PANAMA Special Report



Penonomé: Perfect For The Cowboy (Or Girl) At Heart

PANAMA Special Report

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PENONOME: Perfect For The Cowboy (Or Girl) At Heart

BY DUSTY TUBBS



Penonomé, the capital city of the province of Coclé, lies 143 kms (90 miles) west of Panama City, about two hours outside of the city. Shortly after Río Hato, the Pan-American Highway makes a sharp turn northward to Penonomé, ensuring this important city is connected to the only major roadway in Panama.

The name for this region was created from "penó" and "Nomé." Nomé was the chief of the local indigenous tribe living in this area who was put to death by the Spanish colonial officials that were assigned to govern the newly conquered territory. Founded in 1581 the town paid tribute to the chief by naming it in his honor: Penó Nomé (meaning Nomé was executed).



Penonomé lies 143kms (90 miles) west of Panama City



Sir Henry Moran, The Bucaneer

In 1671, when Panama City was destroyed by Henry Morgan, Penonomé was briefly the capital of Panama. The current population is approximately 25,000. The last census in 2010 counted 21,748 residents, including a large immigrant population from China, Turkey, and Arab countries.

Penonomé is also a district within the Coclé Province. Penonomé district includes the towns of: Penonomé (capital), Cañaveral, Coclé, Chiguirí Arriba, El Coco, Pajonal, Río Grande, Río Indio, Toabré, Vista Hermosa, Los Uveros, El Silencio, and Tulú. (Unless you're from this area, you've probably never heard of these other towns...)

Penonomé is a farmer-friendly town. Like most of the province of Coclé, this is an agricultural area. The region is famous for the production of tomatoes and sugar plus an abundance of cattle ranches and plantations of teak, rice, limes, mangoes, and more.



Feria de la Naranja in Coclé



Machines getting ready to start the harvest at a rice field in Penonomé



Penonomé Wind Farm Project

The Great Plains Of Panama

The triangle formed by Penonomé, Río Hato, and Aguadulce is known as Panama's Great Plains. It is rare indeed to find a location where someone can look to the horizons without seeing a mountain or series of hills. The flat land seems to encourage the sea breezes to blow inland towards the mountains to the north of Penonomé.

The geographical layout of this area makes for the perfect location for wind power generation. Like the Great Plains of the United States, it is also the ideal location for farm lands...

Leaders In Wind Power

The newest crop from the region is being harvested at the Penonomé Wind Farm Project, the first alternative energy facility of its kind in Panama and the largest wind farm in Central America. These giant turbines are easily seen from the Pan-American Highway. The road appears to head right into them as you drive out of Penonomé.

Former U.S. President Bill Clinton was in Penonomé in November 2015 to inaugurate the third phase of the wind farm. The Clinton Global Initiative has been supportive of the project since its inception. Original construction began in September 2012 and has cost US\$570 million to date. A fourth phase was inaugurated in 2016, which further raised the windfarm's megawatt production of clean energy and helped to reduce the nation's dependence on hydro and thermal resources. Penonomé's wind farms contribute a significant percentage of the power being consumed in Panama.

In 2020, Goldwind Americas announced the sale of its 55MW Penonomé I wind farm to AES Panamá, one of the largest power generators in Panama. The farm consists of 22 Goldwind GW109/2500 permanent magnet direct-drive turbines.



The Pan-American Highway.



Basílica Mayor San Juan Bautista

You Have Reached Penonomé...

El Machetazo (a popular local store, similar to Walmart) welcomes you to Penonomé. It's the first thing you'll see as you enter the town.

Café Caney is part of the El Machetazo building and is a reliable place to eat. The portions are more than filling... the food is basic, but good... the prices are always reasonable... The only drawback is you cannot go there late. The closer it is to closing time, the less the selection left on the menu.

The Old Section

The town of Penonomé is divided into what many call "the old section," which is centered on Parque 8 de Diciembre, located in front of Basílica Mayor San Juan Bautista. The government headquarters building, the municipal (district) government building, and the police station are all located here.

Because Penonomé is the capital of Coclé, its main park features an obelisk that pays recognition to each of the districts in the province. Every location in Coclé is part of Penonomé and Penonomé is part of every district, too.

Nearby is the Museo de la Historia y la Tradición Penonomeña (Museum of the Penonomenian History and Tradition). Unfortunately, I'm not too sure what is inside because it is always closed... The posted hours are 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 9 a.m. to noon on Sunday. (If you are able to get in, please let us know what is inside. We're curious to know!) Plus, two blocks in from the park is the Mercado de Penonomé, the local market. As with many locations today, the park is a popular place for the kids to practice their skateboard techniques...

Getting To The Old Section

To reach Parque 8 de Diciembre, coming from Panama City you will turn right off the Pan-American Highway, just before the Puma gas station. The Hotel Dos Continentes was always the landmark given in the past, but it's difficult to see when driving in traffic. You can't miss the Puma gas station, though. It's where the road bends to the left.

Once you turn right, you're on Avenida Juan Demóstenes Arosemena (don't bother looking for street signs; you won't find any). This road leads up to strip loaded with stores packed to overflowing with wares, sidewalks crowded with street vendors and their merchandise, and plenty of places to get a quick, inexpensive bite to eat (or nip to drink).

Just before the Banco Nacional de Panama the street splits into two one-way roads. Keep going straight and at the far end is Parque 8 de Diciembre. After reaching the park you can head back on the other one-way street to return.

As you drive into town, you'll see many little kiosks on the far side of the road. Here, you'll find plenty of fun things to buy... but one of the best buys here are the Panama hats. The real Panama hats... not the ones made in Ecuador, but the more traditional style made in La Pintada, just up the road from Penonomé.

The New Section

To get to the new section of Penonomé, instead of turning at the Puma gas station, keep west on the Pan-American Highway. As you pass the Terpel gas station (on your right) you'll start to see the new section of town... heralded by the modern chains



The Pan-American Highway

and franchises one expects to find in a city: Novey (the hardware/houseware store), KFC, McDonalds, Cochez, and more imported ceramic ware from Mexico are all found in abundance here. It's a fun place to shop for country-minded folk and sells much-needed practical items to those living in this rural area.

A Place To Stay

Trying to find a good place to stay has always been a challenge in Penonomé... not any more, though. The Hotel Coclé recently opened in Iguana Mall. It offers 108 rooms, 2 suites, a restaurant, bar, and meeting rooms for 10 to 350 people.



Parque 8 de Diciembre

Panama's Gold Standard Private Beach Community

Los Islotes on the Azuero Sunset Coast: A fully master-planned paradise with elite amenities and postcard picture views...

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Cigars from Joyas de Panamá



Making a cigar at Joyas de Panamá manufactory

Up In Smoke

La Pintada and Penonomé share another unique distinction in their traditional, hand-rolled cigar industry...

In the 1970s a number of Cubans settled in the Penonomé area... where tobacco was grown at the time. This serendipitous combination made for a perfect cigar business. Today most of the tobacco is from Panama, but some is also imported from the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Ecuador.

La Pintada and Penonomé are each still home to a small cigar factory, both specializing in hand-crafted, high-quality cigars, with distinctive and unique Panamanian flavor.

The factory in La Pintada is called Joyas de Panama and is owned by a Guatemalan expat who married a native of the little town and relocated. Depending upon the demand for cigars, there are 5 to 10 rollers. The tobacco used to be exclusively from La Pintada, but today most comes from Sortava, Chiriquí.

If you can't make it to Penonomé, you can purchase both brands of cigars at the Bodega Mi Amiga on Via Porras in Panama City. Both companies also export their cigars to the United States.

Miss Panama 2015

Not everyone in Penonomé is a farmer... Diana Doris Jaén Ortega was born in Coclé. In 2015, the model was crowned Miss Panama and represented Panama at the Miss World competitions in November 2015 in Sanya, China. She studied Political Science at the Interamericana University of Panama in Panama City.

Finding A Home...

It's not easy to find a home in Penonomé... The lack of real estate offices makes it difficult to know exactly what is happening in the real estate market here. One person I asked wanted to know why in the world I would want to rent when it is so cheap to purchase here...

The rents here, while very affordable at an average of US\$700 a month for a high-quality home on a large lot that would be appealing to most expats, can seem a little overpriced for the area. The reason for this is the difficultly in trying to find rentals...

Penonomé is not generally a rental area; people buy to live here or own a second vacation home here. Realistically, a local-style house could be rented for US\$400 to US\$500 per month. The first step is to actually find a place to rent and then negotiate the price.

The best advice I heard for renting was to drive around until you found a neighborhood where you would want to live. Then you go door-to-door... introduce yourself... explain that you like the neighborhood... and ask if they know of any house that is available to rent.

You'll need to speak Spanish for this strategy, obviously. If you don't, then hire someone that does to go with you.

You need to have the courage to go looking. Finding a place to live here can be a challenge, but it's one that will prepare you well for life here, too.

Where To Eat?

Only a finicky eater will have any difficulty with finding a place to eat at in Penonomé. Fast-food joints like KFC, McDonalds, Domino's Pizza, Subway, Al Capone's, Pio Pio, and Gallo Pinto are easy to find, plus, plenty of Italian, Chinese, Peruvian, Panamanian, Seafood, Spanish, American, Caribbean, and international fare.

Typical Panamanian meals can be easily found for less than US\$5 per meal, some as cheap as US\$2. But options for more formal sit-down dinners are here, too.



Typical house of Coclé



Residential road in Penonomé

One of the most popular local restaurants is Mezon Santa Cruz. This historic landmark was actually a private residence, but many customers think it was a former church. The restaurant is full of family and religious memorabilia.

Mezon Santa Cruz is rated the #1 restaurant in Penonomé by Trip Advisor.

Gastronomia Mar Del Sur has also earned a reputation for serving excellent food... if it was not so difficult to find it would be more popular. This Peruvian restaurant and the chefs pay attention to the details in preparing the food, but you'll need to ask for directions (from a reliable source) to get there.



Coclé handmade sweets



Produce seller

Shopping And Cost Of Living

Shopping in Penonomé means shopping like a local, no matter where you shop. In the old section of town, you'll find the streets packed with sidewalk vendors and stores with bargain-priced merchandise.

At the new strip mall, you'll find the modern chain stores, higher quality products, larger and wider aisles, different selection of merchandise, and usually more employees, but the goods are still of a local aesthetic and standard.

When it comes to grocery shopping you are in luck. Penonomé has two large supermarkets: El Machetazo and Super 99. Both are located on the opposite ends of the town.

El Machetazo recently completed a major renovation and has just about everything a person could possibly want to purchase. This is the Panamanian version of a Super Walmart and offers some great stuff and good prices, from electronics to furniture to sporting goods. The prices reflected in the shopping list this month are from El Machetazo.

Penonomé is a great choice for those with a smaller budget... someone looking for a more local and authentic living experience (or someone interested in agriculture).

Expense for eating out will vary depending on where and what you eat, of course. You can find local flavor for US\$2.50 per meal or classy dining at around US\$50 for a meal.

An agricultural area, produce is abundant and inexpensive here. Save money by stopping at roadside fruit stands and buying from vendors that drive around selling fresh fruits, veggies, and seafood out of the back of a pickup truck.

Health Care Options

Penonomé's main hospital is called Aquílino Tejeira. It's located where all of the buses stop on the Pan-American Highway... but it does not enjoy a good reputation. From what I heard, it is not a place you want to go for care.

You'll also find plenty of clinics, doctor's offices, and pharmacies throughout Penonomé, but most doctors aren't likely to speak English here. Clinics are a good place to get day-to-day care, but should you need more extensive care, you'll need to head to the city.

Penonomé is not a good option for those with serious health issues or ongoing medical problems... you simply won't have quick enough access to the highlevel care you'd need.



Queen of carnaval in Penonomé



Penonome's museum



Coclé pottery displayed in the Penonomé museum

What To Do

Penonomé is for country living... farmer- and cowboy-style country living. If that lifestyle doesn't appeal, keep on moving, folks... nothing to see here.

Carnaval in Penonomé is a unique experience. Here they use real floats for the parade... not the type you move on a street—these actually float down the Río Zaratí. The plaza and three blocks surrounding it are packed with festive people during Carnaval days.

Another popular local celebration is the Patron Saint Festival. This occurs in December on the weekend date closest to the eighth or ninth. A special mass is followed by parading a statue of the saint through the town streets.

There are many historical, cultural, and natural attractions scattered all around the area. It may be easier to book a custom tour than attempting to find them on your own... but, living here, part of the fun is getting out and exploring. Adventuring around the region could be your main activity.



Panama hat craftsman at La Pintada

A trip to La Pintada is a must. The town is named after the petrography found in the local area. One of the challenges is trying to decipher the meaning of the symbols used here.

There is a small movie theater in Penonomé next door to Little Italy. But if you want a big modern movie theater, head to Westland Mall or one of theaters in the city.

Path Of Progress

Like everywhere else, between Panama City and Santiago there is plenty of construction... thanks in part to the Wind Farm Project and its infrastructural needs. Even more wind turbines are to be installed in coming years.

In addition, a new bus terminal, more hotels, a new car dealership, and a new strip mall are all in the works in this region. If you wanted to start a new business here, now could be a good opportunity.

But What About...

Disabilities

The good news is that the land is flat here... But the buildings, sidewalks (if and where they have them),

public transportation, and houses are not made with the disabled in mind. This is not the place to come if you have serious mobility issues.

If you can get by when you're out and about, you could easily design a house here to meet your individual needs. Roads and parking spaces are not designed for special vehicles, like large vans.

Another positive note is full-time care providers are far less expensive here in Panama than in the United States. You would probably be able to afford great inhome care here.

LBGT Living

Panama is a Catholic country. That being said, Panamanians are also of the easiest going people to get along with. In Penonomé there are many Chinese, Turkish, and Arab expats who live harmoniously with their Panamanian neighbors. As long as you're respectful, people are generally respectful back.

Education

While locals use public schools (or private if they can afford it), we did spot a sign for an international school when driving around Penonomé: Excelsior International School, Penonomé's first bilingual school.



Public school students

Universidad Tecnológica de Panama (UTP) is the second largest university in Panama and has a campus in Penonomé. It offers 43 advanced careers, 28 bachelor degrees, and 21 technical careers.

The Astronomical Observatory of Panama UTP is the only astronomical observatory in Panama, opened in April 2011. The observatory offers a summer "Astrocamping" program designed to teach astronomy to all ages (currently being held virtually).

Universidad Latina de Panama, a private university established in 1991 has a campus here, too. There is even a Merchant Marine school.

One expat parent with a child enrolled in school in Panama City wrote that the schools in Penonomé had much more room for the children then what was provided in the city.

Who Should Move To Penonomé?

As with most locations in Panama, it's hot and humid and the *mañana* attitude prevails... It can take longer to get things done that you're used to.

And, as with most of the rural destinations in the country, the streets are small, people like their music loud, and drivers are careless. These are all things to know before you move here.

English is not spoken in many places. However, you may be surprised when a local will approach



Penonomé local cowboys

you speaking English. A server at Little Italy spoke English with a client she knew was from the United States just to practice her English. Coclé Hotel has English-speaking staff. More often than not the Panamanian will understand English (so be careful of what you say!) but they are embarrassed to speak English for fear of being wrong. When out and about here, take a Spanish dictionary with you and practice your Spanish. It can be fun...

Penonomé is the ideal place for the cowboy or girl at heart. If you enjoy simple pleasures and like rustic, country living... this is a paradise. Expect to hear roosters instead of car horns in the wee hours of the morning. 🛸



About The Author

After he'd been in the U.S. Navy for more than 30 years, Dusty decided it was time for a change. Retiring from the Navy, Dusty next became a professor for the Ventura Community College District before going to work with a big box retailer. The downturn in the economy in Hawaii, where he was living at retirement, prompted Dusty and his wife Carolyn to seek new opportunities and new adventures overseas.

The couple moved to Chitré, Panama, in 2013, where they are now full-time residents and adventure seekers and Dusty is reinventing his life as a freelance copywriter and photographer.



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