PANAMA Special Report

Las Lajas Two Worlds, One Unrivaled Coastal Paradise

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-Two Worlds, One Unrivaled Coastal Paradise

By Rebecca Teeters

The colorful central park is crowded with gossiping schoolchildren. People file in and out of the grocery and hardware stores while local restaurants fill with a hungry crowd.

This is lunch hour in the town of Las Lajas. It seems a world away from the sprawling 15 kilometers of serene beach known as Playa Las Lajas.

The beach sits undisturbed and virtually undeveloped just a short 7-kilometer drive from downtown. The two worlds merge to create a perfect destination for those looking for a quiet beach life with services and amenities nearby.

One Of The Oldest Places In Chiriquí

Las Lajas is located on the Pacific coast of Panama in Chiriquí Province and is a subdivision of the larger San Felix district. Founded as a parish district in 1850, San Felix is one of the oldest districts in Chiriquí.

At the time, San Felix was populated mostly by indigenous groups. Around 1899, the area's population

was decimated by a smallpox plague, and it wasn't until 1910 that the district was re-established.

The first European settlers were from France and Germany and they built their homes in the town of Las Lajas. Due to the economic and material growth of Las Lajas, it was named the head of the district in 1918.

Las Lajas has maintained its economic strength due to the minerals, such as copper and gold, that are mined in this mountainous region.

Convenient, Friendly, And Picturesque

Las Lajas is a special place. It's the type of place where you feel at home after just three days. The people are friendly, which makes you want to spend more time with them. The proximity between downtown and the beach offers you the best of both worlds. When you think you're in the middle of nowhere, you head back into town and find the streets full of schoolchildren. The town is full of cute, well-maintained houses that sprawl along shaded lanes. Each house is painted a different color with gardens full of tropical plants, making the town a kaleidoscope of colors.

Even off the beaten track, Las Lajas offers well-stocked grocery stores and a variety of places to dine and activities to participate in. Because the town is located about an hour from David, it makes for convenient shopping excursions and trips to the airport.

Finding Las Lajas

When you're in Playa Las Lajas, you feel as if you're a million miles from the rest of the world. In reality, Las Lajas is only an hour from David and an hourand-a-half from Enrique Malek International Airport, making this Pacific beach one of the most convenient destinations in Panama.

There are several options for reaching Las Lajas. The most affordable is the bus, which leaves the main terminal in David every 30 minutes. You'll take the bus going to San Felix, which costs roughly US\$5 and takes about an hour-and-a-half, depending on the number of stops the driver makes.

There's a grocery store across the street from the terminal and taxis are always available.

If buses and driving aren't your thing, taxis in David will take you directly to the beach for about US\$25.

Driving directions from David are simple. Once out of downtown David, you'll take the Pan-American Highway east toward San Felix. Just before San Felix you'll see signs for the beach—a large metal sign hung above the highway reads "Las Lajas." Take the clearly marked exit on your right-hand side and continue on to Las Lajas. You'll reach the town first. Drive 7 kilometers further and the road dead-ends at the beach, with gravel roads running parallel to the beachfront.

You can rent a car at the airport or at several other rental companies in David.

If you're driving from Panama City, the trip will take roughly five hours. You'll follow the Pan-American Highway through Santiago and turn left at San Felix.



Municipal building in Las Lajas



Schoolchildren enjoy the central park



The road from downtown to Playa Las Lajas



Several local businesses cater to expats

Panama's Next Pacific Hot Spot?

Las Lajas is a small town with a population density of just 28 people per square kilometer. The coastline is sparsely developed and the road between downtown and the beach is inhabited by cows. This may sound dismal, but for those looking to be on the front end of development, it offers a plethora of options. There are miles of unspoiled beachfront property waiting to be discovered. With growth comes more options for businesses as well.

Unlike many small towns, Las Lajas has a large tourist crowd on weekends and holidays. This short-term increase in population provides opportunities for startup businesses to get established before community growth catches up.

Las Lajas has a long way to go before it will be considered the next "hot spot," but the potential exists and the beach isn't going anywhere anytime soon.

A Growing And Connected Expat Community

Las Lajas is sparsely populated compared to other beach destinations, but it has a growing expat community.

There are several restaurants downtown, including an ice cream shop, that cater to expats and tourists. They offer

Western fare and the owners are expats who have found their paradise in Las Lajas.

At the beach, the expat community is growing. There are many lots for sale and several new houses under construction. Because the town and beach are close together, most expats know one another and regularly gather for happy hour, dinner in town, or dinner parties at the beach. Expats also join forces for planned community activities.

Kick Back In Paradise For Less Than US\$1,300 A Month

As prices around the world skyrocket, it's hard to find places that are still affordable, especially at the beach. Fortunately, Las Lajas is one of the holdouts when it comes to buying in paradise.

You can buy a beachfront home for about US\$200,000 to US\$300,000, and if you want to build your dream home, lots are available for much less. Buying a home at the beach might take a bite out of your checkbook, but after that, life in paradise is smooth sailing.

Utilities in Panama cost half what they do in the United States and Canada. Garbage collection in Las Lajas will run you US\$4 a month while water is only US\$4.50 a month. These basics, along with inexpensive electricity, cut the cost of living significantly. If you're a *pensionado* (retiree), the government reduces the cost of your utilities by percentages, making life even more affordable.

You'll have options for meals out, but there's little else that will fall on your entertainment budget, unless you have a soft spot for ice cream. Most of your entertainment will be free at the beach or maybe an occasional massage.

Click here for a more detailed breakdown of your monthly expenses.

Volunteer, Visit A Botanical Garden, Or Indulge In A Massage

Life at the beach is what you make of it. If you want to stroll the beach and hang out in a hammock all day, you can do that in Las Lajas. You can also spice your life up by joining local groups and volunteering.

If you enjoy working on environmental projects, there are several options. One of the most popular is Amigos de las Tortugas Playa Las Lajas Chiriquí. This group works to protect sea turtles that lay their eggs along Playa Las Lajas. Several times a year, they release the baby turtles that hatch at their reserve back into the ocean. If you've never seen these tiny babies scurrying toward the mighty Pacific, it's an event that you'll never forget and will want to witness time after time.

If you enjoy plant life, Jardín Botánico Lajas Adentro offers tours at their extensive botanical garden.

People looking for more active options can try canoeing in the nearby river, surfing the rolling waves, or even scuba diving.

Finish your day off with a massage and dinner at one of the local restaurants before heading back to your hammock.

Learning Spanish Is Encouraged, But It's Not A "Must"

Learning Spanish will help you considerably, but it isn't a requirement to enjoy life in Las Lajas.

Due to the number of tourists that visit the area, there are several places you'll find English speakers. Many hotels have English-speaking staff, and menus are frequently in both languages. Fellow expats living at the beach and in town will be happy to lend a hand.

The locals are friendly, and with small-town living comes patience. If you try, no matter how bad your Spanish is, they'll take the time to help you. With time, and as you interact more with the locals, your Spanish will improve, making it easier each day to get by.

Carrying a notebook or your phone can also help. You can write numbers if you don't know how to say them or draw pictures of what you're looking for. There are also translation apps on smartphones that will help you get by in a pinch. The most important thing is to be patient and try your best.



Try your hand at canoeing



The sole condo building in Las Lajas

Finding Your Dream Home

There's a variety of houses and lots for sale in the Las Lajas area. You should visit, rent, and then consider buying a home after you're positive Las Lajas is a good fit for you and your family.

There are several factors to consider before buying a home or a lot. First, decide how important living at the beach is. The beach is more expensive and will most likely involve owning a car. If you choose to live in town, you can find a home for under US\$50,000 and you might not need a car.

Decide if buying a house is right for you, or if you want to build. The number of lots available at the beach is considerably more than the number of finished homes. Building a house in Las Lajas will involve buying materials locally in San Felix and David, which means a lot of work on your part. For many expats, designing their dream home is worth the sweat.

Buying a house that is already on the market will require research. Do your due diligence: Find out if the property is titled and if the title is clear. Visit the property to see the house and location in person—don't trust the listing. The website may say it's only 200 yards from the beach, but what's in that space between the property and the beach? Some older homes had views that have been blocked by larger homes built in front of them.

Public beach areas sometimes become overly crowded on weekends and holidays. If you prefer quiet and solitude, research the area before buying and ask around to find out of rambunctious beach-goers visit frequently.

Take Your Pick Of Rental Options

The rental market in Las Lajas is alive and flourishing. If you're looking for a luxury vacation rental and price is no object, you'll find plenty of options online. There are beachside houses with pools and all amenities ranging from US\$900 to US\$6,000 a month. Most rental owners don't live in the area and visit only for holidays or on weekends.

If you're after a long-term and affordable property, you'll need to spend time on the ground asking people and following up on posted signs. Word-of-mouth is the best way to find good deals in small towns.

Do you want to live at the beach or in town? There are options in both areas of Las Lajas, and living in town is cheaper. Spend a month or two staying in different neighborhoods to discover what you like and dislike about each one.

Quality Medical Attention

In addition to private clinics, you have two options for health care in Las Lajas. There's Centro de Salud de Las Lajas in the main downtown area. Centro de Salud de Las Lajas is similar to a large-scale clinic in the States. The staff and resources are prepared to deal with everyday problems such as broken bones, prescriptions for various conditions, and minor surgery, such as stitching cuts.

For more serious health care issues, you'll need to go to the hospital in San Felix. It offers comprehensive health care, including x-rays and in-patient care.

If you have an issue that neither Centro de Salud nor the hospital can handle, you'll be sent by ambulance to Hospital Chiriquí in David.

Starting A Business

Las Lajas is still undeveloped, with enormous opportunity for those with an entrepreneurial spirit. You just have to find the right niche market and capitalize on the available cliental.

It's quiet during the week in Las Lajas, and on the weekends there's a large influx of people from David and the surrounding areas. Any business needs to be prepared for this contrast and the cash-flow possibilities it generates.

If you're considering starting a business in Las Lajas, or anywhere in Panama, you must find an attorney. They will help you navigate the reams of required paperwork and will also advise you on local laws and regulations.

Some expats have gone into business without counsel and have found themselves on the wrong side of the law or even immigration, so do your due diligence before diving in.

Getting An Education

There are two main schools in Las Lajas, and lots of children come from the surrounding areas to attend them. Both the elementary school and the high school, locally known as *colegios*, are public schools. They're run by the Ministry of Education of Panama and follow the same curriculum as other public schools. If you're interested in adult education, research INADEH Las Lajas.

Las Lajas doesn't offer any international schools. If you're determined to attend an international school, you'll need to make the hour-plus commute each day. David has several options including The Oxford School.

There are a few specialized schools in the area that are currently closed due to the pandemic.

Living With A Disability In Las Lajas

Navigating any small town in Panama with a disability is challenging, but depending on the type of disability, getting around Las Lajas is possible with assistance. The roads are in adequate condition and the town has less stairs than other destinations in Panama.

Living at the beach with a disability will be more complicated. Many beach neighborhoods in Las Lajas aren't paved and there are no sidewalks.

There's distance between the town and beach, meaning that travel by car is the norm, rather than getting around on foot, bicycle, or horse, which is common in other small towns. This is an upside for someone with a mobility impairment. As the roads are in favorable condition, special-outfitted cars or vans would have no difficulty traversing the area.

You should vacation in Las Lajas before moving here. That way you'll know how much the lack of sidewalks, the rainy season, and the lack of accessibility impact your quality of life.

Acceptance Of The LGBTQ Community

Panama is conservative and its small towns are even more so. Las Lajas is no exception. The town has a large indigenous population and their culture is more conservative than the general population of Panama. There's no LGBTQ movement in the area. This doesn't mean someone of the LGBTQ community would be unwelcome. You'll be in the minority and your sexual orientation or gender identity may not be accepted as it would be in more liberal countries.

This shouldn't deter you from Las Lajas. Unless you openly express your sexual orientation or gender identity, the likelihood that it would affect your life among the locals or other expats is slim. Generally, people in Panama live and let live, they aren't interested in your sexuality. They're more interested in learning about the country you came from and why you chose to live in Las Lajas.

If you hang out with locals or in local establishments you may hear people calling their friends "gay," but this isn't considered condescending in the same way it is in the United States. Local communities are much less politically correct than what many foreigners are used to. It's the same as Panamanians calling the Chinese "chino," which isn't something you'd do at home. Until you know the local boundaries with jokes and discriminative terminology, treat everyone as you would back home.

The Panamanian government offers no rights nor protections to members of the LGBTQ community.

Same-sex relationships aren't legally recognized, samesex marriage isn't legal, adoption of children by same-sex couples is banned, and there are no protections against discrimination or hate crimes on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. In terms of LGBTQ rights, Panama lags far behind its more progressive neighbors, Colombia and Costa Rica.

Get Your Goat

If you're moving to Las Lajas for tranquility and smalltown living where cars are outnumbered by bicycles... be prepared.

During the weekends, especially holiday weekends, Las Lajas is anything but tranquil. Hordes of visitors come from David and the surrounding areas. They come for the beach, but they also come to party. Car radios, ATVs, children, and drunk adults invade the beach and will have you wishing for life anywhere but here.

Then, just when you think life is returning to normal, the noise is over, the cars and people are gone... you look at your beautiful beach and see what they left behind.



Panama hasn't adopted healthy practices for dealing with trash, and your beautiful beach will be covered with litter. This is annoying and might drive you a little nuts, but it's the cost of living at the beach.

Try to focus on the positive aspects of life here, and if you still can't handle it, take a vacation on those weekends.

Is Las Lajas The Haven For You?

Las Lajas offers the best of both worlds, the beach and small-town life. It's also close enough to David to make going to the city a day trip rather than a serious hassle.

These are the reasons people love Las Lajas. It's quiet, with just enough rowdiness on weekends and holidays to remind you why you love your quiet beach.

If you're looking for all-night clubs, movie theaters, and luxury shopping, Las Lajas isn't for you. Small-town living comes with its drawbacks... for example, there are only a handful of restaurants and places to go out. Shopping is limited and sometimes that means you won't find what you need. If fine dining and big crowds are what you're looking for, keep looking.

The same things some people find to be drawbacks are what residents of Las Lajas love about it.

There are only a few stores, and it won't take long before you know the clerks and the young people working at the ice cream shop. The children who live in your neighborhood will wave to you and the old man who sits on the corner will say "*buenos dias*."

Las Lajas offers an unparalleled beach experience. If long sunrise walks on the beach and afternoon dips in the Pacific are what you're looking for, you'd be hardpressed to find a comparable beach. Fifteen kilometers of unspoiled empty beach, where there are more pelicans than people, is something to be cherished. Las Lajas is one of the last places you'll find this type of tranquility.



Alone on the beach



About The Author

Rebecca Teeters is a freelance writer who spent many years in New Orleans, Louisiana, before catching the travel bug. After four years in Nicaragua and a solo drive through Central America, she has finally put down roots in the small beach town of Puerto Armuelles, Panama, where she enjoys learning about the local culture and blogging about those lessons.



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