

*Emails from Panama and the San Blas Islands
February, 2011*

February 18, 2011

Hi: this had to be the easiest flight in the world! 2 1/2 hrs to Miami, a few hours hanging around the airport and using free internet in the lounge, then 2 1/2 hours to Panama City! It is beautiful flying in -- its very green for a long time, then city buildings pop up. Everything went smoothly and within an hour of landing, I settled in to my little studio apartment. (Thank you Ellie for suggesting this apartment-hotel!).



I'd arranged a driver for my first day to visit Casco Viejo (the old, very picturesque section of town) and Panama Viejo (the really old part of town). Both areas are UNESCO sites and way across the city from each other, so it was a good introduction to Panama's traffic woes. Jose (driver) and I had a great time but I must admit, he wasn't a true guide (very limited in historical facts), but he was a wonderful "walk with me, talk with me" kind of person. And the best part, we spoke in Spanish/Spanglish the whole day! Even though I'm visiting this same areas when the tour begins, I wanted to take my time here, visit the museums at my own pace, walk the ramparts and check out the local artisan shops. (don't worry Joe, I didn't buy any paintings!). In the late afternoon Jose dropped me

off at Albrook Mall, the biggest in Central America and I walked about 1/3 of it, then took a taxi to the hotel.



There isn't much left of "old" Panama City, but it is an interesting archaeological site to wander around.

I enjoy visiting malls when traveling in Spanish speaking countries as I can try out my language skills on unsuspecting shop girls with the hopes that they understand me. And I also bring things that need to be repaired when I travel as this give me good opportunities to talk to people-- this time I need bracelets fixed and batteries for two watches. They are very safe, have great air conditioning (its about 95 degrees here and very humid) and I can sit and people-watch as much as I want.

I love petroglyphs and there is a very famous one in Valle de Anton about two hours away. I had asked the agent at the company doing the local arrangements for the Explore trip for a driver and a guide, but he said it would be too expensive and to take the public bus! Thank goodness for internet -- I clicked around and got quotes as high as \$250.00 (way too much!) with a two person minimum.

Finally one company, Sendero Panama, said that they didn't have any tours scheduled that day and they would do the trip at the regular price for one person. Was I lucky! Christian showed up at my hotel at 8am in full dress naturalist outfit! He is a birder so in addition to us talking all the way to El Valle, I learned all about the birds that come thru Panama and we even stopped a few places where he knew they hung out to watch them.



Christian was quite taken by the young boy who explicated the petroglyphs. He had been taught stories relating to the glyphs by the local priest. It is a nice way for him to earn a little money.

Christian was amazing -- he worked as a naturalist on Lindblad/National Geographic ships for 8 years and guides the Tauck Travel groups (a really high end company) when they are in Panama. We stopped for an empenada breakfast (local food), hiked in a cloud forest, hiked to see the petroglyph, visited an artisan market (nice stuff!), had lunch (local fish), then talked all the way home. In the evening, I returned to Albrook Mall and finished the walk. It was especially busy as the new school term begins soon and kids are buying their uniforms and school supplies.

Its Friday now, and the day I move to the group hotel and start the Explore tour. I asked Jose to help me for the day and we had another great time. Our first stop was the Archaeological Museum. It surprised me that there was no entrance fee and that I had to be personally guided around. There were exhibits after exhibit of people important to Panama and a gorgeous display of "Pollera" dresses"- the traditional heavily embroidered and lacy Panamanian dress. When I asked where the archaeology section was, the guide said that everything has been put in storage as they will be doing some construction in the coming months! I must have looked terribly disappointed, as she hurried away then returned with a large book containing photographs of the collection that she gave to me to keep! She was a lovely lady and very proud of her country. Jose then took me to the largest craft market in the City and finally to the new hotel to check in and drop off luggage. Then he drove me to another Mall!

So its been a great, activity-filled three days! The UK flight arrives in a few hours. We meet tomorrow at 8am for a briefing then the tour begins. I have three more malls to go before I leave Panama.

Can hardly wait!

March 7, 2011

As you may remember, I was supposed to go to India this winter, but plans fell through so I looked for an "easy" trip with a not-too-long flight. I selected Explore's "Panama - from the Pacific to the Caribbean" itinerary, and am glad I did. You already know about my first 3 days in Panama, and on Day 4, I joined the Explore group, a British company I've traveled with before.

There is nothing I like better than a well-experienced guide. Kenny Weeks, who guides for GAPA (Explore's local agent) was great. There were (as usual) some interesting and strong personalities in our group of nine, and he handled us all well.

On the first day we repeated much of where I had gone with Jose -- Panama Viejo (archaeological site) and Casco Viejo (the Colonial city). But now, instead of the trip being to my own interests, it was a casual look-see with little time to visit local artisans.



The colonial part of Panama City is very up and coming. Streets are being repaired and buildings are being renovated. This area is a UNESCO site and a premier tourist site.

One thing about Kenny - he knows good restaurants and we never had bad meal in Panama. If you like fish - like Sea Bass, Tuna, Trout and seafood, then come to Panama. They pride themselves on having good kitchens and presenting food in a delicious and artful way.

Day 3 was our Panama Canal day. We drove thru the leafy Canal Zone (and former U.S. military base) which is now a very swishy neighborhood and stopped at Miraflores Locks to see a huge container ship transit the lock, then visited the Canal Museum. We even took a boat ride on Gatun Lake in the middle of the canal and did some bird watching. Our picnic lunch was on a private, uninhabited wooded island in the middle of the lake.

Container ship going thru the Miraflores Locks. The canal is so busy it runs 24/7, 365 days of the year, bringing a tremendous amount of money into Panama's economy.



We had just two days in Panama city, then a seven hour bus ride to a city called David in the highlands. It was a large a/c bus with comfortable seats. Because we were close to the Costa Rica border there was a police checkpoint where we had to present our passports and entrance stamp. One of our group couldn't find hers and the police held up the bus until she did.

Now the "real" Panama comes forward. We are in the highlands of Chiriqui province - dotted with volcanoes, hot springs and walking trails. The big event was to be a full days hike on the UNESCO trail "Los Quetzales", a beautiful trail where it is easy to spot the elusive quetzal bird. Unfortunately due to recent landslides, the trail is closed. But Kenny knew of enough others to keep us busy.

We hiked - usually surrounded by magnificent Blue Morpho butterflies, visited orchid farms and hung out in the various small towns we stayed in. On our free day in Bouquete, there were lots of options: rafting, coffee tours, bird watching or more hiking. For the morning, I decided to walk the town and try to talk to people in Spanish. I took a few pieces of jewelry to be repaired (good excuse to ask for directions, etc.), and was trying to match a nail-polish color (put on in booth in the public market in Volcan). For the afternoon I had arranged for a guide to take me to nearby petroglyphs.

The pièce de résistance of the itinerary is two days in the Bocas del Toro Islands. Bocas is a small archipelago of nine islands and a bit of mainland, much of which is national parks. If I conked you

over the head and you woke up here, you would never guess you were in Panama. You would think Caribbean Island 50 years ago. We snorkeled, went dolphin-spotting, enjoyed Red Frog Beach - one of the best in Panama -and hung out in the town of Colon which was starting its Carnival celebrations. The food was great and if that isn't enough, they make their own local chocolate!

After a great two days we flew back to Panama City, but two people were bumped to a later flight. We had an option to visit the Embera Indians that day, but by the time the last two arrived it was too late. Kenny arranged the Embera visit for the next day - departure day. I couldn't go with the group as I was being picked up at 4:45am for a 6am flight to the San Blas Islands.

It is so bittersweet when you leave a group. I knew by the time I got back to Panama City, everyone would be gone. I was on my own again.

The San Blas Islands



It was hard getting up at 3:30am! The driver plunked me in a very long line (one line for several flights) at the airport and it took a bit of time to get to an agent. Meanwhile I had a chance to people-watch as I seemed to be surrounded by colorful Kuna Indians. There aren't any seat assignments on Air Panama's domestic flights, and I ended up right behind the pilots. It was such tight seating that my toes stretched into the cockpit! There is no flight attendant, and no bathroom. It was cloudy, so there wasn't much to see for the first 30 minutes, then there was about 15 minutes

of jungle and finally a quick landing on a short airstrip next to the water. Luggage gets thrown on the tarmac, we get off, new people get on, and the plane takes off right away .

A boat dock is about 15 feet away and most people were headed to Dolphin Lodge. Their boat left and I stood there alone! What a terrible feeling!!! Am I here on the right day??? Did they forget me? Was my reservation lost? Finally a boat sped in, a Kuna man (soon found out he is my guide, Romedio) jumped out and asked if I was Esther. Whew – all is well.

For once, I chose wisely. Akwadup has only 7 over-the-water bungalows on a private island. I was assigned the last in the row, with three beds, sitting area, and a hammock swinging on the verandah with a unobstructed view of several islands. I could hear water lapping under my bungalow. There was a knock at my door and Romedio announced that breakfast was ready. I was assigned "my"



table for the duration and I could leave reading materials, etc. on it if I wished. There are no locks on any doors as we are alone on the island.

My bungalow was the last one in the row and more private than the others.

This is the view from my porch. the San Blas Islands consist of 370 small islands off the west coast of Panama - just a few of them are inhabited.



First thing I noticed was that a small bottle of water is \$2.25! Luckily all food is included but I did run up a good size bill for water by the time I left. Romedio offered me a morning tour to the community on an island about 30 min. away (two excursions are offered each day), but I just wanted to unpack and relax. Another couple went and told me all about it at lunch (they left after one night saying it was "too quiet" and there was "too much nature"!).

The island is perfect. Coconut palms and banana trees everywhere, frangipani plants, lots of other foliage and a nice size white sand beach. I spent an idyllic first morning reading in my hammock and waving to passing Kuna fishermen.



These Kuna are sitting on prime real-estate as only they can own land. In addition to the 925 square miles of virgin forest and jungle on the mainland, there are 230 miles of pristine shoreline. Of the 370 islands in the archipelago, only 40 are inhabited. They really have it together and work for the benefit of the entire Kuna community.

Food..... each morning there is a nice breakfast and later, seafood for lunch and seafood for dinner. To be honest, I didn't recognize some of the sea creatures I was served, but they were tasty. Kenny had

advised me to bring snacks and I'm glad I did as it was comforting to have food I could recognize.

That afternoon we went snorkeling. The comparison to Kennys guiding was amazing – Kenny took such good care of us! We sailed to an uninhabited island about 30min. away. Romedio pointed to where we should snorkel, then went off snorkeling himself! No assistance, no pointing out stuff, etc. We were completely on our own and soon got entangled in the weeds of a shallow area. The albino boatman came over and rescued us! (there is a 5% incidence of albinism here, due to intermarriage. They are accorded very high status and are well thought of).

The only other excursion I took was to the community on the neighboring island. It is like stepping back 100 years. The Kuna women are magnificent in their traditional dress and most display hand-sewn molas outside their homes. The guidebooks call it a “mola mall.” It made the dirt paths very colorful. I could have gone fishing, swimming, visiting other communities or even stayed on a small private island by myself for a day. But I spent most of my time in a hammock on the little beach or when it was too hot, in the hammock on my verandah relaxing, reading and just enjoying being in the moment.



Kuna women hand-make “molas” which they can stitch together for clothing, window treatments and bedcovers. but to us foreigners, they are an art form.



I spent a fair amount of time in this hammock on the beach. It was a great four days!

The flight back to Panama City was wonderfully scenic. It was a cloudless sky and we hugged the shoreline. There were only 5 people on the flight, but we made a stop at another airstrip to pick up a group of researchers studying the reefs. I asked the pilot if we could go over the Panama Canal, but he said it was restricted airspace, but would point it out to me when we got near. And he did!!



Akuadup Airport

On my departure day, Jose (the driver I had for two days before our tour) picked me up at 9am, for last minute shopping at Casco Viejo and to Cerro Ancon for great views of Panama City, then he dropped me off at the international airport at 12:30 for my 2:45 flight. It was great shopping now that I knew how to recognize the best quality molas. Jose took me to a area with about 40 artisan booths, run mostly by the Kuna Indians. I bought two gorgeous molas from a woman who let me take pictures of her; and in another booth when I admired a large carry-bag sporting an unusual mola motif (very geometrical), the woman offered to sell it to me. Turns out, I bought her purse!



The Purse!

Panama was a good surprise. Because of the money from the Canal, it has good roads, good schools, good hospitals and very little poverty. I didn't run into begging anywhere. They use the US dollar as their currency, including coins and, as I mentioned their restaurants are great. There are also all the regulars we know - McDonalds, Burger King, Dunkin Donuts, Fridays, etc.

I have emails for Kenny and Christian (great guides) and Jose (wonderful driver and semi-guide), if you'd like them. I also have \$18 worth of talk time on my local phone. I bought \$35. worth, talked to Joe every day, sometimes twice a day and made numerous local calls. The sim stays alive for a year so if you will be in Panama before Feb 16, 2012, you are welcome to take it with you and use up the talk time!

The most stressful part of the trip was coming home thru Miami Airport. I wish the Disneyworld people would show them how to deal with lines. It was chaos - the worst I've ever seen.

Thank you for following along on the trip. The Easter Island/Chile/Argentina trip is cancelled, so I'm working on some domestic trips: Shaw Festival in Canada, an Art trip to either Dallas or New York, and a senior center trip to Shipshewana. Should keep me busy!

All the best
Esther