

PANAMA

Special Report



Pirates, Forts, And Black Jesus
—Discovering Portobelo, A Town On
Panama's Caribbean Coast

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Special Report

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PIRATES, FORTS, AND BLACK JESUS

—Discovering Portobelo, A Town On Panama's Caribbean Coast

BY MATT CHILLIAK



Panama is a country of impressive economic growth.

The Hub of the Americas, the country is firmly on the radar of multinational corporations and financial groups from around the globe. All this attention mainly focuses on Panama City, as demonstrated by the city's multitude of skyscrapers and infrastructure improvements...

However, Panama is also a country of contrasts, and nowhere is this clearer than in the dramatic change in scenery you experience on the trip from Panama City to the sleepy port town of Portobelo.

(While Portobelo is technically a city, it feels more like a town, so I will call it such throughout this article.)

Arriving in Portobelo from Panama City, I realized that, while the capital city is pulling itself into first-world status, other places in Panama remain underdeveloped—places such as Portobelo.

The path of progress that is expanding through Panama has yet to arrive in Portobelo. It's a sleepy town, content with the simple lifestyle it enjoys.



Aerial view of Portobelo village

Off the beaten path, Portobelo is an adventurer's paradise. A forest full of wildlife that is waiting to be explored surrounds the town's historical Colonial ruins that look out to the open ocean.

Getting There

Located an hour east of the city of Colón, Portobelo can easily be reached by car. From Panama City, take the Corredor Norte for about an hour to the town of Sabanitas, and, after turning onto another highway, Portobelo is just a half-hour away.

It's possible to take a bus from the Albrook terminal in Panama City to Portobelo. With a transfer in Sabanitas, the bus trip takes several hours and costs about US\$6. If your bus has air-conditioning, consider yourself lucky...

Another way of getting there is to take a train operated by the Panama Canal Railway Company from Panama City to Colón (US\$25, or US\$18 for seniors) and then complete the trip with a car service to Portobelo. The train departs from the station near Albrook in Panama City, Monday to Friday at 7:15 a.m.

Climate

Being on Panama's Caribbean coast, Portobelo receives more rain than Panama City, which lies on the Pacific coast. Expect heavy showers, especially during the rainy season from April to December.

As they are in most of Panama, the temperatures in Portobelo are hot year-round, typically around 85 to 95 degrees Fahrenheit. 09/2500 permanent magnet direct-drive turbines.

Pirates And Plunder

For the little amount of attention Portobelo receives today, it's hard to believe that it was once one of the most important colonial settlements in the Americas.

Christopher Columbus arrived here on his fourth New World journey in 1502, and, after being founded in 1597, the town became an important center for Spanish exploits in the 16th and 17th centuries.

At one point, more than one-third of the world's gold and silver passed through Portobelo's Customs House before being patriated to Spain. The town was also a hub from trading in sugar, tobacco, wine, cloth, cheese, and slaves.

Portobelo's riches couldn't be kept a secret, and envious pirates and other nations began to set their sights on



Ruins of Fort San Lorenzo

the town. To protect the town's wealth, Spain built an impressive collection of armaments and forts to defend against the British fleets and pirates that attacked. The ruins of these forts are now a UNESCO World Heritage Site and provide a glimpse into the town's famed past.



View at Defense Walls Overlooking the Bay of Fort Jeronimo and Real Aduana customs house in Portobelo main square

Alas, Spain's defenses weren't enough, and, in 1668, legendary pirate Captain Morgan and 450 of his merry men successfully attacked and raided the town for all its wealth, plundering it for 14 days. Apparently, the defense planners had focused too much on defending from an attack from sea and were taken by surprise from the captain's land-based attack from behind.

Locals half-jokingly mention that there is an immense amount of unfound gold buried around the area. I took those stories with a grain of salt; however, that is not to say that discoveries aren't to be made...

When Sir Frances Drake died in 1596, he was laid to rest at sea in a lead coffin near Portobelo Bay, providing an ambitious hunt for present-day divers.



Main street in Portobelo village

Where To Stay And Eat

A number of hostels are scattered throughout Portobelo, catering mostly to backpackers passing through on their way to or from other sites along the Caribbean coast...

Casa del Rayo Verde is a step above a hostel and provides comfortable rooms at a decent rate. For US\$65 a night, you can have a clean and well-decorated, oceanfront, air-conditioned room with a private bathroom and a hammock right outside your door.

The place is operated by a nonprofit group a few doors down, the Fundación Bahía de Portobelo, which aims to promote and encourage local culture and artists. The group operates a music and dance school for local children and sells locally made arts and crafts in its gift shop at the Congo Cultural Center. They also provide individual art classes for anyone who is interested.

The restaurant at the Congo Cultural Center is perhaps the best in Portobelo. The menu is a mix of local traditional and modern international foods, including wraps, salads, and ceviche.

For about US\$50 you could have dinner for two, with an appetizer, drinks, and main course, with tax and tip included. The food tastes excellent, and all the proceeds from the restaurant go to the foundation, which helps justify the cost being higher than the other restaurants in town.

Portobelo offers plenty of cheaper dining options that are also worth a try. Fonda Adamilcar is a little hole-in-the-wall restaurant on the main road. The place only has a few tables and was staffed by one woman who was host, waitress, and chef, all at once.

The menu offers typical Caribbean food, with a selection of seafood and meats. The coconut rice is a delicious change from the regular bland rice I am used to in Panama City, and the squid I ordered was delectable. Dinner for two, including natural fruit juice and two main courses came to US\$20, after tax and tip.

Another eatery that I highly recommend is the bakery Panadería Refresquería. A favorite among locals and expats alike, the bakery has fresh breads and pastries available on the main floor and an open-air restaurant on the second floor.

This is the spot to go to for a good breakfast and morning coffee. The Nutella and banana crepe was large, filling, and savory, and the bacon and eggs as good as any other. All included, breakfast and coffee for two will set you back about US\$12.



The old fort in Portobelo

While I wouldn't have known it had I not been told, apparently much of the seafood offered around Portobelo is not freshly caught but is in fact frozen. This seemed like an oddity, given the town's coastal location.

Supposedly, fishing is not that big of an industry here, and much of the seafood arrives frozen from Colón. Nonetheless—frozen or fresh—the seafood I tasted throughout my stay was fantastic.

Activities, Attractions, And Adventures

The aged sights of Portobelo will be sure to pique the interest of even the least history-fascinated minds...

The first thing you see when pulling into town, Bateria Santiago is free to enter and explore. The

canons, now neutralized, stand as a testament to the town's former importance. The catacomb underneath is an interesting reminder to the grim reality facing captured raiders.

The Customs House is another remnant of the Spanish Colonial period in Portobelo and is in remarkably good shape compared to the other structures from the same period. The main floor shelters a museum that is open from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., seven days a week. Entrance is US\$5 for adults, with discount for kids, students, and seniors.

The exhibit consists of a 10-minute educational film on the town's history and a collection of artifacts such as muskets, bayonets, navigational equipment, documents, and photos. The top floor is free to enter but is literally nothing but a large empty room.

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Across the square from the Customs House is the Iglesia de San Felipe, dating back to 1814. Inside the church is the cherished effigy of Cristo Negro (Spanish for "Black Jesus"), a revered religious figure to many of the Afro-Caribbean descendants in the region as well as Panamanians in general.

The town holds a festival in honor of Cristo Negro every year on Oct. 21. During the rest of the year, a museum displays religious articles belonging to the statue of Cristo Negro.

For those less inclined towards historical ruins and museums, Portobelo is surrounded by a national park that provides a wealth of natural beauty waiting to be explored...

Trails into the jungle are easy to find, and I set upon one that started in town one afternoon. The path wasn't too rough, and it showcased all kinds of wildlife and crystal-clear streams. If you're lucky, you'll get to see some monkeys. Just be sure not to get too close or try to feed them—these are wild animals



View of Black Christ Church or the Iglesia de San Felipe

and they may not be as friendly or as cute as they look.

About 20 minutes before Portobelo, there is a zoo on the side of the highway called Safarick's Zoológico. This is not any old zoo—it takes in sick and injured wildlife and rehabilitates them back to health. The animals housed include toucans, sloths, monkeys,

Black Jesus (Cristo Negro)



The true origins of the Black Jesus statue are muddled, but it's generally acknowledged that it first arrived to Portobelo in the mid-1600s. One account claims the statue was thrown overboard to lighten the load of a ship in a storm and was then retrieved by fishermen.

Another account claims the arrival was simply a shipping mistake, and that the statue was meant for Taboga Island. With all the accounts, the statue arrives, is prevented from being removed, and is given reverence for its miraculous traits.

The statue is kept in the Iglesia de San Felipe, adorned in a robe and crown. The robe is changed multiple times throughout the year, using more than 60 robes made and donated by Panamanians.

Since its arrival in town, as many as 60,000 people from across the country make the pilgrimage to

pay their respects to the Black Jesus statue during a festival held every Oct. 21. Some walk as far as 200 kms to get there, and many others take to crawling the last 22 kms of the pilgrimage in honor of Black Jesus.

During this festival, the town comes alive and is packed. Some people even camp out in tents in the streets and main square because of the lack of spare beds.

For the festival's mass, 80 men carry the statue on a four-hour parade around Portobelo. Being chosen to help carry the statue brings great respect in the community.

white-tailed deer, and ocelots, among others, as well as a butterfly sanctuary. If an animal can be rehabilitated to the point it's able to reenter the wild, the zoo releases it.

The rehabilitation facility has been around for years, but they have only recently opened to the public as a zoo. It's good to see a zoo that takes proper care of their animals and doesn't mistreat them for profit. In Portobelo's central square, there is a sorry sight of a monkey in a small cage, whose owner charges money for photos with it.

The zoo's owner, Antonio, offers guided tours for US\$25, telling you each animal's story of how it was brought to the zoo, how they rehabilitate the animals, and the success stories they're had.

If you're looking to get some sun, the coastline around Portobelo and on the nearby islands is dotted with



Architectural details of the customs house of Fort Jeronimo

beaches, including Playa Huertas, Playa Frances, and Playa Blanca.

The Caribbean coast makes Portobelo a great spot for watersport enthusiasts. The Congo Cultural Center offers watersport activities with all the necessary



Visitor at old Spanish fort overlooking Portobelo Harbor where gold was once loaded on Spanish galleons

equipment. Some of the options include waterskiing, fishing, banana boating, and paddle boards, ranging in prices, from US\$20 to US\$60.

Another option is Portobelo Tours, which offers kayaking, snorkeling, diving, hiking, and fort tours. If you're lucky during one of your dives, you may come across the legendary lead coffin of Sir Frances Drake.

Living Here

Living in Portobelo is definitely not for those who are accustomed to a pampered lifestyle... But that's not to say that moving here can't or shouldn't be done. Just be sure not to go in with any misconceptions. Life here is simple, basic, and perhaps, at times, frustrating.

Services in the Portobelo are minimal. Five small supermarkets are set up in the town, and their goods range from regular supermarket food items, including processed foods and fresh produce, to school supplies, hardware, small appliances, and much more.

If you are an avid shopper, you may suffer withdrawal because there are minimal shops in town: one with clothing, figurines, and touristy trinkets; the arts and crafts shop at the Congo Cultural Center; and the small stalls setup around the town square.

If you need to take out some cash to make any purchases, there are limited ATMs in town. The only



View at Palm trees, sea and houses in Isla Grande shore

one that I know of is housed in its own little facility on the main road, open from 5 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily. There is no bank in town, and if the ATM is out of operation, you may be left broke because most places in town only accept cash.

While Portobelo is ideal for a laidback retirement, it would be much harder to live here if you were trying to raise a family. No international schools are located here, and it appeared as if most school-aged children were bused in and out of town for class. I would be surprised if there were any school-aged expat children living here at all.

One service I was pleased to see was a health clinic. The facility is open 24 hours a day and is also where prescription medicine is distributed (there is no separate pharmacy in Portobelo). It was a basic operation, to be sure, but did have an ambulance

Isla Grande

A half-hour drive east from Portobelo in the village of La Guaira there is a boat-launch spot to go to Isla Grande. The cost per person is US\$2.50 and the trip takes about 10 minutes. Beware of opportunistic boat operators trying to gouge you for a higher price, as they have been known to do from time to time. There is a small fee to leave your car in the parking lot. The island is pretty laidback and simple, somewhat like Portobelo. A hotel, a couple bars and restaurants, and not much else are located here. A better alternative to renting a room in the hotel is to rent a beach-house, giving you an extra degree of privacy and freedom.

parked in front for emergency transport to a fully equipped hospital in Colón.

Housing in Portobelo can be cheap—as cheap as it may get in Panama. A typical two- or three-bedroom house rents for around US\$200, and individual rooms can go as low as US\$100. Of course, if you want to spend more on something a little more spacious and luxurious, you can do that, too.

When it comes to purchasing property, US\$30,000 could get you a very basic two-bedroom home right in town on the low-end. Prices in the nearby gated community of San Marino are a bit higher and can fetch a more modern and fully equipped home.

Be careful when purchasing property in and around Portobelo, as often some of the properties come with rights-of-possession land titles as opposed to full title. Without full title, you won't enjoy all of the rights you normally would as owner of the property.

Whether you're renting or buying, the process is basic—no agents, no leases, no multiple listing service. Some property sales are listed through an agent; however, you won't find any offices in Portobelo. Ask around if you're looking for a place to rent—word-of-mouth advertising is the name of the game here.

Portobelo is still very much under the radar when it comes to tourism, but this is slowly changing. Opening a hostel, hotel, restaurant, watersport, or ecotourism business targeting the increasing number of tourists coming through could be a worthwhile undertaking.

It would be difficult getting set up, as the infrastructure and logistic-networks are basic, and you wouldn't necessarily be without competition, as little as it may be. This is still a market that has yet to be fully discovered by developers and tourists, but, when it is, the established businesses will be sure to profit.



Picturesque panoramic view from the deck at the sea landscape in Isla Grande near Portobelo



Main street in Portobelo village



Aerial view of Portobelo village



Colón cruise port

Colón

Even before the Panama Canal, this country was a cross-continental transportation center, with a railway linking ports on the two coasts.

Colón was founded in 1850 as the railway and ports grew. The city became a cultural center that flourished with live music, theater, and neo-Classical, Art Deco, and streamline modern architecture.

Over time, Colón seems to have lost its way, left behind in Panama's economic progress. The unemployment rate in Colón is almost four times higher than that of the rest of the country...

Colón is not a recommended destination for retirement as crime here is a significant problem. But it does prove useful for all the needs that can't be met

in Portobelo. The Caribbean International School is located here, as is the Manuel Amador Hospital.

Come to Colón for anything you can't find in the hodgepodge of stores in Portobelo. (Although, shopping in the Colón Free Trade Zone is possible, it's more geared towards commercial clients. For the best selection of retail shops, Panama City is probably your best bet.)

Colón is currently unsafe, but this may change someday, as the government is currently planning an upgrade to much of the infrastructure in Colón and the port is beginning to attract more cruise ships, providing economic activity that may help alleviate the city's extreme poverty.

As the city attracts more interest, the real estate market will likely heat up as well. Right now could

be a great opportunity to buy some of the older architectural gems before prices reach unattainable heights like has happened in Panama City's historic area, Casco Viejo.

For now, however, remember that even as a foreigner on the most modest of budgets, you are many times richer than most of the people living in Colón and you may be a target for theft.

Safety

Being so close to Colón, Portobelo has garnered somewhat of a bad reputation when it comes to safety. Before leaving Panama City, many of the people I told that I was going to Portobelo told me to be cautious. Gringo tourists are frequent targets of crime, according to them...



The historical Fort Jeronimo in Portobelo

This bad rep is mostly unwarranted, and, walking around town both day and night, not once did I fear for my safety. Of course, as with anywhere you go, precautions should be taken. Don't flaunt your wealth, be kind, and act respectfully, and you are likely to be treated well.



The San Jeronimo Fort in Portobelo



A crucifix in the water of Isla Grande, Colon near Portobelo

Sexist machismo culture is prevalent throughout Panama, and this is no less true in Portobelo. The young woman I traveled with received a few unsolicited catcalls from men on the street. In fact, some of these calls even came from not men but boys who couldn't have been more than 10 or 11 years old—I guess they start out young here.

Nothing more transpired from these catcalls, but that may be partially due to the fact she was accompanied by myself. Women traveling alone should keep caution, especially at night (this is typically good advice anyplace you travel).

Keeping It Clean

Given that Portobelo is surrounded by a national park, it was shocking to see the amount of trash



Shipwreck on the rocks in the bay of Portobelo

littered throughout the streets and highway. While the trash situation exists in Panama City as well, it's especially disappointing to see it so close to the irreplaceable natural environment as opposed to in the concrete jungle of the city.

Proper garbage collection is a sorely needed service in town. It may be that people don't care or understand the importance of it, but this is sure to change with time as younger generations are educated on the importance of ecological protection.

Like A Sore Thumb

Be prepared to stick out. Unlike in other parts of Panama that are more established among expats and foreigners, such as David or Panama City, the expat community in Portobelo is still small and somewhat isolated from the local population. Many of the expats who make Portobelo their home tend to live in the surrounding area or on a boat on the bay and not in the town proper.

Also unlike Panama City, not having any knowledge of the Spanish language would make living here difficult, and learning at least some basics of the language is recommended.

If you are in a non-heterosexual relationship, public displays of affection are likely to garner some inquisitive and perhaps judgmental looks from the townspeople. That's not to say that Portobelo is full of homophobes or mean-spirited people, but it's a rural community where alternative lifestyles are unfamiliar.

Accessibility

Portobelo's infrastructure being as rough as it is, it would be difficult to get around for anyone with serious mobility constraints. Most of the buildings involve steps to enter, and sidewalks are practically nonexistent.



UNESCO World Heritage Site Fort San Jeronimo

A Hidden Treasure

Panama City may be leading the country into its future as a developed and modern first-world country, but Portobelo is content with remaining a hidden Caribbean treasure. Once you come upon Portobelo, you realize that it's a treasure you want to stay hidden.

Don't let any negative nancies or gloomy guses tell you Portobelo is too underdeveloped or unsafe or whatever other scruple they come up with. The naysayers can never be pleased...

Take Portobelo for what it is rather than what it isn't. It's relaxed, affordable, full of history, surrounded by beautiful nature, and, perhaps most importantly, unspoiled by megaresort developments or hordes of tourists.

If you're looking to get yourself off the grid and find some privacy—be it for a retirement destination or just a weekend escape—look no further than 🌸



About The Author

Matt Chilliak hails from Saskatoon, Canada, and has an honours degree in political studies from the University of Saskatchewan, with minors in economics and Spanish. He also holds certification from Fine Art Bartending School. He has traveled throughout Latin America, to Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Colombia, and Panama.



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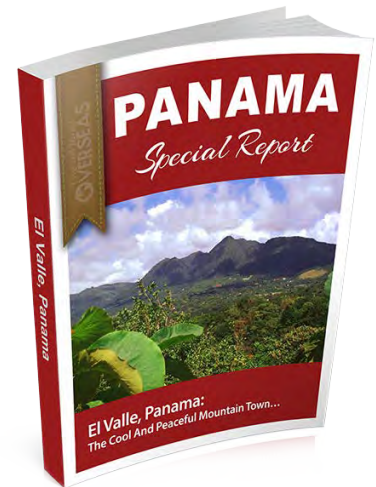
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