PANAMA Special Report



David Panama's Other Boom Town

PANAMA Special Report

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DAVD PANAMA'S OTHER BOOM TOWN



A plane flies low overhead, blocking out the glaring sun. A line of taxis wait for passengers in front of the grocery store while schoolchildren file down the sidewalks. Chimes ding as customers stroll in and out of stores, and buses roll down the street headed to places near and far. This is downtown San José de David, better known as David. It's the third-largest city in Panama and the capital of Chiriquí Province.

Outside downtown lie quiet neighborhoods—known as *urbanizaciones*—home to David's strong middle class.

David is a booming commercial metropolis and the hub for all major industries in Chiriquí, including

the transportation, agricultural, financial, and commercial sectors.

High-speed internet, reliable electricity, and strong infrastructure make David an excellent place to do business. For the same reasons, it's an increasingly popular destination for expats.

A Metropolis With Humble Beginnings

David has come a long way since its founding in 1602. It's no longer the unrecognized, six-street city that Juan Lopez de Sequeira and Francisco de Gama created. At first, David wasn't recognized by the central government, likely because its founding fathers were Jewish, which put them at odds with the Catholic government.

In 1736, David was officially recognized and continued its long journey to becoming the metropolis that it is today. From 1916 to 1949, David was the main hub for the 165-kilometer (103-mile) railway system that serviced and exploited Chiriquí.

David was home to the main railway stations, which helped turn the city into the merchant capital of western Panama. When the railway discontinued service, David remained an important transportation hub.

The Pan-American Highway (which connects South, Central, and North America) runs through the city, making David the central port for imports and exports to and from Costa Rica. The highway also links all corners of Panama.

In addition to being the transportation hub of western Panama, David is also the main commercial district and financial capital of Chiriquí Province.

The Hub Of Western Panama

David is the capital of Chiriquí Province and the thirdlargest city in Panama with over 80,000 residents.

It stands out among other places in western Panama due to the high level of activity within the city. Compared to other well-known destinations like Boquete or the beaches along the Pacific coast, David is a commercial haven.

Residents of Chiriquí Province flock to David for all that it has to offer. If you want to go to a movie theater, David is the place. The same goes for shopping malls, upscale dining, international fast-food chains, car dealerships, nightlife, casinos, and international banks.

Finding David

David is located about 30 kilometers (19 miles) from the Costa Rican border at the foothills of the Cordillera de Talamanca mountain range and below the water break of the David River.



Bustling streets of David



One of the many international banks in David

If you're traveling from Costa Rica, David is impossible to miss. The outskirts of the city are bisected by the Pan-American Highway, and you'll know you're in David when you hit the first stoplight after crossing the border.

The quickest way to make the journey is by car, which takes about 30 minutes. There are also plenty of taxis after you cross the border that will take you directly to David for US\$20 to US\$25.

To save money, there are buses at the border that will take you directly to the downtown terminal in David. They leave the border every 20 minutes and cost US\$2.

You have several options for traveling from Panama City to David. The quickest and most direct route is by airplane. You can fly Copa Airlines from Tocumen International Airport or AirPanama from Marcos A. Gelabert International Airport near the Albrook bus terminal. Either option costs about US\$100 and takes roughly 40 minutes.

If you're flying to David from an international destination, you'll layover at Tocumen. If you're already on the ground in Panama City, Albrook's Gelabert airport is more convenient and affordable.

Bus is another option. Companies like Panachif run regular, direct routes from Panama City to David for about US\$20. They also offer an express bus that travels overnight and will cut your travel time from eight hours to six. Make sure to have a jacket or sweater handy—these buses are air-conditioned to the max.

You can also drive from Panama City to David by following the Pan-American Highway, passing through Santiago. It's a long drive and if you don't have experience driving in Central America you may want to forgo this option.

A Promising Future

David has a well-established middle class and low unemployment and poverty rates. These factors along with its strength in the financial sector and manufacturing industry, make for a healthy economy that's primed for growth.





There have recently been several large-scale public construction projects in the area, including the renovation of the Estadio Kenny Serracín baseball stadium, the expansion of both Enrique Malek International Airport and the David-Boquete Highway, and the construction of new bridges along the Pan-American Highway.

These initiatives plus the development of the banking center and increased commercial activity make David one of the fastest-growing cities in Panama.

Although the pandemic put several projects on hold, today the city is back up and running at nearly 100% of pre-pandemic activity and shows no signs of slowing down.

Finding Other Expats

The expat community in David is growing steadily, and each year more expats move to the area. It's a popular city for entrepreneurs and retirees alike.

In David—like in the rest of the world—expats tend to gravitate toward one another, forming small communities with shared backgrounds, interests, and experiences.

Whether you meet other expat parents at your child's school or form a group of bird watchers that goes to Boquete on the weekends, there are lots of ways to meet and engage with other expats in David.

David has about the same population as Jacksonville, North Carolina... Not exactly huge. This means that with time you'll start seeing the same faces at the same places and find groups of people that you enjoy spending time with. Some friends play horseshoes during the week while others meet for happy hour on the weekends or go to boxing class together in the mornings.

There's no limit to the social activities possible in David.

Business Competition Means Low Prices

David is an affordable city to live in. With such a large market, there's plenty of competition, which benefits the consumer. Whether it's the flooded rental market or the price of shower curtains, there are plenty of deals to be found in David.

The mix of expats, locals, and consumers from surrounding areas has led to an increase in the variety of available goods in the city. You can enjoy lunch at a local *fonda* for US\$3 a person or you can head across the street to McDonalds. The average price of a single movie ticket in the United States is US\$9.57... in David you can see a movie and get a 32-ounce soda and a box of popcorn for just US\$10.

Panama also offers a *pensionado* discount to senior citizens. This discount often isn't recognized in smaller communities, but is easy to take advantage of in larger cities like David.

A couple who owns a home should expect to spend about US\$1,300 a month in David.

<u>Click here</u> for a more detailed breakdown of your monthly expenses.





Parque Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra

Go Shopping, Enjoy A Meal Out, Or Take A Day Trip

Staying busy in David isn't difficult; finding time to relax might be. David has so much to offer that you could fill your calendar every day.

David has more than a dozen gyms for an early morning workout. There are more places than you can shake a stick at to enjoy lunch. You can go shopping at a local clothing store or a mega-box store like PriceSmart (similar to Costco), or take a relaxing stroll through Parque Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra in downtown.

Stop in for a bite of sushi at dinner or get a pizza delivered from Dominos. After dinner you can head to the new movie theater at Federal Mall or to Estadio Kenny Serracín for a baseball game. If you prefer soccer, there's Estadio San Cristóbal where the Chiriquí team—Atlético Chiriquí—plays.

On Saturdays you can visit the farmer's market near the government offices to buy flowers or the Mercado Público for fresh fish. Later in the day you can meet with any number of volunteer groups, ranging from pet adoption to the Rotary Club.

If you still have free time, head out of the city. You can go horseback riding in Boquete or maybe do some bird watching. You can head to Playa La Barqueta for a stroll on a black-sand beach or visit a beach resort in Boca Chica.

The International Fair of David every March is the most well-known event of the year in Chiriquí. Vendors come from all over the world (but mostly Central America) to sell their wares. You can find jewelry, hammocks, boots, and belts. If you don't feel like shopping, you can still enjoy the music and dancing.

Throughout the year there are other fairs in the city, parades with marching bands, and holiday celebrations. November is a busy month for celebrations as Panama celebrates multiple Independence Days.

Learning Spanish Will Make Your Life Easier

Life in a foreign country comes with challenges, and learning a second language is often the most intimidating. While knowing a basic level of Spanish would make your life easier, speaking it fluently isn't a requirement for living well in David.

David has no shortage of bilingual employees. Many are young and have studied hard to earn their positions. They may not speak English fluently, but most speak and understand it well enough to overcome the language barrier.

If all else fails, there are several translation apps available on smartphones that you can use in desperation. The more time you spend in Panama, the more words you'll add to your vocabulary, and you'll make friends who can help you when you need it.

Own A Comfortable, Modern Home For Less Than US\$150,000

Downtown David is hectic, and many expats prefer living in close-knit, quiet neighborhoods. These neighborhoods are walking distance or a short drive from downtown. Many neighborhoods have their own grocery store, gyms, and other convenience stores. They also range in style from cute colorful homes to modern residences.

Some neighborhoods have a mix of locals and expats, while others have a majority of one or the other. You should spend time in different neighborhoods before committing to one.

David offers high-quality real estate for cheap. You can easily find a comfortable home here for less than US\$150,000. Though you can find cheaper housing in smaller communities, the quality in David is far superior to what you'd get for the same price elsewhere.

You're more likely to find a good deal on a property with on-the-ground research. Although some houses are listed online, most homeowners still put a sign outside that says *"se vende."* This means you'll need to contact the owner directly. The upside is that you can





negotiate your own terms and won't have to pay a real estate agent.

Always use a lawyer when purchasing property in Panama. You need to know if the property has a clear title, as properties are often handed down through generations without the proper paperwork. A lawyer will check the title and register your sale afterward. They'll also rule out any liens against the property.

Popular neighborhoods in David include:

El Terronal: Just off the Pan-American Highway behind Do It Center and Rey grocery store...

Villa Mercedes: A quiet, middle-class neighborhood with a mix of expats and Panamanians...

Villa Olga: An upscale residential community...

Altamar II: A gated community about 10 minutes from downtown David...

Coquito: Large homes just five minutes from downtown David...

San Antonio: A quiet neighborhood bordering Río David...

Maria Gloria: Located five minutes from downtown David just off the David-Boquete Highway.

A Diverse And Affordable Rental Market

The rental market in David is diverse. Online you can find a variety of properties for rent, ranging from fully furnished modern homes with swimming pools to modest, unfurnished apartments. With such a large and diversified market, rental prices vary greatly, from US\$200 to US\$2,000 a month.

Homeowners usually have to pay utilities like water, electricity, and trash services. When a rental says "unfurnished," it means the rental is a bare space... no refrigerator, no stove, maybe a random broken table. You'll need to buy the things you need.

If you have the time and want to save money, there are plenty of rentals that aren't listed online. To find





these you'll need to be in David searching the streets for signs posted outside of properties. This can be time consuming and overwhelming if you're not familiar with the city.

To narrow down your options, you should first decide what your needs are, what part of the city you'd like to live in, and how much you're willing to pay.

World-Class Health Care

David offers the best health care in Chiriquí Province. There are two public hospitals and two private hospitals in the city. Hospital Chiriquí is one of the best hospitals in Panama.

There are dozens of private clinics offering basic care and prescriptions. You can also find chiropractors, sports medicine doctors, dentists, and laboratories that do blood screening and testing.

Before moving to David you should research various facilities throughout the city so you know which providers you're comfortable with.

The Place To Be For Entrepreneurs

David is the fastest-growing city in the region and entrepreneurs are setting up shop. If you're looking to start a business in Panama, David is the place to be.

David offers several professional centers where you can rent spaces on a month-to-month basis. There's also a coworking center—Areacoworks—which is perfect for start-ups. Spaces can be rented on a need-to basis or monthly. They offer closed offices, high-speed internet, meeting rooms, and a kitchen space for coffee breaks.

David is growing with industry in mind.

Many businessowners are heading to David to escape the bureaucracy in Panama City. The government in David is more forgiving: They want your company and are willing to hold your hand through the process.

There's an abundance of eager young, educated people looking for work in David. Many come from throughout the region to find better-paying jobs.



Hospital Regional Dr. Rafael Hernández in San Pablo Viejo, David



One of the many banks in David

They're often supporting large families and are hardworking and eager to impress.

Starting a business in Panama, like anywhere, comes with laws that must be followed. You'll need to hire a lawyer who can help you throughout the legal process and keep you and your business on the right side of the law.

Take Your Pick Of International Schools

David offers the best schools in the area, making it a popular destination for families with children. Although David has plenty of public schools, many expats prefer international schools with bilingual curriculums for their children. These schools are private and tuition varies depending on the school.

The two most well-known international schools in David are The Oxford School and the American School, but there are many options to choose from. Between online research and in-person campus visits, you'll find a school that fits both yours and your children's needs.

If you're looking for a religion-based curriculum, the Magen David Academy is your best option.

Living With A Disability

David has pros and cons for people living with a disability. On the positive side, it boasts first-class health care for those in need of regular care. If you have a disabled child, David's private schools may offer better accommodations than schools in other areas of Panama outside Panama City.

On the other hand, drivers are aggressive and many sidewalks are broken or cracked, making it difficult for people with mobility issues to safely move around the city. There are more handicapped ramps in David than in the rest of Chiriquí, but many lead to fast-moving traffic or crowded sidewalks without ramps.

If you have a disability and are planning a move to David, vacation here first for an extended period of time to know how much these obstacles affect your quality of life.







Is David Gay-Friendly?

Panama Letter Editor Gabrielle Wells explains...

Panama isn't yet an LGBTQ-friendly destination. The Panamanian government offers no rights nor protections to members of the LGBTQ community. Same-sex relationships aren't legally recognized, same-same 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. If you're married to a partner of the same sex, your marriage will not be recognized in Panama. You can try signing a power of attorney and getting it notarized to grant your spouse rights in matters like finances, children, and health care, but these documents often aren't honored.

Homosexuality was decriminalized in 2008 in Panama. This is a Catholic country with no real separation of church and state. Discrimination and prejudice are an everyday reality for LGBTQ individuals living here.

The most LGBTQ-friendly destinations in Panama are Bocas del Toro and certain areas of Panama City. In the interior provinces, including cities like David where lifestyle and beliefs are more traditional and machismo culture more prevalent, members of the LGBTQ community should exercise caution. Avoid all public displays of affection with same-sex partners for your safety.

David celebrated its first LGBTQ Pride March this year. While progress is being made, the city still has a long way to go before it could be considered LGBTQ-friendly.

If you don't like the idea of keeping your identity a secret, look to Panama's more progressive neighbors, Colombia and Costa Rica (gay marriage is legal in both).

Get Your Goat

Ask anyone in David and they'll tell you that parking isn't just a minor hassle: At times it's enough to reconsider owning a vehicle. The roads weren't designed for the amount of growth the city has seen.





Although businesses and people can adapt, the roads will never get any wider or longer. This means limited parking with an ever-growing number of cars.

The amount of cars in David makes driving stressful, and when you find a place to park it's impossible to squeeze into the spot because there's a taxi on your bumper and someone cutting you off in front. More often than not, you end up going around the block just to find someone already managed to park.

If you're driving for the first time in David, be prepared for a stressful day. The majority of the roads are unmarked one-way streets. Before turning, always check for oncoming traffic to make sure you aren't running into a one-way street.

David has a few stoplights, but downtown relies on stop signs that are often ignored. Keep your eyes on the road and be alert at all times.

If you're only visiting, consider hiring a taxi to drive you around the city. They're affordable, know the area, and some will even wait for you to return from your shopping.

Is David The Haven For You?

David is a unique destination and most people will either love it or hate it.

Life in a hectic city has drawbacks. Driving, parking, and the unrelenting heat are factors that some people can't live with.



Living in David has many upsides. You'd be based in the center of everything: Whether you're looking for nightlife, shopping, fairs, or sporting events, it's all close by.

If you're starting a business, there's no better place to be. If you're sending children to school, you have lots of options. Even if the city is hectic, many neighborhoods are far from the hustle and bustle, making for quiet living just minutes from anything you might need.

David is conveniently located for weekend getaways. The hills of Boquete are just 30 minutes away. There are a handful of beaches less than an hour from David. The Costa Rican border is also about 30 minutes away.

If you're looking for a vibrant and growing city in Panama, David has your name on it. 📌



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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Certainly, you'll find the best services in Panama City, but some smaller towns also offer good public and private hospital and clinic options. This report shows you where, beyond the capital, you can find them...plus it also details your top in-country health insurance options (including policies that could provide all the coverage you need for as little as US\$50 per month...

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