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# LIVING IN PANAMA AS AN EXPAT

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BY JACKIE LANGE



# Is an Expat Life in Panama For You?

*You may have heard that Panama has become one of the most popular expat destinations in the world. It offers a comfortable lifestyle at costs much lower than where you may be living now. Does this mean that you should pack your bags and jump on a plane today? Maybe, but sometimes a hasty decision can lead to wrong choices and disappointments. This book was written to help prevent you from making a potentially costly mistake.*



*Considerations in a new home are going to be quite different for a retired couple than they are for a young family with school aged children. Your personal reasons for making a move overseas will affect your choices as well. Are you looking for adventure and cultural experiences or are you more interested in enjoying most of the comforts you are accustomed to, but at a lower costs? There is a lot more to moving abroad than calling a moving company and hopping on a plane! No one place is a Shangri La.*

*But Panama has something for just about everyone!*

*Some of the things covered in these pages include banking and healthcare options, employment and taxes, language challenges, how to get around, visa options, buying and renting real estate, things to do in Panama, as well as descriptions of several of the top expat localities and a few of the more 'off-the-radar' choices worth looking at.*

*This book will provide an overview of the numerous options available for relocation to Panama, with suggestions that will help guide you to making the right decision for your future as a potential Panama expat.*

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## Meet the Author



**Hi – I’m Jackie Lange** and I moved from Texas to Boquete Panama over 5 years ago. My husband and I were searching for a place to retire where we could have spring like weather year round. We wanted to escape the extreme heat of Texas and high air conditioning bills that were necessary to keep life comfortable there.

We also wanted to live in a country that had a more stable economy and government than the United States.

I am no newcomer to international living. I have moved 22 times in my lifetime, lived in four countries and traveled to 26 different countries. I know a lot about relocating, including overseas. I’ve also started multiple companies which continue to help fund my lifestyle today.

After two years of research and visiting many different countries; including Costa Rica, Belize, Mexico, and Chile, we made our way to Panama. We flew in to Panama City and then on to David, on the far western side of Panama, where we rented a car and spent 10 days driving and exploring several different towns along the way back to Panama City.



**We fell instantly in love with the small town of Boquete as soon as we saw it.** You simply can’t read about how a place “feels”. You have to go there and see for yourself to know that it is a fit. The people were very friendly and the natural beauty was breath-taking.

A picturesque valley surrounded by majestic green mountains and a stream running along one side of town. The air was crisp and the weather is year round spring time!

**The original plan was to retire and simply enjoy my new life in Panama.** Of course, being the serial entrepreneur that I am, that didn't last long! After I moved to Panama, friends and associates from back in the states became curious. Many of them did not feel comfortable traveling around in a foreign country alone and asked if I'd be their guide. Soon, I had 8 people who said they wanted to come see Panama. I rented a bus and driver and that was my first tour of the country. I continued to get inquiries from people who wanted to know how they could get on 'one of my tours' and so, the Panama Relocation Tour Company was born in 2011.

During the time that I have lived as an expat in Panama, I have met others who love living here just like I do. However, I have also met folks who believed stories they read online of Panama being *a paradise where you can live like royalty on pennies, with all of the comforts of back home*. No place is paradise to everyone! Some of these people were greatly disappointed when the reality of their new home was not the rose-colored-glasses vision they had expected. Some of these people move back where they came from, with a tremendous financial loss and a lot of undue stress.

**One of the main objectives of Panama Relocation Tours™ is to show you what it would 'really' be like to live in Panama.** We visit towns all over the country and meet with expats in every town we visit. You have an opportunity to chat with these expats over lunch or dinner and hear their personal stories. Ask them questions about the things that are important to you and hear first-hand viewpoints of what it is like living there. *Nobody is selling you anything, so there is no hidden agenda!*



My tours attract people from all over the world and all age groups, not just retirees. Panama is a very diverse country. You can't know what area is a fit for you by reading online or sitting in a workshop in a fancy hotel. This is a life changing decision you are making!

Life in Panama City is like another world compared to life in Boquete or Bocas del

Toro. I truly believe that there is a place in Panama for just about everyone and my goal is to help you find the right place for YOU.

In this book, I will go over many of the options available in towns, visas, housing, and more. It is a great starting point of information to help you check off the boxes that are important to you. I hope I will see you on a future tour when you are ready to make your final decision. I will do everything I can to help make that decision the right one.

*Jackie Lange*



## Where Is Panama?

The Republic of Panama is the southernmost country in Central America. It is an “Isthmus”, which means *a narrow strip of land with sea on either side, forming a link between two larger areas of land*.

Panama has an east to west running orientation. It shares a border with Costa Rica to the west and Colombia to the east side. The Pacific Ocean forms the coastline along the southern edge of the country and the Caribbean Sea is to the north.



Panama City is located in about the center of the country.



# The 10 Provinces

A Province in Panama is similar to a State in the U.S. or a Province in Canada. Each one is unique in some way. The provinces are broken down further into Districts, which tend to be centered around the main towns, and then into smaller zones called “*corregimientos*”, which are usually smaller towns and villages.

Recently, the Republic of Panama added a 10<sup>th</sup> Province called Panama Oeste (West Panama). It actually divides the original province of Panama, which surrounds Panama City, into an east and west side.



Sometimes, if you are driving or on a bus, you may come to border checkpoints when you are crossing into a different Province. Usually, you are asked to show your passport and driver's license at these stops.

**Following is a brief overview of the Provinces: This will help you narrow down where you might want to live in Panama**



**1) Panama** – this is where the capital, Panama City, is located. The largest population in the country is here, with about 1 ½ million people. You will also find the largest airport in Central America, Tocumen International Airport and the Panama Canal, as well as the financial and banking centers of the country. It is a metropolitan city with high rises, shopping, dining and cultural activities. The old Spanish towns of Casco Viejo and Panama Viejo are also located in this province.



**2) Panama Oeste** – This is the area between the Panama Canal (Bridge of the Americas) and the province of Coclé. There is a lot of new development in this area as it is becoming a large middle-class suburb of Panama City. It includes the beach areas of Chame, Coronado and Gorgona, as well as the mountain town of Altos del Maria.



- 3) Coclé** – One of the drier provinces, Coclé recently announced the opening of the new Rio Hato Airport. As more flights are added, it will help to bring growth to the area. Penonome and El Valle are two of the larger towns in the area. Penonome is where you can buy a “real” Panama hat! It is also where you will see the new windmill farms along the highway as you drive by.



- 4) Herrera** – Chitré is the main town in Herrera. It is a fairly modern town with plenty of shopping and other amenities. The small villages and towns in Herrera are predominantly colonial style and are known for their beautiful clay pottery. It is the smallest of the provinces, about a 4 hour drive from Panama City on the Azuero Peninsula. This is an agricultural area where you will see fields of sugar cane and corn growing





**5) Los Santos** – This province is a cultural hotspot of Panama and the Azuero Peninsula. It includes the town of Las Tablas which is famous for its Carnival and traditional Pollera festivals. The beach town of Pedasi, which is quickly becoming a popular expat community, is also in Los Santos. Surfers have discovered the waves at a beach near the point called Playa Venao and Santa Catalina. There is an island offshore called Isla Iguana that is becoming a tourist destination.



**6) Veraguas** – One of the largest Provinces, including the western edge of the Azuero Peninsula and the famous Marine Park Coiba. Santiago is the capital city which is located on the Pan American Highway. This is a fast growing region where a new Mega Mall and construction can be seen everywhere. The little town of Santa Fe is in the mountains above Santiago.





**7) Chiriqui** – Chiriqui is often referred to as the ‘breadbasket’ of Panama. The majority of the country’s produce is grown here. The Volcan and Cerra Punta towns are mostly agricultural highlands. The famous expat town of Boquete is in this region, where you will find some of the best coffee in the world. The little beach town of Puerto Armuelles and the Baru Free Zone are also in this province that borders Costa Rica on the far western end of Panama.



**8) Bocas del Toro** – It feels like a different country in Bocas! Located on the Caribbean side and made up of an archipelago of 9 islands, there is definitely a Caribbean feel that can be seen in the architecture and ambiance of the area. Most people speak English here and there are plenty of tourists. It is somewhat of a backpacker and surfer crowd with lots of hostels and water activities galore.



**9) Colon** – Home to the second largest free zone in the world, the Colon Free Zone, and located at the Caribbean side of the Panama Canal. This is a major commerce center for Panama. It is also a port of call for the cruise ships passing through. There are beautiful islands and beaches to explore. Portobello is located in this province.



**10) Darien** – This is the largest, but least populated of the provinces. The capital is La Palma. Most of the Darien is jungle and forms a natural border between Panama and Colombia. The Pan American Highway ends about halfway into the Darien Province, which is why you cannot drive to Colombia.

## Comarcas are not Reservations

Comarcas are regions of Panama that have been set aside for the Indigenous tribes to live. Many of the indigenous still practice their traditional ways, speak their own languages, and dress in clothing that is unique to their tribe. They are different from 'reservations' that have been set aside for Native Americans in North America. First, because these are the lands where the indigenous already lived in Panama; they were not relocated. Second, because they do not receive subsidies from the Panamanian Government. They do receive the same medical and educational benefits as residents of Panama, but they are mostly sustenance living and some of them have found creative ways to earn incomes by selling wares to tourists.

**There are three primary indigenous tribes in Panama today.**



**Emberá** – Mostly located in the Darien province and the smallest population among the Panamanian Indigenous peoples. They have retained much of their traditional lifestyles and practices. The basket weaving is museum quality, with some of them being so tightly woven that they can actually hold water!





**Kuna Yala** – Found along the eastern Caribbean Coast and the islands of San Blas. They are recognized by the brightly colored beads that the women wear around their calves. You will often see them walking in Panama City and selling their “molas”, which are a type of fabric quilting that is made into wall hangings, totes, and even clothing. <photo courtesy of [yachtlatina.com](http://yachtlatina.com)>



**Ngäbe-Buglé** – This is the largest group of indigenous people in Panama, with a population of over 150,000. They live primarily in the Bocas del Toro, Chiriqui, and Veraguas areas. Many of these people have found employment throughout the nearby towns as laborers. They are often seen doing landscaping and house maintenance jobs. They are also avid fishermen and farmers.



## Geography & Weather

Panama is located about 8 degrees (600 miles / 900 km) above the equator and is categorized as a Tropical Monsoon Climate. Fortunately, the country is located below the hurricane belt and is not directly affected by them, other than stormy weather. Elevation and proximity to the oceans are the primary factors affecting local weather. Coastal areas, on the north and south, generally experience higher humidity, while the mountains running down the center of the country, remain dryer and more temperate.



Panama has two main seasons, *la seca* (“the dry”) from December through April, and *la lluviosa* (“the wet”) from May through November. On the average, Panama receives about 106 inches (269 cm) of rain each year. During the wet season, heavy afternoon downpours and thunderstorms are the norm, and rain falls almost every day.

Daytime temperatures are consistent, remaining in the 85°F (30°C) range regardless of season. The coolest temperatures in Panama are found in the Cordillera Central Mountain range at 6600 feet (2000 meters) above sea level. It has even been known to reach freezing on top of Volcan Baru! The temperature drops about 10 degrees in the evening.

**You can literally pick your ideal temperature based on the elevation in Panama.** At sea level the average temperatures are 85 – 90 degrees fahrenheit. The temperature drops 4 degrees fahrenheit per 1,000 feet increase in elevation. An

example, in David it may be 90 degrees, but drive 30 minutes to Boquete which is at 3,500 feet to experience 76 degree weather. If that's too cool for you, simply move to a lower elevation. What's your ideal temperature?

## A Brief History of Panama

The Isthmus of Panama was formed over 3 million years ago by considerable volcanic activity. The first humans appeared here about 10 thousand years ago. The first Europeans set foot in Panama in the early 1500's including Rodrigo de Bastidas, Christopher Columbus, and Vasco Núñez de Balboa. There are remains of early Spanish settlements that can be viewed in Panama today.



Panama began to grow in commercial importance and attracted the attention of many privateers and pirates, the most famous of which were Sir Francis Drake and Henry Morgan. Morgan successfully attacked the well-fortified harbor of Portobello in 1671 and destroyed Panama la Vieja on the Pacific side.

In 1752, Panama became part of New Grenada, under Spanish rule, which included Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador. In the 1840's, when the California Gold Rush began, people started to consider Panama as a way west. Construction of the Panama railway began in 1850. Once finished, the railway was a financial bonanza! A one-way ticket cost \$25 and profits in the first 6 years were in excess of \$7 million. 400,000 people crossed the Isthmus between 1856 and 1866, inspiring the creation of the Panama Canal.



By November of 1903 a rebellion in Panama was organized and, with the backing of U.S. war ships, Panama became an independent republic. A Panama Canal Treaty was signed by the U.S. and the new government of Panama. The canal was built and inaugurated in 1914 and celebrated 100 years in 2014. It

is considered to be one of the ten Ultimate Man-Made Wonders of the World. On the last day of the twentieth century the U.S. turned control of the Panama Canal and the Canal Zone over to the Government of Panama.

From 1985 – 1988 General Manuel Noriega ruled as a Military Dictator. He was indicted for drug trafficking in the U.S. and eventually surrendered in 1990. He was found guilty and is still in custody today. Democracy was restored in 1991. The current President is Carlos Varela, who was elected by popular vote in 2014.

## Politics & Economics

Panama is considered a constitutional representative democracy. The government is divided into 3 branches: executive, legislative, and judicial. The executive branch is led by an elected president who serves as both the head of state and the head of the government. The president is elected for a 5-year term and appoints the national cabinet. The legislative branch of government is made-up of 71 members who are elected for 5-year terms. The judicial branch consists of a national supreme court, 5 superior courts and 3 courts of appeal.



Juan Carlos Varela (photo on the left) was elected president in May 2014, representing the Panameñista Party, the oldest political party in Panama.

There have been as many as 50 different forms of taxes, but currently, in order to attract more foreign business, reforms are being designed to make the tax system friendlier to business with reductions in some forms of corporate taxes. The maximum personal income tax is 33 percent, and the maximum corporate tax rate is 30 percent.

As of 2013 figures, the GDP of Panama was \$61.54 billion; or \$16,500 per capita. In 2014 the country's growth rate was 7.5%, and has been consistent at this rate for the past 10 years. Inflation: 4.1%. Unemployment: 3.5%. There is actually a shortage of skilled labor and an oversupply of unskilled labor.

Almost 80% of the GDP comes from the services sector in Panama. The highest contribution being from the famous Panama Canal, followed by banking,



insurance, container ports, medical services, and the Colon Free Trade Zone. Panama has one of the fastest growing economies in Latin America.



Ongoing progress; One focus of the current administration is to increase efforts to boost tourism throughout the country. There are also improvements to infrastructure going on almost everywhere you look today in Panama, from new sewer and water lines to improved roads and bridges. There has been a recent push to teach more English language in the schools to

prepare students for international business jobs being attracted to Panama.

## General Information About Panama

The official name of the country is the **Republic of Panama**.

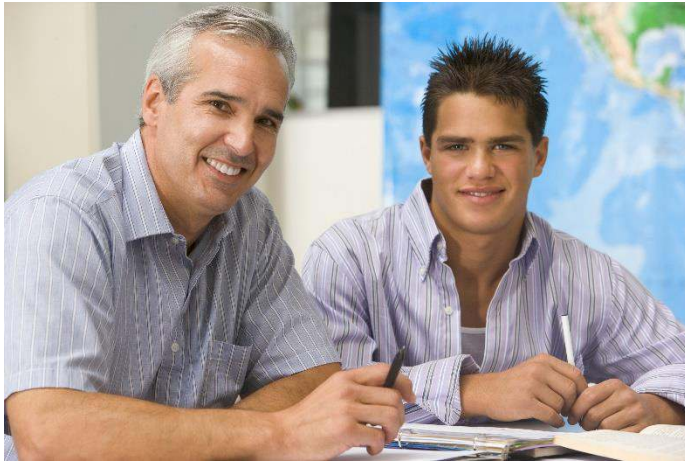
**Population** (according to the last UN estimate on July 1, 2014): 3.987,866. More than 70% of the population lives in the urban cities, mostly Panama City and Colon, which is the highest percentage in all of Central America. About 12% are indigenous people.

**Life Expectancy:** 77.37 years

### Language

**Spanish** is the official language of Panama. Because English is the international language of business and banking, there are a higher percentage of English speakers in Panama City. There are also areas around the country, like Boquete and Coronado, where large numbers of expats have settled and there is, naturally, a higher English prevalence in these areas. As you travel into the interior of the country, heading west and away from Panama City, there are less English speakers in most of the rural towns. Bocas del Toro has an interesting mix of English, Spanish, and Caribbean Creole.





*As with any country, it is best to at least try to speak some basic phrases in the native tongue.* There are some great online courses like Rosetta Stone, that can teach you a new language if you are willing to take the time to learn. Spanish is not considered a difficult language in comparison to English. If you are an English speaker, you've already

mastered one of the hardest languages to learn! There are also several Spanish Schools and individual tutoring once you are relocated to Panama. Emersion into the culture is reported to be one of the fastest ways to learn a new language! I've provided some common and useful phrases at the end of this book to get you started.

## **Currency & Banking**

The official currency in Panama is the Balboa. The US dollar is also accepted legal currency in Panama, making it easy to do business here. The Balboa circulates alongside US dollars at an exchange rate of 1:1. However, because Panama has its own currency, *it is not forced to rely on the international valuation of the U.S. Dollar, should a financial crisis occur.*



Another positive point to be aware of is that Panama has No central bank, which creates a completely market-driven money supply. *The country must buy or obtain their dollars by producing or exporting real goods or services; it cannot create money out of thin air.*



Panama is open to attracting foreign investment; in fact, foreign investment accounted for 10% of the GDP in 2014! The country has made it relatively easy for you to open a bank account here as an expat, or even a tourist. There are now over 80 international banks in Panama, making it one of the largest banking sectors in the world.

***Considering the proximity to North America, easy accessibility to an account, and the stability of the economy, Panama is one of the safest and best places to open your offshore bank account. If you're interested, during the Panama Relocation Tours, we will help you open an offshore bank account.***

# Time Zone

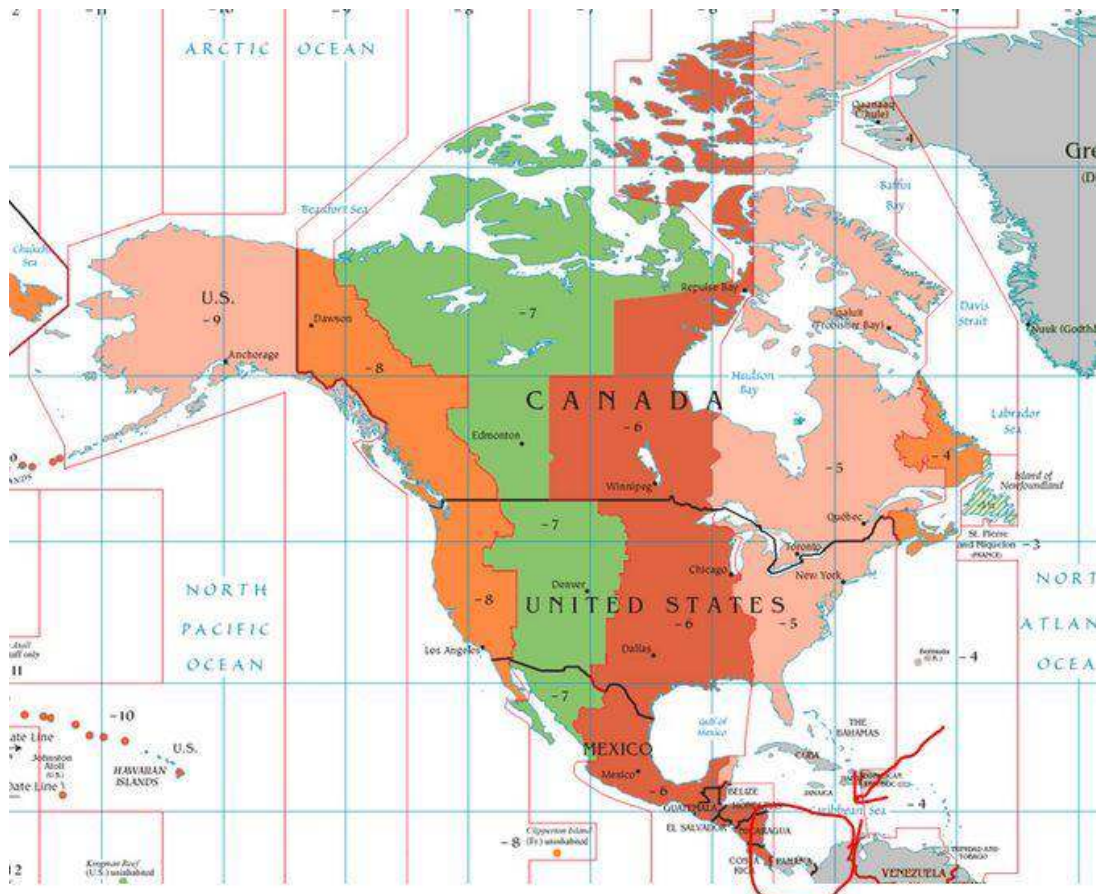
The time zone in Panama is UTC/GMT 5:00. This means the time in Panama is -5 hours from the Universal Time Coordinated (**UTC**), which used to be called Greenwich Mean Time (**GMT**). Greenwich, England is the 'ground zero' of the world time clock.

Panama is technically in the Eastern Time Zone. In the Diagram below, you can see how Panama is lined up under the Eastern side of North America.

What is the old saying "Spring ahead, Fall back"?

Forget about it ~ ***there is no Daylight Savings Time to worry about!***

So, even though Panama's time does not change, the time zones in North America do, which causes the time zones to be different between the two countries. In the winter, Panama is the same time zone as EST, or Eastern Standard Time. In the summer, Panama's time matches up with the CST, or Central Standard Time.



## Measurement & Distances

The metric system is used in Panama, like most countries in the world. If you come to Panama from the United States, you will have to learn to do some conversions in your head.

**Approximations are simple to learn:**

Length is measured in **Meters**. 1 meter = slightly more than 1 yard

Speed and Distance are in **Kilometers**. 1 kilometer = a little more than ½ a mile

Weight is in **Kilograms**. 1 kilo = about 2 ¼ pounds

Gasoline is sold by the **Liter**. 1 liter = a little more than a ¼ gallon



Once you start using the metric system, the conversions will become automatic.

*Soon you will be thinking metric all the way!*

## Water & Electricity

Panama uses 120 volts AC, 60Hz. Outlets are the flat two-pin American type. Typically electric service is reliable though it could go out during a thunder storm.



Tap water is safe to drink throughout the mainland in Panama and considered safe in most areas. However, standards may not be the same as your home country. When traveling, it is always a good idea to drink bottled water to be on the safe side. When visiting the islands, it is best to drink only bottled water.



# Getting Around in Panama

## Public Transportation

There is a large International Airport in Panama City that handles flights from all over the world. A smaller international Airport in David and a new one in Rio Hato, have plans to begin adding more international flights. Airplane flights are currently available in country between Panama City, Bocas del Toro, and David.



Taxi Service is available throughout Panama, even in small rural towns. The cabs do not have meters to calculate the fare. There are standard fares between zones in Panama City, generally around \$3 to most places within the city. The standard rates are loosely followed and obvious tourists are often quoted a higher fare. Always negotiate and agree on the fare before you get in the taxi. To hail a taxi, put your arm out, palm down, and wave down toward the curb. Uber.com is available in Panama City.



Bus Service is available to almost anywhere in Panama. Around the city, fares are about 35 cents. The bus terminal at Albrook has buses going to most towns in the country. Prices are relatively inexpensive; \$3 -\$20.00 to most places outside of Panama City.

There is also a modern Metro Train that runs from one end of Panama City to the other for 35 cents each trip. A second and third phase of the line are going to be added.

In Bocas del Toro, there are water taxi boats (pangas) that can be hailed like a cab to take you to the various islands. They are anywhere from about \$5 - \$20, depending on where you are going. Fees are pretty standard for most places and ask ahead to see what the typical fare is to your desired destination.

## **Personal Transportation**

There are a large number of local Panamanians that earn as little as \$500 per month and most of them do not own a vehicle. The most popular ways that you will see people getting around in town are:

**Walking**

**Biking**

**Horseback**



Cars are abundant in the cities and rules of the road are an interesting concept in Panama. Panama City is plagued by unmarked streets, busy intersections with no traffic control, pedestrian traffic and huge traffic jams during rush hours. Horn honking is a method of communication rather than a rude gesture, so get used to it.

Although the basic rules are the same as they are in North America, they are not always adhered to here. All drivers are required to wear seat belts, hold third-party auto insurance and adhere to posted speed limits (remember that they are posted in Kilometers per Hour). Drivers use the right side of the road, and traffic signals and most of the road signs are standardized.

Foreigners can drive a vehicle for up to 90 days using a valid driver's license from their home country. Rental cars from major international agencies are available at the airports and in the larger cities.

Considering the potential for driving incidents in a foreign country, you may want to leave this part of your first trip to the experts and support public transportation... or take a [Panama Relocation Tour!](#)

## Popular Tourist Attractions

Panama now has a rapidly developing tourism industry. Until fairly recently, just about all of the tourists coming to Panama visited only Panama City. A large number come by cruise ships which go through the canal allowing passengers to disembark in Panama City or Colon. Of course, there are some amazing attractions to see in the capital city. The growing number of more adventurous visitors, will find a variety of unspoiled natural sights and adventures if they venture into the 'interior'.

- The number 1 attraction is the world famous **Panama Canal**. Considered to be one of the top 10 Man-Made Wonders of the World, it is truly a sight to behold when you watch the gigantic container ships traverse through the locks.





- The recently opened **Bio Museo** is a sight that catches your eye when you first get a glimpse of the colorful architecture. Eight galleries tell us about the origin of the Panamanian isthmus and its gigantic impact on the planet's biodiversity.



- Take a trip down a river in a dugout canoe to visit an indigenous tribe on an **Embera' Village Tour**. See what life is like in these remote villages deep in the Darien jungle. Get a temporary tattoo, buy some souvenirs to take home, and enjoy a traditional lunch served in a plantain leaf bowl.



- **Diving and snorkeling** are popular sports, especially in the Marine Parks located at Isla Coiba on the Pacific side and Bastimentos in Bocas del Toro.



- **Whale and Dolphin Watching Tours** are becoming one of the most popular attractions in Panama. One company told me recently that they have had 100% views of whales on their tours for the past 2 years in a row! The best time of year is during the peak season between July and October.





- **Bird Watching** is some of the best in the world in Panama! Did you know that there are over 900 species of birds in this tiny little country? Some very exotic species can be seen if you are observant.

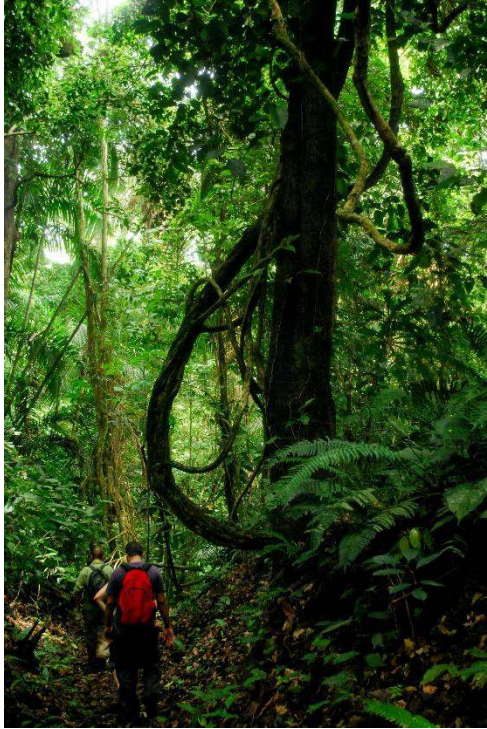


- **Deep Sea Fishing** in Chiriqui Bay has been featured in International Fishing magazines. There is a very deep drop off that is close to shore, so boats don't have to travel far to catch Marlin, Tuna, and other deep water fish for dinner.





- There are **hiking trails** all over the country, as well as on the numerous islands around Panama. Be prepared to spot monkeys, sloths, and crocodiles as you adventure into the jungle (and watch for snakes!).



- There are adventurer seeker **Zip-Line** rides over the jungle canopy in many parts of Panama. You will find them in Bocas del Toro, Boquete, El Valle, and the Darien.



Fabulous **surf** can be found along both the Pacific Coasts and the Caribbean side of Panama. There are even international surfing contests conducted annually!



## Relocating to Panama

**Expats make the move to another country for a wide variety of reasons.** There are so many things that make Panama an attractive expat destination that it is no surprise it has become one of the top destinations to relocate to in the world. The amenities that are available, pleasant weather, friendly people, residency options, and being a travel hub that is easily accessible are a few of the reasons that Panama is an expat magnet. Many expats report that they can live a better lifestyle for much less expense. We'll take a look at a typical budget in this section.

***Let's take a look at some of the items that are important to most expats and see how they rate in Panama.***

## Communication Services



**Cell Phones** in Panama will require a local SIM card. If you have a phone from Verizon or another company that does not use a SIM card, you can buy a phone in Panama for as little as \$20. US phones with SIM cards will have to be “unlocked” for use in Panama. Once you arrive in Panama, you can purchase a SIM card from one of the mobile carriers

for about \$5. They will assist you in changing and setting it up, then you can purchase talking minutes as you use them. You can also prepay for a data plan without a contract. Cell phone reception is very good throughout most of the country.

**Internet Service** is another widely available product with numerous options in Panama. Cable Onda or Cable and Wireless Cable service is about \$30 per month. Speeds range from 7 to 25 Mbps. The speed is fast enough to easily stream movies. Many people get internet service through their cell phone provider and use the phone as a ‘hot spot’. In most cities in Panama, you can also find many cybercafés where you can pay per hour or per minute to use a computer with Internet access. Many hotels, cafes, restaurants, malls, universities and airports will offer free Wifi.

In rural areas your internet service provider choices will be limited and much more expensive. Expect to pay \$130 per month for 2 Mbps of speed.

Another combo internet/phone option is to download **Skype and/or WhatsApp**. You can use these apps to call anywhere in the world for free as long as the person on the other end downloads the app too. There is also a device called **Magic Jack** that can be purchased in the U.S. and when it’s hooked up to your computer in Panama, which is connected to the internet, you can place unlimited calls to friends and family back home (there is an annual charge of about \$30 for the service)



**T.V. and Movies** are available in English and Spanish by a few different means in Panama. There are Cable TV services that have access to movie channels around the world. Many expats prefer to watch their favorite programs via internet sites that are viewed on a big screen TV while the shows are streamed from the computer.

And, of course, there is also Amazon, Netflix, and Hulu, though you may need a VPN to access them in Panama. A good way to brush up on your Spanish skills is to practice by watching movies with sub-titles. Where there's a will, there's a way and the expats who came before you have definitely figured things out. *Someone will be more than happy to show you the ropes once you get settled into your new home!*



## Expat Budget

Compared to most areas of the world, Panama offers a more affordable lifestyle. The natural beauty, fresh food, and diversity of scenery and activities make life more fun. Budgets vary depending on where you live in Panama. Some areas, like Panama City or Coronado, are more expensive. While other areas, like Volcan or Las Tablas are less expensive. I live in Boquete. I will share our typical monthly budget for a couple. But understand that everyone's lifestyle is different so budgets will vary considerable. The biggest determining factor in your budget will be housing costs. Before we bought our 1000sf house, I paid \$600 per month rent so I will base the budget on that rent.

<b>Rent</b>	<b>\$600</b>
<b>Groceries</b>	<b>\$400</b>
<b>Electricity</b>	<b>\$25 (near the beach it will be 4X more)</b>
<b>International Health Insurance</b>	<b>\$250 (covers 2 people worldwide)</b>
<b>Dentist and Doctor Visits</b>	<b>\$10</b>
<b>Prescriptions when Needed</b>	<b>\$10</b>
<b>Cable TV and Netflix</b>	<b>\$50</b>
<b>Internet</b>	<b>\$40</b>
<b>Clothes and Shoes</b>	<b>\$30</b>
<b>Entertainment and Eating Out</b>	<b>\$100</b>
<b>Travel</b>	<b>\$100</b>
<b>Gardener and Maid</b>	<b>\$80</b>
<b>Car Insurance and Maintenance</b>	<b>\$100</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$1795</b>

If you pay more in rent, your cost will go up accordingly. If you live at a lower elevation where air conditioning is needed, your electric bill will likely be four to five times more. But even with these expenses, you can see that a couple can live comfortably for less than \$2000 per month if you are in a \$600 rental.

# Visa Options

*Panama has made it fairly easy for foreigners to obtain a residency visa to live here.*



Although you will need to hire an attorney to get a Visa, the process is really not that difficult if you follow the step-by-step requirements. Each of the Visa Programs has its own set of requirements, so you should make sure you understand them thoroughly or have a Panamanian attorney advise you on the best option for you.

**These are a few of the most popular residency visas today:**

- 1) Pensionado – Retirement Visa:** You must be over the age of 18 and able to show a pension or lifetime income of at least \$1000 per month, and an additional \$250 for your spouse. The source of income can be from a government, military, or a corporation and is usually a pension or Social Security. One stipulation with the Pensionado Visa is that you cannot work in Panama with this visa. There are quite a few benefits for retirees, which I will cover a little later in this book.
  
- 2) Friendly Nations Visa:** This is a ‘fast-track’ residency program available to citizens on the list of 50 countries considered ‘friendly’ by Panama. The countries are: Andorra, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Marino, Montenegro, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Singapore, Slovakia, Spain, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, United States of America, Uruguay, and United Kingdom. If your home country is on the list, you must deposit \$5000 in a Panamanian bank.



You'll also need to do one of three things: (1) have a labor contract, (2) set up a corporation with the "intent" of doing business in Panama, or (3) purchase a property worth at least \$100,000.

- 3) Reforestation Visa:** To qualify for this 'green visa' you will have to invest a minimum of \$80,000 to purchase at least 5 hectares of titled land in a government certified reforestation project. Teak farms are a popular investment, though they tend to have a long term return on your money.



- 4) Business Investor Visa:** Invest at least \$160,000 in a legitimate Panamanian business and show business activity to qualify for permanent residency. Additional requirements are to obtain a business license, register with social security, and hire 5 Panamanian employees.
- 5) Self-Economic Solvency Visa:** This option was designed to attract wealthy foreigners to Panama. There are three ways to qualify: 1- Invest a minimum of \$400,000 in Panama real estate. 2- Invest a minimum of \$400,000 in a three year Panama CD (Certificate of Deposit). 3- Combine the first two options by making an investment in both Panama real property and a Panama bank CD where the equity and cash amount total at least \$400,000 USD (or foreign currency equivalent).
- 6) Marry a Panamanian Citizen:** Don't try to run a scam on this one! It has to be a legal, valid marriage with a long list of requirements.

- ***Most permanent visas allow you to obtain citizenship after 5 years.***

# Retiree Benefits

Panama really takes care of its elderly population! If you qualify and receive a Pensioner Card, Panama has a slew of perks available for you. Please note that, for those of retirement age (women over 55 and men over 60), you are eligible for most of these benefits with any Visa. The Pensionado is still the most popular visa for expats and this list of benefits and discounts is the reason why:

- One time Duty tax exemption for household goods up to a total of \$10,000.
- Duty exemption for importing a new car every two years.
- 50% off entertainment anywhere in the country (movies, concerts, sports)
- 30% off bus, boat, and train fares
- 25% off airline tickets
- 50% off hotel stays from Monday through Thursday
- 30% off hotel stays from Friday through Sunday
- 25% off at restaurants
- 15% off at fast-food restaurants
- 15% off hospital bills (if no insurance applies)
- 10% off prescription medicines
- 20% off medical consultations
- 15% off dental and eye exams
- 20% off professional and technical services
- 50% reduction in closing costs for home loans
- 25% discounts on utility bills
- 15% off loans made in your name
- 1% less on home mortgages for homes used for personal residence



## Schools

Panama's public schools generally lack resources and quality teachers, or curriculum. The schools also tend to be over crowded so students are placed in either a morning or afternoon session to make room. This means they are only receiving half the instruction time offered in North American schools. For these reasons, it is recommended that foreigners enroll their children into private schools in Panama.

There are many good private schools to choose from for expats relocating here. Panama's private schools are amongst the top in Central America, and are comparable with North American standards.

The majority of private schools in Panama have a onetime admission fee ranging from \$500 up to \$12,000 per student. Large family discounts are usually available.

The private school year either follows the North American schedule of September - June, or the Panamanian schedule of March - December. Every school is closed during Carnival, Easter, and Christmas.



Panama private school students come from all around the world including Asia, Europe, and North & South America. There are even language based schools such as a Japanese school, a French school, several Chinese schools, and English schools. Religious based schools include Jewish, Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist, and Muslim. Most private schools are located in areas with large expat communities like Panama City, Coronado, and Boquete.



# Employment Options

Not everyone that relocates to Panama comes with a pension or a huge “stash of cash” to live off of. If you need to fund your new life in Panama or just want to earn a little extra money to do some traveling or other fun things, there are options available for you.

If you move to Panama on a Retirement Visa, you will not be allowed to get a worker’s permit or be employed here. That includes your own business, unless it is a “hobby business”. Some retirees make crafts and items to sell at their local Farmer’s Market in Panama. This may give you enough “play money” to make your life in Panama even more enjoyable. As long as you are in compliance with the laws, you are fine selling your personal creations on a small scale. Any other visa has an option to get a work permit in Panama, though getting a job can be tricky.



First of all you need to be aware of a few things about employment in Panama. The minimum wage here is very low, around \$2.40 per hour. That said, skilled labor is difficult to come by and the competition among companies that are hiring leads to much higher salaries. Exploit any skills you may have! Another important note; without written consent from the government, companies in Panama are only allowed to fill

10% of jobs with foreign employees. Multi-national companies can hire unlimited foreign workers. Getting a job can be a challenge, but not impossible. *It is best to start your search online before you make the move, and attempt to secure a position in advance, if your income in Panama will be dependent on it.*

Another consideration is that most jobs will require at least some very basic Spanish skills. There is a recent push by the government to teach English to locals in the schools here, so an English teaching job may be a good option right now.

***My personal favorite is to create your own income opportunity!*** Be aware of your surroundings and the needs of your new community and you will be sure to come up with one, if not several, entrepreneurial ideas that you can implement.

Panama is growing by leaps and bounds and that means people have more money and want more things. Whether it is a product or service, find something you will enjoy and go for it!

**Here are a few examples to get the wheels turning in your head.**

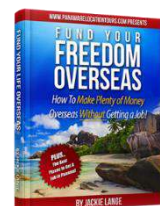
- One expat couple in Pedasi started pet-sitting for a few neighbors while they were traveling. Before long, word got around and they had a full-fledged business caring for other people's pets!
- I know of quite a few expats who have blogs and other internet businesses that bring in a little extra, or in some cases, completely fund their lives here. Even a retiree can run an internet business, as long as it is based in their home country and they file the business taxes back home!
- Another expat in Bocas del Toro, started a quaint B & B in the spare rooms of her home and it has turned into a steady business that provides a decent income today.
- Do you have musical skills? Teach others how to play a musical instrument or give singing lessons. ***The possibilities are endless!***



I've noticed many needs in my own little community. There is no re-sale consignment store for furniture, which would be popular with new expats on a limited budget. There are more and more adult Panamanians with a desire to learn English. You could

become a private tutor. A delivery service would probably be successful, since there are a good number of people who don't own cars. Home delivery of groceries, take-out meals and maybe even bill-paying services would be a huge convenience that many people would gladly pay someone to do for them. And of course, there is always a need for a good restaurant with affordable prices.

*As a special gift to you, I have included a link [here](#), and in the Resources Chapter at the end of this book, to download a free copy of my previous eBook called **"Fund Your Freedom Overseas"**. It contains many more creative ideas to earn additional income overseas.*



# Healthcare

According to **US News & World Report**, “*Health care in Panama is of an international standard*”. Talk to any expat in Panama about their experiences with healthcare here and you will get overwhelmingly good reviews. Most of the doctors at the hospitals in Panama have been trained in the U.S. and many of them speak English as a result. Punta Pacifica Hospital in Panama City is the only



hospital in Latin America affiliated with and managed by Johns Hopkins International.

A friend of mine had to get emergency medical surgery in Panama last year. Her sister, a nurse from California, rushed over to be by her side (concerned about the hospital conditions in Latin America) and remarked that *the equipment in the Panamanian hospital was more modern than the*

*hospital she worked at back home. And the level of service was extraordinary. **It's not uncommon for a doctor in Panama to give a patient his personal cell phone number!***

My own experiences have been similar. Shortly after moving to Panama I had severe ear and sinus pressure. I visited Dr. Chen in Boquete, who did a thorough exam and prescribed antibiotics and ear drops for my infection. He then gave me his cell phone number to call if I experienced any other problems and the bill was all of \$10!

Another more serious issue sent me rushing to the emergency room at MS Chiriqui Hospital in David. I had severe pains on my lower right side and feared that my appendix had ruptured. I was seen immediately upon arrival. Blood and



urine tests were taken and an IV was started with pain medication. A surgeon was called in case he might be needed, and fortunately he was not. ***The TOTAL cost for the emergency room visit, standby surgeon, all tests and medication came to a whopping \$119.80.*** I didn't even use my insurance card!

Because the cost of medical care in Panama is so affordable, many expats choose to "self-insure", meaning they simply pay for the services they use and don't buy health insurance. The cost of health insurance in Panama is also very inexpensive. There are a wide variety of plans available for expats and I go over these options on my Relocation Tours. The plan I have personally, costs me \$2100 per year with a \$1000 deductible. It covers me in any country I travel to, at any hospital, and with any doctor. I know people back in the U.S. who are retired and pay that price for insurance for ONE Month!



As in most countries, there is no shortage of Pharmacies in Panama. When you need to get medication in Panama, you may find it is easier than in your home country! There are many drugs which are available over the counter in Panama which would require a prescription in the US or the UK. Because the typical Panamanian cannot afford to pay a lot of money for a prescription, the cost of medications is about a third of what they cost in the US.

***If you have a Pensioner Card, receive another 10% off the price!***

***Affordable healthcare and top notch medical services are one of the biggest money savers and benefits to being an expat in Panama!***

# Real Estate

**Anyone can own property in Panama.** Foreigners have the same property rights as Panamanians. You do not have to be a resident of Panama; you can even purchase real estate as a tourist. The challenge is finding a property you like and paying a fair price for it.



*There is not currently a well-functioning MLS in Panama.* That means there is no central location to find real estate or compare sales in a given area to see if a price is in line with the neighborhood. One real estate company is usually only aware of the properties listed with his company and in the general area where they're located. They may have reliable area information to share with you. However, you may miss out on seeing properties that are not listed with his company or any realtor. You should not limit yourself to a single realtor or search method for this reason. Make sure you check local online and periodical classified sections in the area you are searching. Walk the neighborhoods you are interested in and talk to people.



***A good deal of property in Panama is discovered by word of mouth!***

Whether you find a property you like on your own or with the assistance of a realtor, you will need to hire an attorney to do the title search and draw up the paperwork for the sale. There are 2 forms of property ownership in Panama with huge differences between them. The first, and best option, is to buy **“titled” property**, which comes

with a deed and has a “finca” number assigned to it. *This is the most secure form of ownership.*



The second ownership method is called **Right of Possession**, or simply R.O.P. These properties are technically owned by the government and you can essentially purchase a ‘right’ to use the property. R.O.P. real estate can be sub-divided, resold, rented out, farmed and built on. Often, it is possible to go through a tedious legal process and gain Title to one of these pieces of property. There is a mitigated risk in R.O.P. ownership and there have been cases where people have lost a property and the money they invested. Quite a lot of beachfront property is not titled. ***Please make sure you talk with an expert in this kind of ownership before moving forward with a purchase!***

An additional type of real estate transaction in Panama involves real estate that is held in a **Panama Corporation**. This is a very popular method of holding property by expats because it offers estate planning and asset protection benefits. The property ***may be titled or R.O.P.***, so you still need to check the ownership status, even though the owner is a corporation. If you purchase a property that is in a corporation, you usually buy the ‘shares’ of the company and the real estate comes with it.







Property taxes are generally low in Panama and there have been many incentives given for new home construction, including waiving property taxes for up to 20 years. Sometimes, if you purchase a relatively new home, it may still have years left that are property tax free. Be sure to ask! Property Assessors are not currently going out and evaluating property values in Panama. Tax rates tend to be based on the most recent 'sale price' of the property. This can benefit purchasers of real estate held in a corporation. Because the "property" was not sold, the tax rate is based on the value recorded when it was transferred into the corporation.

Prices of real estate in Panama are almost arbitrary. A few things you can usually count on; prices between Panamanians will generally be much lower than a price from a Panamanian or 'gringo' to a 'gringo'. It's a local preconception that expats have more money than locals. Also, the more expats that live in an area, the



higher the overall price of property will be in that area. The truly 'great deals' are still mostly found in the rural and somewhat undiscovered locales.

Before you make the leap and purchase a home in Panama, I strongly suggest that you ***try the area out by renting for at least 6 months to see if this is an area you will be happy living in.*** The rental process is similar to back home, just make sure that everything included in the home is listed on the lease agreement, like stove, refrigerator and other appliances.

On my Panama Relocation Tour, we drive by and even visit a wide variety of homes in different areas of the country so you can get a feel for what is available and the price ranges.

***I don't sell property or get 'kick-backs' for showing you around.***

## **D.I.Y. or Try a Relocation Tour?**

*If you think Panama may be the perfect location for you to relocate to, because you've read everything you could get your hands on, thoroughly researched the place, and feel like you even have a good idea of where in Panama you want to settle, then you have some very important decisions ahead of you. Go with your 'gut', pack your bags and dive right in – that's one option. Or, carefully collect all of the data you've been researching and verify what you've discovered so you **KNOW** you have made the right choice.*

I've met and talked with dozens of expats over the years who have done it both ways. Some jumped in feet first and are happy here, while others felt they made a wrong decision and are long gone. Many took their time, got local guidance and maybe rented for a while, before deciding to make Panama their long term home. Now, I'd like to share some of the reasoning and real results behind these two methods.

### **Pros & Cons**

Okay, let's go over some reasons why someone might prefer to 'Do-it-Yourself' and why it may or may not be valid.

- **It's cheaper to do it myself because I am on a tight budget.**



First of all, ***it may not be cheaper to go it alone, especially in the long run.*** By the time you factor in transportation, lodging, and restaurants you already have a good amount invested. You will most likely be paying top dollar for these items, where I am able to get better accommodations and meals at lower group rates, meaning a better quality experience. Once the tour begins, your trip is

all-inclusive (other than alcohol or personal expenditures). You must also consider the time involved on a D.I.Y. vs a guided tour. To see as much as I can

show you in 6 days, with everything pre-arranged and knowing the area like the back of my hand, will probably take quite a bit longer for you. This is because you don't know the area. You probably can't get the same access to gated communities and condos to see what's available, unless you want a realtor with an agenda to show you around for free.

I have arranged access for you to several communities and condo developments and there is no guilt in looking around or asking questions. It is totally relaxed and there is nobody pressuring you for a sale. In fact, we are often served cocktails and snacks when we show up! This makes for a much more pleasant experience.



I'm also very familiar with the kinds of expats and locals that live in various towns and communities around Panama. I do a short survey with you before you come on my tour and get to know you while you're in Panama too. I may be able to point you towards some places that are a good fit for you, which you may have never found on your own. ***You will see a lot more in a shorter amount of time,***

***thus saving money in the long run.***

- **All of the information is available on the internet.**

There is no argument that the internet is crammed full of information. Maybe it's really too much information? The problem is, some of the material you read online and in books may be very outdated.





Things are changing rapidly in Panama since it is one of the fastest growing economies in Latin America. Prices, deals, what was working a few years ago, may not be true today. ***Much of what is printed online and in books about Panama***



***has been regurgitated over and over for years!*** Another thing to watch out for is that quite a bit of what you read online is written by people or organizations with a hidden agenda. They have partnerships or affiliations with developers and other companies and will say just about anything to make Panama ***paradise***, if it means they will be receiving a paycheck for your buying in. This may not always be obvious, but the old

adage “if it sounds too good, it probably is” should be at the top of your mind. Why would my tour be a better option? You can relax, because I do not sell anything or get any kickbacks as a result of my tours.

***There is no hidden agenda with a Panama Relocation Tour.*** When was the last time the author of that article you read online, got in their car and drove around Panama to see firsthand what is going on? I have been running a tour almost every month for over 5 years now. I personally travel with my tour from one end of Panama to the other and I see the changes happening around the country...in real time, every month.

***You'll get a fresh and current view of what's happening in Panama.***

- **Never heard of a 'relocation tour'. What is it and why should you considering exploring Panama with a relocation tour group.....**



A relocation tour is nothing like a tourist vacation to popular hotspots. ***My tours are specifically designed to show a potential expat what it would really be like*** to live, for example, in Panama City, Boquete, or David. You visit super markets, see hospitals, and talk with expats who are living in each town we visit on the tour. You

will experience lunch in local spots and nice hotels.

Enjoy a meal with people who have been living in this community for a while and ask them the questions on your checklist. What are schools like? What do you do for entertainment? Get answers to all your questions about relocating to Panama.



Whatever you want to know before making a decision to move, you now have personal friends and contacts who you can continue the conversation with after you fly back home. You'll know over a dozen expats living all over Panama after less than a week! These are not the realtors, or authors of internet magazines, writing articles with information designed to get you to buy a product. These are people just like you and I who made a decision to move to Panama and are happy to talk to you about their experiences in this new home. We also meet with lawyers, insurance agents, and other

professionals and experts who have been personally vetted by me and people I trust, to share information about topics you need to get clear on before you move. Things like Visas and health insurance options, starting a business in Panama, shipping household goods and pets overseas, and other important information necessary for a successful move. You will have contact information for each of these people so it will not be a “hit & miss” to find a reputable person to work with. You will have a rolodex of contacts from professionals to expats, myself included, to answer any further questions that may come up after you return home.

***You don't just see Panama, you experience it!***

## **Testimonials from Previous Tour Guests**

Don't just take my word for it. Head over to my website to see what a typical tour agenda looks like at [www.PanamaRelocationTours.com](http://www.PanamaRelocationTours.com) . Here are just a few testimonials from some guests who were on tours in the past. There are many more on the website.

***“The contacts alone were worth the price of the tour. The recommended attorney had my Panama Corporation created before I arrived in Panama. Within a few days after the tour, I had two bank accounts, a resident's visa good for 1 year, and the process was started for permanent residency. (I met people in Panama who suffered through months, and sometimes years, trying to get these same things done.)”***

***Sue, California***

***“we traveled to different regions of Panama, and were able to visit several homes of expats, including Jackie's house and property. From day one, the discussion of rentals or home ownership had me shaking my head in disbelief, it didn't seem possible, since I have a monthly heating bill ( we live in northern New York State ) that is the same as renting a house in Panama, fully furnished !The tour was worth more than the cost. My wife and I would not have been able to amass as much information and meet so many invaluable contacts in such a short period, Once again, THANK YOU JACKIE! Erik and Debby, New York***

***“I also made valuable contacts as far as securing my visa, bringing my dogs, renting/buying a car, a better feel for prices, shopping, stores, mail,***



*internet availability, etc, etc. Knowing what I know now I can't fathom moving to Panama without all the info and intel received on this tour.....it has saved me from soooo much future stress and worries."*

**Lynne, USA**

***I hope to meet you on a future tour & help you with your quest to become an expat in Panama!***



## **Where to Live in Panama**

*I've given you a basic overview of what life may be like in Panama in general and what is available here. You have some tips on how to get help in making your final decisions. Now, it's time to start checking off some boxes of what you want in your new home with an overview of some of the most popular, and almost unheard of, towns and areas to help narrow down your search a bit more.*

**The list is divided into two groups:**

**Popular Expat Areas** – These include most of the towns you have probably already heard about or read about on the internet. Panama has had a steadily increasing community of expats in pockets around the country for the past 10 years or so. Some of these neighborhoods and towns have a well established networking group, community events and activities, and they tend to have more of the amenities you may be used to from back home. The larger areas will

possibly have an international school nearby. Usually, they are near the larger hospitals, supermarkets, and have a greater variety of restaurants. There will be a larger population of English speaking expats and locals, so if you find learning Spanish difficult, you may be more comfortable where you can communicate easily. These are all comforts that expats are used to and have re-created to some extent, in their new home. Because of this, the prices for real estate, dining out, and other items will tend to be considerably higher in these areas. When it comes to price, there is a give and take in most areas. You have to decide what you **MUST** have in your life to be comfortable and happy, whether it is a golf course down the road or your favorite deli items in the supermarket, and check off the places where you don't think you'll find your peace and freedom overseas. You'll start to pinpoint the spot that is waiting for you!



**Undiscovered Local Towns** – Some of the places on this list may be new to you. They offer a very different kind of freedom. What they lack in amenities, they usually make up for in natural beauty and local culture. There are going to be much fewer expats living in these areas and the predominant language will be Spanish. If you can't speak the language, be prepared to become immersed! I think it is the fastest way to learn. There may not be any fancy restaurants nearby or an international school, but Panama is a small country and it is never more than about a 30 minute drive to get something you really need. Life in these towns tends to be pretty basic. The word in Spanish is “Tranquilo”. If you are looking to stretch your dollars, you will find \$2-3 Panamanian lunches and a simple Panamanian house can cost around \$20-30,000. Often only a few blocks from a beautiful and secluded beach! If you can life without daily spa visits and enjoy peace and simplicity, you may find your dream home in one of these spots.

## Popular Expat Areas:

### Panama City

If you enjoy city life, Panama City is the place for you. It is a noisy, cosmopolitan metro with almost nonstop activity. Panama City is home to the Panama Canal and the largest International Airport in Latin America. More and more names you are probably familiar with can be found here like Hard Rock Hotel, Trump Tower, TGIF, and even Starbucks Coffee. It is not a huge city by North American standards, with a population of around 1 ½ million people, but it has pretty much everything you need and more.



There are constant cultural and musical events and festivals to attend. You will never get bored in Panama City! International events in Panama include an annual Jazz Festival and even a Beer Fest! Fine dining and ethnic cuisine is abundant, along with several giant shopping malls, a couple of boat harbors, nearby golf, museums and theatre.

Many expats I know in the city use public transportation to get around. Parking and driving can be a nightmare and it is usually not more than \$3 to get from point A to B in the city. There are a number of good international schools in the



area and supermarkets with everything from organic to kosher. Minimal culture shock should be experienced moving here.



The real estate will be mostly condos, with a few beautiful single-family homes in neighborhoods like San Francisco. One friend rents the ocean view condo where I snapped the photo above for \$1200 per month, furnished. That's a good deal. You can find condos in town for sale for \$200k and up. A couple of the more popular expat areas are El Congrejo,

where prices are slightly less, and Casco Viejo, where prices have sky-rocketed over the past few years. It will cost considerably more to live in this eclectic Historic-Spanish part of town. Many of the crumbling old buildings have been purchased and refurbished, turning the area into an art and cultural center and popular tourist destination.

There has been tremendous growth throughout Panama with new neighborhoods, new roads, new hospitals, airport expansions and much more. This growth is expected to continue in Panama. The new Panama Canal expansion will be a boost to the already robust economy, starting in 2016. Tourism is a focus of the new administration and this will only help draw more tourists to the country. An indication of what's to come can be seen in the Tocumen Airport Expansion Project which is expected to increase capacity from 5.8 million to 18 million by the year 2022.



## Coronado & Nearby Pacific Beaches



Playa Coronado was one of the first Pacific Coast beaches to develop a large expat community. Only about an hour from Panama City, over the Bridge of the Americas, it is close enough to visit the city to attend an occasional event. Coronado is a gated community at the beach with an international school and plenty of nearby shopping and dining. Nothing near the scale of Panama

City, but enough to keep one satisfied. There is golfing and a nice beach to walk, swim, or go surfing.



Prices in Coronado are not low, unless you compare them to Malibu, California or Hawaii. A nice home can easily be half a million dollars or more. There are condos you can pick up for a decent price, in the \$200k range, in the nearby beach area called Gorgona, just steps away but not quite as developed yet. There are several other beach areas expanding out from Coronado.

They tend to get a little less costly as you move away from Coronado and the beach. Beachfront will cost you, but a few blocks inland you might find a deal? There are several large condo developments popping up along this Pacific stretch of coastline.

Coronado, and the surrounding beaches, have the second largest expat community in Panama (Boquete is #1), so you won't have a problem with speaking English here.

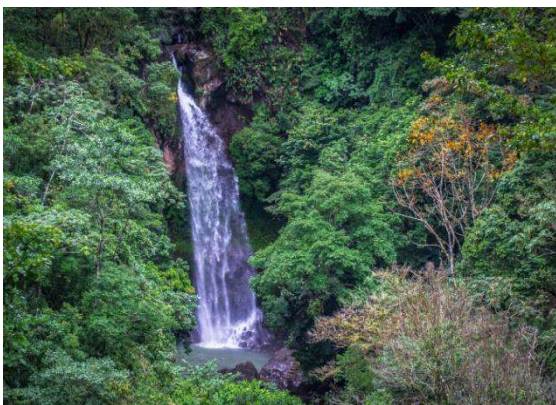


## El Valle

Heading north from the beach towards the mountains in Coclé, you have to drive up a winding picturesque road and then down into the caldera of a dormant volcano to find El Valle de Antón.



Because of its higher elevation, El Valle has a pleasant year round climate. It is about a 2 hour drive from Panama City. El Valle is actually a popular second home location for wealthy Panamanians from Panama City, who go here occasionally to escape the heat of the city. There are beautiful homes in this upscale area, and you will find resorts, spas and fine dining as well. Weekends can be a little busy with visitors.



The natural beauty and abundant birds and other wildlife make this area a nature lover's paradise. It is one of the few homes of the endangered Golden Frog. There are numerous hiking trails and waterfalls where you can take a dip if you desire. Even replenish your soul in a natural thermal hot spring!

In El Valle, there are a few homes in the



\$200k+ range, but most are over half a million. It is a luxury lifestyle in a resort-type setting. You'll need to drive to Coronado or Penonome to get to a hospital, good shopping or private schools.

## Pedasi



Pedasi is a beach town with a growing expat population in recent years. Popular activities revolve around the beach – surfing, kite surfing, fishing. Las Tablas and Chitre' are the closest towns for shopping and other services. 30 minutes to an hour drive away. There are decent restaurants and small hotels in Pedasi, as it is

more of a beach retirement and tourist town. Otherwise, there is not a lot in the way of amenities.

They have occasional issues with water, so a catchment and storage tank might be a good idea here. The atmosphere is laid back. Prices are still low for a beach town, which has helped to draw more expats to the region.



There is no nearby private school or hospital. It is more than 5 hours to Panama City and about 2 hours from Pedasi to Chitre where all modern conveniences are available. Nearby Las Tablas is nationally famous for its Carnival and Pollero Festivals. Pedasi has become more expensive in recent years.

## Chitré

Chitre' is the largest city on the Azuero Peninsula, home to about 100,000 residents, and one of Panama's oldest settlements. Colonial records indicate that there was a village here as early as 1558. Today, it is one of the most developed cities in Panama.



A combination of rich history and modern amenities make Chitre' an attractive place to live today. This is one of the driest regions in Panama and the closest beach, Playa Agallito, is about 15 minutes from town. The beaches along this stretch of the peninsula are known for

birdwatching and nature preserves.

The city is also the cultural and historic capital of the region. It is a very lively place during the yearly carnivals! Some of the best artisan clay pottery is found in the area and pieces dating back to 5000 BC can be seen in the local Herrera Museum. A focal point of Chitré is the San Juan Bautista cathedral, built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.



Even with all of the modern amenities in place, life is relatively inexpensive in and around Chitré. There are quite a few homes for sale in the \$75k-150k range. A decent rental will run you about \$500 per month.





There are several private schools in Chitré, including the *Colegio Agustiniano*, a Roman Catholic private school, and *International Saint George* school.

Chitre is an up and coming area of Panama and in the past year has seen some major developments in terms of shopping centers, banks, another hospital, malls and other large developments. *The pace has really started to pick up!*

## David



Welcome to the third largest city in Panama! David is located in the Chiriqui Province and is where all of the outlying town's people make their occasional trek for supplies. You can find just about anything in this town, including traffic reminiscent of Panama City! There always seem to be a flurry of activity in David. There are popular fast food restaurants, like Burger King, Pizza Hut, and McDonalds, which feel like a treat if you only go once every few months!



David is home to a small international airport and is a hub for national flights, as well as Costa Rica, which has a border only one hour away. There is also a small marina on the coast. David is one of the hottest cities in the country, but fortunately it is only a 30 minute drive



up the road to Boquete!

In David, there is a large expat community spread out throughout the city and suburbs. Some of the best medical facilities in Panama are in David, as well as access to an International School about 15 minutes out of town. There are hotels, shopping (including a PriceMart; the Cosco equivalent in Panama), dining, cultural activities and a large MultiPlex Theatre, where you can see movies in English, dubbed in Spanish, or with sub-titles. English is spoken in many establishments in David today.

## Boquete

Ahhh, Boquete! Home of the largest expat community in all of Panama, and it



only takes one visit to understand why. The high altitude and pleasant year round weather are only a small part of the picture. The expat community is very active in this little mountain town, known as “The Little Town with a Big Heart”. They have an annual charity event that brings in over \$100,000 to fund local charities. There

is a weekly Market, where everyone has a chance to catch upon current events.



Located just 30 minutes up the mountain from David, you are close to major hospitals, schools, and shopping. Ten years ago, Boquete was a sleepy little town where retirees began to come for the climate and cheap real estate. Today, good prices are a lot harder to find in the area.

Boquete is now considered a top retirement destination and is priced accordingly. Even rentals are difficult to come by these days. There are many social events including the annual Boquete Jazz and Blues Festival.

## Volcan

Volcan is the place to get in on a location that many say reminds them of Boquete 10 years ago. Volcan is at a similar altitude to Boquete with pleasant weather and an abundance of natural beauty. Volcan is still a more rural mountain town; though it is growing in popularity quickly as many retirees feel they've been priced out of Boquete. You'll find a tranquil lifestyle only about an hour drive from David.



Most of the produce in Panama is grown in the region around Volcan and Cerro Punta. You will never have a shortage of fresh veggies here, and the small expat community has a weekly Farmer's Market so you can get organic produce, aquaponic products, home-baked goods, and crafts.

There are also two new supermarkets that are modern with a great variety of products.

Volcan offers a peaceful, country lifestyle that is only a short drive away from the conveniences of the city, hospitals, and



schools. Expats have recently discovered Volcan so it will not be long before there are new restaurants and cultural activities. Prices are in a wide range here, but you can find very good deals if you take the time to research the area. Rentals start about \$500 per month.

## Bocas del Toro

Other than Colon, Bocas del Toro is the only major town on the Caribbean side of Panama.



It feels separate from the rest of the country and, truthfully, it's like you are in another country here. Bocas is unique! Take a plane from Panama City to the main island, or drive 3 hours over the mountain from David to get to Bocas del Toro. You'll find that just about everyone speaks English in this area, which is a

population mix of Panamanian, Indigenous Indian, Caribbean, and a large community of expats.

Bocas is a water town. Most of the people and activities are located on one of the islands that make up the archipelago with the capital, Bocas Town, being on the island of Colon (not to be confused with the city at the Panama Canal!). Very few people own cars and transportation between islands is via water taxi, or “pangas”. There is a strong tourism market here that revolves around beach, nature, and boating activities. It is a popular backpacker destination so there are a number of hostels and clubs in the main towns.



There is a Caribbean influence in the architecture and laid back attitude of life in Bocas, where you can shop at an organic market in the morning and take yoga classes in the afternoon. However, one drawback is that it is very isolated from the rest of Panama. There is a small hospital and schools, but prices are a bit



higher here since everything has to be shipped in. Real estate has a big range in price so you have to search for a deal. There is also a lot of R.O.P. property due to being on islands and beachfront, so be cautious of claims that they can easily be titled. Extra due diligence is needed when purchasing property in this area.

## Undiscovered Local Towns:

### Santiago

Santiago is actually a large city by Panama standards. I mention it under the 'undiscovered' heading because it still has relatively few expats living in the area. Most people driving across the country on the Pan American Highway, will stop in Santiago, which is right on the main highway halfway between David and Panama City, to get a bite to eat or buy souvenirs at the numerous vendors and local handicraft shops.



Over the past few years, I have been watching the major construction projects and growth happening in this lesser known expat destination. There are a number of good restaurants, hotels, and supermarkets in town. The Santiago Mall, a mega shopping complex, recently opened with dozens of stores and dining choices.

This is a convenient and central location for the country of Panama, and you can find affordable housing in and around the town. I found a 3 bedroom home in a gated community for \$81k and numerous lots and small farms in the surrounding areas in the \$20k range. It is a short drive up to the cool mountains of Santa Fe or down to the beaches of Santa Catalina and out to the Marine Reserve on Coiba Island for a weekend retreat.



## Santa Fe

There has been a lot of hype in recent years about this tiny mountain town, a two



hour drive along a scenic winding road above Santiago. The Veraguas Province is the only one in Panama that borders both the Pacific and Atlantic oceans and there is talk of plans to build a road across the country here, that would pass right through Santa Fe. This has caused a few speculators to invest in

land in the area. Parcels can still be found at very low prices, but there are also land re-sales that are overpriced. Brush up on your Spanish too, since there are few expats here.

The climate and natural surroundings are idyllic in Santa Fe. There are beautiful mountain vistas, streams and waterfalls to create a backdrop for a lovely home. A small self-sufficient farm would be a good option here. Land can be purchased for around \$10k per acre and re-sale homes are not readily available yet. This is a boots-on-the-ground ask the locals kind of town.



If you are looking for a place to “get away from it all” this may be it! Although the very basic necessities, local fonda-type restaurants and small convenience stores are in town, living here will mean an occasional trek down the mountain for supplies.

Isolation or peace and serenity ~ it’s all perception!

## Bugaba & Boqueron

Bugaba is the hub of the farming and agricultural lowlands in Chiriqui. It's a mid-sized town with a "Caballero" (cowboy) feel. If you are a fan of horses and rodeos, this could be a perfect location to investigate further. It's about halfway between the Border of Costa Rica and David, 30 minutes either way, and right on the Pan American Hwy. This puts good hospitals and additional modern conveniences only a short drive away.

There are not a large number of expats in the area, so prices are still very affordable. You can find decent homes for sale in the \$100-150k range. Maybe less, if you take the time to shop around. There are many small farms in the outlying areas that would be perfect for growing produce or setting up a gentleman's estate. A nice, comfortable lifestyle can be had in Bugaba and it is not a far drive for an occasional visit to Costa Rica, Volcan, David, or the nearby beaches.



A short trek up the hills near Bugaba, the weather is cooler and a few expats have discovered a nice rural community called Boqueron. Country living that is not more than 30 minutes to town make this location a nice option to consider today.





## Puerto Armuelles



A hidden gem on the farthest west Pacific Coast of Panama! Once a booming banana plantation town, Puerto was devastated by the exit of Chiquita Banana a decade ago. The town fell into disrepair and poverty. Recently, there has been renewed interest in the area, by the Panamanian government, to build a container port and dry canal that is much needed in the western province of Chiriqui.

Although some speculators have begun to buy up beachfront lots and jack up prices, there are still plenty of good deals to be found in this beach town.

Puerto is about 12 miles from the border of Costa Rica and an hour and a half from David. There is a small hospital, a few larger supermarkets, bakeries, hotels, and decent restaurants. A short walk around town will reveal the potential here. A 2 ½ acre ocean view lot can be picked up today for \$45k and a cute house right on a sandy beachfront for \$115k. Rentals can be had for \$200-500 per month.



The miles of beaches in town and the surrounding areas are beautiful and rarely have people present. The surf is consistent, fishing is some of the best in the country, and the natural jungle landscapes are full of monkeys, sloths, and giant iguanas. It is a typical hot and humid coastal town, but the ocean breezes make it more comfortable. If you want beachfront at a truly affordable

price, this is one of the last places you'll find it in Panama.

# Travel Tips

*Here are a few suggestions that may help you enjoy your next visit to Panama.*

1. There are crosswalks for pedestrians in most towns, but nobody uses them. People and animals cross anywhere – anytime. Be extra aware if you are driving!
2. Most street names are not marked anywhere. One-Way streets are common in the cities but will not have a sign. Instead, look for faded arrows painted on the street.
3. Taxi cabs and cars may stop in the middle of the street, without notice, to pick up a fare or talk to a friend. Be patient!
4. Horns are used regularly and not considered offensive. 2 quick honks means a car is about to pass you. *Don't be afraid to use the horn to let people know you're there.*
5. Parking is generally along the sides of the streets. Park where you see other cars are already parked to be on the safe side. Always lock the door when you leave the car & don't leave valuables visible.



6. **Watch where you step!** There are holes, cracks, protruding objects, and unknown items along the way.
7. During the rainy season (August-December) carry an umbrella.
8. Keep a little toilet paper or kleenex with you, in case you need to use a bathroom because the TP rolls are often empty. Most restaurants and stores will let you use their facilities, but may charge a 25 cent fee if you're not a customer. It is usually posted on the *baño* door.
9. Carry change and small bills, \$1's and \$5's, if you will be shopping at street or bicycle vendors. They probably won't have change. ***Credit cards are not widely accepted outside the cities, but there are usually ATM's in bigger towns where you can get some cash.***
10. Try to speak Spanish, even if you know "*un pocito*". Locals will appreciate the effort. A little improvised sign language in the end will usually accomplish the task!

# Useful Spanish Phrases

*This will introduce you to a few of the most common phrases you are likely to use on a visit to Panama. You don't have to say them perfectly to get your point across. Greetings, where places are, and how much things cost are going to be your biggest accomplishments!*

Hello.....*Hola*

See you later..... *Hasta luego*

Good Morning (Afternoon, Evening)..... *Buenas Dias (Tardes, Noche)*

Where is \_\_\_\_\_?

*Donde esta \_\_\_\_\_?*

a Bathroom - *El baño*   a restaurant - *Un restaurante*   a church - *La iglesia*   a hotel - *un hotel*

the airport - *El Aeropuerto*   the bus – *el autobús*   the market/store - *el mercado/una tienda*

To the left.....*a la izquierda*

To the right.....*a la derecha*

On the corner.....*a la esquina*

Straight ahead.....*derecho*

Is it near?.....*Esta' cerca?*

Is it far?.....*Esta' lejos?*

Please.....*Por favor*

Thank you.....*Gracias*

Excuse me.....*Permiso*

How much is \_\_\_\_\_? .....*Cuanto cuesta \_\_\_\_\_?*

*Point to the object you are asking a price for. If you are in a cab, fill in the blank with the name of your hotel or destination.*

*\*\*\* Numbers are written the same so you can get by without knowing how to say them yet!*

*May I have the check please? ..... **La cuenta por favor?***

***You will almost always be greeted by locals you pass on the street with “hola” or “buenas”, so be sure to smile and return the greeting!***



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