.

## Boquete And Education

Both public and private schools are plentiful here, although there is no international school. Many expat children attend school and happily blend in with Panamanian students.

Schools here have a unique system in place that should be applied worldwide. All parents of school-aged children are required, at the beginning of each school year, to attend mandatory evening classes about child health and welfare. The courses run for about a week, are facilitated by professionals, and cover subjects such as reaction signs to sexual or verbal harassment, bullying, healthy eating, and more. Panamanian parents receive a small monetary allowance to assist in the purchase of school textbooks, supplies, and uniforms, but those who don't attend the seminars forfeit this allowance.

## The Property Market

Property is readily available in Boquete and surrounding areas, both to rent and to purchase. Houses, condos, and apartments range from modest, Panamanian-style to more elaborate American builds.

Prices are a bit higher in Boquete than in David and outlying areas because this is such a desirable expat haven. They're still in reach, however, and much less expensive than comparable North American homes.

Property prices have levelled off here after years of increase, making it a buyer's market today. (See examples of real estate listings in this issue's [Property Picks](#).)

### Renting In And Around Boquete

Rentals include a variety of houses, condos, apartments, and small *casitas* and are usually furnished. Leases are often required but month-to-month rentals are available as well. Boquete Ning is an online source that lists local



rentals. Most of the real estate companies also have a rental service.

## Residency

For information about how to gain residency in Panama, [go here](#).

## Is Boquete For You?

Boquete is one-of-a-kind and a beautiful place to call home, but it also has its foibles and isn't necessarily for everyone...

First and foremost, the streets and sidewalks are poor quality, and there is a lack of parking. For years the main streets were rough and full of potholes, and the outer residential streets were little more than dirt paths with the occasional patch of lumpy gravel, which you drove over at your own risk. Sidewalks and parking were virtually non-existent.

Fortunately, as of a few short months ago, the main street through town has been smoothly paved, sidewalks have been poured, and parking has improved immensely. Rumor has it that this became a priority because the president purchased a farm close by. Such is the way of things in Latin America... Hopefully these improvements continue throughout the rest of town.

Another idiosyncrasy is the downtown area: It wasn't set up with any rhyme or reason. A hodgepodge of businesses, eateries, banks, hostels, and private apartments dwell haphazardly together along the road.

If you can accept those quirks, you'll find Boquete an endearing place to call home. Its upsides are that you'll live in a lush, natural setting, have access to fresh produce and a cool weather year-round, and get to live overseas but enjoy a sense of familiarity thanks to its deep expat roots. Every time you crest that hill and gaze down upon the scene below, your heart will belong to Boquete all over again. 🌸

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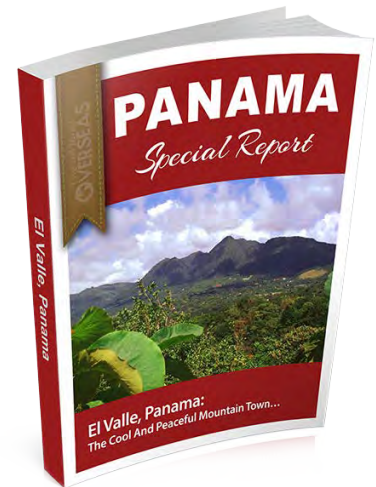




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