



Herrera Square across from the American Trade Hotel in Panama City.

PHOTOS BY BEVERLY-MANN



Casa de Lourdes in Anton Valley.



Erito, head of tourism for the Embera (R), with Ruben, chief of village, his wife Hortencia, and their child Aron.

Exploring Panama

The canal and beyond

By Beverly Mann

A salsa rhythm filled the warm, humid air as I danced to the resounding beat, punctuated by a soft tropical rain. My dance experience was unlike any I could have possibly imagined. I wasn't in a crowded club in the city but under a thatched canopy in a dense Panama jungle with members of a local indigenous tribe.

The instruments that created the salsa sound—bamboo flutes, wood- and deerskin-covered drums, gourds with seeds or stones for maracas, and turtle shells—were handmade by the Embera people of Purn Village, located within Panama's massive Chagres National Park.

The Embera are just one of Panama's seven indigenous tribes that comprise 6 percent of the country's population. Since 1984 when the area became a national park, the indigenous people have been selling their woven and wood-carved crafts to tourists.



Handwoven plates of the indigenous tribes.

Panama is a place of intrigue, cultural diversity, dense tropical rainforests, and natural abundance.

Erito, head of tourism in the village, said that despite challenges establishing continuing education for their children, living within the park has been beneficial.

"We are happy to live here," he said. "We have a lake for fishing, can hunt for food, and the forests supply our agriculture."

I felt welcomed by these open-hearted people, as we lunched on fried chicken and plantains wrapped in a banana leaf and fresh papaya and pineapple plucked from a nearby tree.

This tropical rainforest, which provides the main source of fresh water for the Panama Canal, is two hours away from Panama City by car and a 30-minute trip on a hand-carved canoe. This lush, emerald world was just one of many memorable moments beginning my customized week's tour with Panama Vacations exploring authentic Panama, the canal, and beyond.

Panama City, Anton Valley Steeped in a rich history of pirates, conquerors, and explorers, Panama is a place of intrigue, cultural diversity,

and natural abundance.

The plentitude doesn't stop here. This compact country of around 4.1 million also has more than 10,000 species of plants and 1,000 species of birds. Considered one of the safest countries Central America, Panama continues to attract an increasing number of visitors and retirees from around the world.

I further explored this cultural and terrestrial diversity with a 90-minute ride outside of Panama City to Anton Valley, a town set within a volcano dormant for some 5,000 years. Here we viewed petroglyphs along the mountainside and visited a nearby butterfly museum, where we were surrounded by hundreds of magnificent insects.

In the distance, the outline of the mountain is shaped like a sleeping female figure. The legend goes that a heartbroken Indian princess died near the mountain over the shame of falling in love with one of the handsome conquistadores who was trying to conquer her people.

After exploring the indigenous marketplace of handmade arts and crafts, we dined at Casa de Lourdes Restaurant, an historic converted residence. The lightly spiced linguini with baby scallops, broccoli, and toasted walnuts—enhanced by a passion fruit pie—was more than ample.

However, my most lasting culinary taste of Panama was at the 16-seat Donde José Restaurant in the Old Quarter (Casco Viejo), Panama City's UNESCO World Heritage Site. Like the French Laundry in Napa, California, customers are served a 10-course

tasting menu, changing weekly or daily according to the creative flair of the chef.

Donde José's head chef, José Carles, trained at Sydney's Cordon Bleu in Australia. "Each dish must tell a story of our country, traditions, and influences," he said.

Nearby sits the remodelled American Trade Hotel, the city's first concrete building constructed in the early 1900s, where I stayed two nights enjoying Casco Viejo's 17th- to 19th-century colonial architecture. After savouring a flavourful fish dinner at the hotel's popular restaurant, I topped off my meal with heavenly handmade chocolate purchased at Oro Moreno, a one-of-a-kind chocolate shop.

Panama Canal

Any trip to Panama isn't complete without a visit to the historic Panama Canal, a result of centuries of fortitude and human sacrifice dating back to the early 1500s. Since then, more than one million ships from around the world have passed through the 50-mile canal, connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and providing a cost-effective and time-saving shortcut for transport of a plethora of international goods.

I experienced the workings of the original canal with my visit to Miraflores Locks on the Pacific side, an engineering marvel of locks utilizing gravity-driven fresh water.

The recent nine-year Panama Canal Expansion Program and Aguas Claras Visitor Center on the Atlantic side were completed in June. The extension doubled the waterway's capacity to meet

the demands of larger ships as well as alleviate climate change by reducing global emissions of CO₂.

I sampled Panama's untouched beauty firsthand during a stay at El Otro Lado on the Atlantic side, a short boat ride from the town of Portobelo. This private resort hosts 20 people in the heart of a national park rich in fish, mammals, and plants. From my morning hike, where my guide needed a large machete to cut our path through thick branches of foliage, to my last night's boat ride along the tranquil river observing a bounty of birds at sunset, my appreciation of Panama's abundant and untamed terrestrial riches only grew.

There's a saying: "If you don't visit the canal, you haven't seen Panama." But as I discovered, there's so much more to Panama than the canal.

Beverly Mann has been a feature, arts, and travel writer in the San Francisco Bay Area for the past 30-plus years. She has received numerous accolades in various fields, including a Bay Area Travel Writers Award of Excellence in Newspaper Travel Writing.

MORE INFORMATION

El Otro Lado:
www.elotrolado.com.pa
American Trade Hotel:
www.vacationtopanama.com/hotel/american-trade-hotel/
JW Marriott Panama Golf & Beach Resort:
www.vacationtopanama.com/hotel/jw-marriott/
Information on Panama:
www.visitpanama.com and www.vacationtopanama.com



View of Panama City's highrises from the Old Quarter.



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