

Panama – February 2007

Introduction: Seeing, and going through, the Panama Canal has long been on the list of things we must do sometime, but we have no interest in doing it as part of a large cruise ship tour of central America. In addition, Panama is said to be like Costa Rica 10 or 20 years ago, so a fun place to visit to see flora, fauna (mainly birds), beautiful islands, and native cultures. Thus we planned a trip for the right time of year (a month or so into the dry, really just drier, season and before the Easter hordes arrive; albeit still in the high tourist season so we expected some crowds (others avoid the rainy season just like we were doing)).

Preparations were made via the Internet to provide accommodations for the first several nights, after which we'd be winging it and to assure us of a couple of primary outings. One was to go through the canal all the way, and that is available only once or twice a month, and the other to go to an island (Isla Barro Colorado) where the Smithsonian Institute has had a tropical research center for a long time and give tours if you make reservations well ahead of time. The third anchor of our trip was to visit the Kuna people on the San Blas Archipelago, but we figured arranging that once we were in Panama was the way to go. Oh, yes, we also used the Internet to rent a car for the initial part of our trip at a ridiculously cheap rate when you don't take the insurances.

Saturday-1: Fridel picked us up at 5:15 AM and we got to the airport plenty early. Checkin and security passing went just fine although they took my shaving cream as I had it just in my dopkit rather than in a ziplock bag. Humm, didn't look like a liquid or a jell to me but who argues! The plane left right on time and we had window-isle with an empty seat between us; quite nice. We were flying on Continental, actually having gotten the tickets with some frequent flyer miles that we had accumulated long ago. The first leg of the trip was to Newark, I had a fine window seat and enjoyed the scenery along with doing some reading and starting this trip letter. We were certainly surprised when they served us a breakfast, so didn't eat much of the food Dawna had brought along in her "bistro bag." In addition I redlined a proposal by one of the fellows at the lab hoping to be able to FedX it back to him from Newark; and lastly I tried to rest but didn't do very well at it. We got to the NYC area 20 minutes early but then circled and circled while waiting for our turn to land, so ended up just on time and with Dawa's stomach glad to be done circling. The final approach into Newark was quite nice with a fine view of Manhattan as we cruised down the western side of the Hudson River.

I asked people about a spot to get rid of my FedX and they said there was one pretty close by, on the other side of security. So, leaving everything except my package, boarding pass, and passport with Dawna off I went and found it. Good; and then Bad. I had brought Dawna's boarding pass not mine and they wouldn't let me back through security. They said I could get the right boarding pass from a nearby machine but when I tried it wouldn't do it (because it was less than an hour to flight time I was latter told). Panic began to set in and I sort of pushed my way forward at the Customer Service counter and a nice lady got me a boarding pass. Back through security I went and all was well, Well, not quite all, Dawna remembered she had forgotten to bring an umbrella (to the tropics no less), so we went into a nearby Brookstone outlet and purchased one. Next step

was to board the plane where we again got the isle and window of a three-seat arrangement. Great. Our plane sat on the runway for almost an hour but eventual we were in the air. Had a pretty good sandwich for dinner and a fine flight other than now being an hour or so late, so arrived at like 11:30 PM local time. Cleared customs easily, but picking up our Avis rental car took longer than one is used to in the states but not terribly long. Did have a go around about insurances, however. Basically the agent had no problem with our waiving the collision damage insurance since we said our Visa Card covered it, but he insisted we had to take one other insurance. The basic car rental was ridiculously cheap (like \$14 per day) and after doing the insurance for like \$12 per day the overall rental was still VERY cheap. Because it was so cheap I had even inquired verbally with Avis back in the US to find out if we had to take any special insurances and they had said NO. But that did me little good with this fellow and since with the extra charge it was still a very inexpensive rental car, we took it and off we went. Drove into Panama City on the most direct (and thus some tolls) way, followed the directions to our B&B, and got there around 1 PM. Lady of the house let us in and to bed we went.

We were staying in a B&B that I had found over the Internet. Located in a mostly residential area, it had been the Vietnamese Embassy or something like that. Quite nice and felt comfortable immediately given the e-mail traffic background that led up to our taking the place. The place had 4 rooms, two with bathrooms and two sharing a bathroom; we had one of those. The lady who let us in and her daughter, Jennifer, run the place (for less than a year now) with Jennifer being a real go getter, active, competent gal; also a chef who had gone to the San Francisco Culinary Academy. Their niche into the B&B business was they were pet friendly. That was actually our only hesitation on choosing the place, but given that it seemed the best of the (only) two or three we found on the Internet we had taken it. The location was a close walk to the action yet isolated. Excellent in those regards. I'd say the place has a good future as Jennifer is very capable and will be constantly improving things as they settle in and have the cash; and given the dirth of such places and the fact that Panama is perhaps following Costa Rica on becoming a tourist place and a place for Americans to retire to, things should work out for them.

Sunday-1: Got up in a late/relaxed mode and had breakfast on the large patio. There was a choice of three items for breakfast and I think we both had eggs and bacon, along with fruit, juice, and lots of coffee; all in a fine setting. Chatted a bunch with Jennifer. Eventually got in the car and drove to old town (Casa Viejo). Bit tricky getting there due to all the one way, unnamed streets, but not too bad. Walked the area looking at the architecture, views to the ocean (where ships were sitting waiting to get into the canal), the people, some public buildings, etc, etc. Hot and muggy. Ate a small lunch in a real local place (mainly stopped in there to get off our feet and use the toilet). Had a good pieces of tongue actually. More walking, went into the National Theatre which is modeled after the Opera House in Milan and it was very nice. No one else in it right then so fun to slowly tour around looking things over at our pace. Eventually, after a very tiny bit of non-serious shopping, we were finished with Casco Viejo and we got into our (nicely) air conditioned car and decided to not go straight back to the B&B.

Instead we went down the causeway which joins a few small island, all man-made from what was dug up when the dredged the canal, and along which more ambitious folks were biking. We just drove slowly, explored a bit, turned around at the bottom, and when we got back to the top of the causeway we took the Americas Bridge westward over the canal entrance (boats in sight)

and explored a bit in that direction before eventually going back to our B&B. The game plan back there was horsd'oeuvres at like 5 PM daily; and an honor bar with wine and beer. The cold beer was a real winner (not to mention it was only \$0.50). Based on chatting with Jennifer we then walked to a restaurant called Machu Pichu. Dawna had excellent octopus with garlic and I had grouper with a Peruvian sauce on it. It was good as well. The place was nice, the house wine just OK, and a fine time was had by all; including getting to see more of the city as we walked there and back. Also, we tried to get money out of several ATMs but failed (using our LM Credit Union card).

Monday-1: Casual/good breakfast with three choices again and then hit the road out of town in the general direction that the canal goes. We wanted to see Soberania National Park (jungle), a couple of the locks, and an area called Gamboa with a rainforest, fancy hotel, and some attractions primarily for folks staying at the hotel. Also, our route would go right by where we were to pick up a boat ride to Isla Barro Colorado early the next morning so wanted to scope out what it took to get there.

Part of this dry run was on how to get out of Panama City efficiently. Turned out that Jennifer was extremely good at making maps of how to do this, how to get to restaurants, etc, etc (something like a photographic memory she said) so it was actually a snap. In Soberania Park we did a couple mile loop nature trail through some fine flora, seeing a few birds along the way. We also did a couple of miles along Pipeline Road, which is famous for birding but we didn't see a lot (it was the heat of the day) of birds but did see a few. Also saw a few animals. After our walk we went to the expensive hotel, checked its interior out, found out the attractions such as the serpetarium weren't open that day, and headed towards home. As an aside, at one point in time we thought we had modest reservations at the hotel for that night and the next, but then learned they had fallen through.

On the way back from Gamboa we stopped along the side of the road to watch a boat or two go through the Pedro Miguel Locks. Neat. Then a bit onward to the Miraflores Locks where they have the prime visitor center for the canal. A fine place with great viewing of this double step lock system, a loud speaker telling you something about the boats going through the locks, the history of the canal, etc. Spent a long time out on the viewing deck. Super stuff to watch. They have a film show in a theater there, which wasn't worth much actually, and a rather large museum. We did the museum up thoroughly getting more and more informed on the canal and on Panama in general. Had to do the last bit of the museum in a hurry as it was closing. However, the viewing area and restaurant remained open so we went to the latter. Decided to not eat diner there but to have a slow, cool beer while watching more of the canal action. Nice. Got back into the city and to our B&B a bit before dark but too late for the horsd'oeuvres. After cleaning up a bit, and maybe even relaxing a bit, we went back to Machu Pichu. Shared a squid starter, had shrimp in garlic for our main dish, and then Dawna ordered the garlic octopus "for desert" (I helped her with it a bit I admit). And had a better-than-the-house wine. Lastly, had a rather expensive geloto for desert at a place on the way back to the B&B.

As an aside, for the first few days we continued to try getting money with either of our ATM cards and failed, made some calls back to the states (using the free Vonage systems at the B&B) to fix things and failed, and on and on. We weren't broke but wanted a bundle of money before

leaving the big city. Eventually, we walked into a regular bank, gave them VISA and got the money; and then logged onto the LM Credit Union site and paid off our new charge so as to not incur interest on it. Never did know why the ATM cards failed but the bank people said it was because machines only work for Debit cards not for regular ATM cards; or something like that. Sure was nice to have access to Jennifer's Vonage phone system, I admit.

Tuesday-1: This was our day to go to Isla Barro Colorado, an island that was formed from a small mountain when they made Lake Gatun as part of making the Panama Canal. Very early in the game (1920s) the Smithsonian Institute created a Tropical Research Institute here and kept the island isolated and pristine. It functions to this day and they do tours if you have reserved ahead of time; which we had. The boat for the island left the Gamboa pier at 7:15 AM and since it took about an hour to get to it from our B&B it meant getting up early. Jennifer was ready for us with coffee and some pastry, however. As an interesting, and somewhat frustrating, aside the front door to the B&B had a complicated lock system so one could only go in and out with Jennifer or her mother opening and closing the door. We'd feel bad about making them do this over and over and sometimes at awkward (like early times, like this day) but that was the way it worked and they were used to it and kept telling us so. Anyway, the drive went smoothly again although a bit frustrating when we got to the relatively long, one-way, old bridge prior to Gamboa and many of the cars, locals who knew the system, went on across against the red-light but we and one other car waiting for green.

Got to the dock by the prescribed time of 7 AM, however, and were soon on a small ferry for a 45 minute trip to the island. Most of the folks on the ferry were workers or researchers at the Institute. Oh, yes, our guide for the day was on the boat with us. Upon arrival we had a coffee, a bathroom break, and a pre-walk slide show to get educated a bit. Then we went on our guided walk. There were only about 8 of us. A nice couple from Minnesota (I think), a group of four Germans three of whom stopped walking after a few minutes and went back to the "lodge" and the fourth an obnoxious lady. Then there was a chap named Neil who was doing postdoctoral work at Bristol University in the UK. He was doing research on how STRI was adjusting to the concept of dealing with tourists; obviously the subject is deeper than that but you probably get the drift. He would be spending a couple months there (had only been there a few days thus far), going on walks with folks, seeing how the "tours" went, asking questions of the tourists, etc. A nice chap who added to the enjoyment of the "hike." And our lady/girl guide was quite good as well. Saw lots of flora, some fauna (including three different type of monkeys), heard about the different research project that were going on such as radio tagging/tracking panthers, and all manner of such stuff. Lunch was back at the "lodge" and wasn't very good - we wished they had just let us carry box lunches and stay on the trails. Then some more walking and talking, a bit of time in their small Visitor Center; where Dawna bought a couple of nicely done note cards that it turned out were drawn/painted by our guide/research gal, and then another slide show. This one was a bit long but we did get more education, which never hurts. Boat ride back. Oh, yes, one got to see a few of the large vessels that use the canal since they go across the lake nearly on the same path our little ferry does. Back to the B&B and I can't remember what the meal situation was that evening.

Wednesday-1: We were now in a one long day, one shorter day flip flop mode; so got up slowly, had another good breakfast, and spent some time arranging a trip to the San Blas Archipelago on

Saturday. This involved various phone calls, interacting with people at a Travel Agency, faxing forms back and forth (with Jennifer's help), and such. Did get what we wanted, however, which was a one night stay on one of the Islands. We also elected to stay an additional night at Jennifer's after this outing so as to not feel rushed, etc. Once our ducks were in order we walked down to the ocean and explored a bit, but not as much as we'd normally do due to the heat and humidity. Even ended up even taking a cab back to the B&B in the late afternoon, wherein I had a nice swim and a bit of reading of my "airplane novel" near the pool. Probably also hit the Internet as I was doing that every other day or so using Jennifer's office computer. Went to bed early that night for Thursday was going to be another early morning.

Thursday-1: Our assignment, via pre made plans, was to be at the bottom of the causeway by 7:15 AM to get on a boat that takes tourists through the canal. We grabbed a taxi to accomplish this, actually tried two in order to get the right price from the second chap. Yes, we had turned in the rental car the prior evening. Gradually the other participants showed up and we all boarded, getting different colored armbands as we did so. Most of the folks were elderly (like us) and many were with different college alumni groups (Virginia, Northwestern, and a couple of others I've now forgotten), plus a bunch were part of a large tour group called something like Country Tours. Accommodations were fine what with a covered top deck where one could see things really well while keeping out of the Sun. Before actually leaving the dock, we had breakfast, with going to the buffet organized by your colored wristbands and thus efficient. OK coffee and juice and pastry.

Eventually, like 8:45 the boat pulled out. We were told the delay had been to obtain our Panama Canal captain and also our place in line for going through the canal. Whatever; we were certainly ready to go by then. Nice views all around as we started out up the side of the causeway and then into the canal itself, past some shipyards, and then to the Miraflores Locks. It is a two step affair. Our ship was relatively small, could carry up to 300 folks and probably had around 200, so we were tagged up with a major freighter from Hong Kong and went through the pair of locks together. Neat to now be in the boat that was going through the locks with the tourists watching us from the visitor center as we had been watching others a couple of days before. Amazingly efficient at filling these huge locks and raising the boats as required, etc; what with little trains and cables running along side of the lock to help guide the boats. Oh, yes, the locks are two lanes wide so you/we also got to watch a parallel ship passing through. Next was a short run to Pedro Miguel Lock, which is a single step upward in contrast with the double steps at M. As we came out of that lock our Hong Kong partner pulled over to the side. Due to the time of day and the fact that ships were now coming through from the other direction, she was going to have to wait a few hours before continuing. Had a buffet lunch; again perfectly adequate by our standards for food on such an outing. The ship stopped at Gamboa and about half the folks got out there, as it was the end of the half-day tour. The scoop is that there is a half day (or maybe one by each of two companies) once a week or so and a full transit once a month. We had signed on for the full deal and in fact it was the cornerstone of our entire trip. On we went across/through Lake Gatun. Could even see the STRI as we passed it, adding to our enjoyment and understanding of the geography we were going through. Never did spot an alligator, however, but did see some fauna and lots of flora.

The lake is at the highest elevation on the canal route and takes a fair while to get across; but I at least never tired at looking at all the huge ships passing by us on their way from sea to sea. The cost for our modest sized ship to go through the canal was like \$2,400 while for the Big Boys it is a factor of 100 more than that. I haven't mentioned it, but there was a narrator throughout the cruise, although he didn't say much once we got on the lake, who did a fine job of telling us facts about the canal and the ships going through it. One of these was a huge chap, guess I should say lady since that is what ships are, that carried cars and it became our companion going through the final lock (Gantin Lock, which was a three step downward one for our direction). Quite something to go into a lock, move forward, and then have this enormous ship come in behind, and relatively close to, you. Many photos as the ship, called a Panamax, only had a meter or so to spare on each side as it motored in, being nudged into the right path by a few tugboats; and then watching it and ourselves drop many many meters as the lock empties! By the time we'd done this twice, however, we could have skipped the third, but that's not an option; as each does take 45 minutes or so. Eventually we were at the Atlantic level, however, and motored to the end of our transit. Buses were to meet us there but they were late and it was frustrating having to wait for them as it was getting dark and I had hoped to have roadside viewing on the ride from Colon back to Panama City. And they held us on the boat until the busses arrived. Then we got out and on, with Dawna snagging a front seat which makes viewing so much better. Off we went, but SLOWLY as the road is lousy and it was filled to the brim with traffic; like a freeway at rush hour time. So it got dark on us before we had gotten very far towards home. At least the last bit of the road is a freeway so you make better time there. Going back down to the bottom of the causeway to get off the bus seemed foolish so several of us convinced the driver/tour leader to drop us further uptown, where we caught a taxi home.

Unfortunately, this was supposed to be a night we were going to have a Jennifer cooked dinner; she had offered a couple of other times but it didn't fit our schedule. This time we had signed up for it, not knowing we'd be so late getting home. They had eaten, Crab Newberg I believe, and I think she was ticked at us for being late but came to understand we had no choice in the matter. We walked a couple of blocks to a small German place and (a) sampled the two primary local beers (on tap) and continued to prefer Balboa as we had at Jennifer's, and (b) had a light dinner. Dawna's fish was plain and quite good and my two different types of sausages were also good.

Friday-1: Our turn at getting up more slowly, which we did. We then headed towards old town but not quite that far in order to see a particular museum; going there by cab. The museum was where it was supposed to be but the building was empty and being worked on. After much attempted chatting with a person there we figured out the museum had moved (temporarily?), so we proceeded with part two of today's plan, which was walking down Central Avenue toward old town as it is now a pedestrian only street with lots of (rather junky) stores on it. Went in 2 or 3 looking for shirts for the twins and just generally bumming around. Also used LP and some other literature to identify and look at different architecture/buildings. Eventually made a left turn through some more areas in order to get to the Fish Market where we hoped we could still get lunch even though it was getting towards 2 PM. And, they were still serving lunch in the second floor restaurant, although calling it a restaurant was a bit of a stretch as it was a covered market with fish on the ground floor and a balcony above it that served food. Dawna ordered cerviche and I ordered a whole fried fish. We then took turns wandering downstairs to see the various fish stands up close even though they were closing down now that it was afternoon. D

picked up some cerviche down there as well. It was standard/good while what she got upstairs was hard to describe and certainly not great. My fish was fine and she helped me with a bit of it. Probably all washed down with a cold beer, as was our habit, although I don't actually remember if that was the case. Back to the pedestrian street we went primarily to sit in a plaza/park and watch people for a bit. Plus, Dawna watched all the local buses and lobbied for taking a ride on one of them in spite of the heat. Eventually we did just that picking one whose label made me think it would go near our "home." And it slowly did, dropping us off opposite the German restaurant where we had eaten the previous night. Likely had a swim again and some horsd'oeuvres and definitely didn't go out to dinner given how we had had such a late lunch and were going to have an early day tomorrow

Saturday-2: We were to be picked up by someone from the Travel Agency at 4:45 AM, so got ourselves up a bit earlier than that. Unfortunately Jennifer had thought our pickup was at 4:15 so she was up even earlier. The chap drove us to the local/domestic airport on the edge of town and guided us through to where we had a ticket on a small plane to Achutupo, part of the Archipelago de San Blas. After a bit of waiting we and about 10 others boarded a tiny plane and took the 30-45 minute flight. The sun was just coming up so viewing was not great unfortunately, plus there were clouds. Landed on a tiny runway strip next to the Ocean (Pacific / Caribbean) where there was a thatch covered open area as the terminal. Ran to it in some rain, which stopped shortly. Seven of us (5 Canadians and we two) and a couple care takers got into a small motorboat and went to our island "resort" where we'd be spending the night; actually the others would be spending two nights there. Had a modest breakfast and the coffee really hit the spot.

Then a bit of unpacking and relaxing followed by a boat trip to another tiny island for some snorkeling (again we seven plus boatsman/guides). Picturesque little island but lousy snorkeling as there was no coral, lots of sea grass, and only a few fish. Plus, my rental mask+snorkel leaked. Dawna, by the way, passed on getting into the ocean. She also borrowed a better snorkel from the Canadians and I could then at least enjoy cruising around trying to find some fish. Water was actually pretty clear but so darn shallow. After a couple hours everyone had had enough so back to our "resort" island we went. Lunch time with a dark meat fish being featured. OK but not great. Then some rest time with me spending it in a hammock partially reading and partially napping. Around 4 PM was our next outing. A short trip to a different little island, this one where a whole community of Kuna people resided in thatch covered habitats. They are said to be the most authentic indigenous people in Central America and much of South America and I can believe it. Plus they dress in quite colorful costumes. We walked the village/island being constantly shown molas (what they are famous for) for purchase and the group, including Dawna, did purchase an appropriate quantity of them. The people in general were not pushy, the kids were quite charming, and the guide did educate us some about their culture. A good visit and a prime reason we had selected a trip to the San Blas islands.

Back to our island we went and after a tiny bit of cleanup it was dinner time. About a dozen of us now. The meal was lobster, which was supposed to be a big deal but we aren't big on it plus we felt it was overcooked. After dinner the local help did some dancing for us, which given the heat and humidity produced lots of sweat along with smiles. Meanwhile our guide, Eirie or something like that, had asked us if we wanted to go back to the village island at 9 PM for a local party. Of

course we said Yes, and off we 7, plus as many of the workers as would fit into our boat, went. We went to a large building where the party was just getting rolling. It was AUTHENTIC and thus a grand experience. They basically do this community drunk every three months and the whole "ceremony" was a version of what one might expect from natives in the Americas. There was lots of dancing/bouncing up and down by the guys, drinking was via coconut half shell "cups" taking the liquid out of a large canoe; it being constantly replenished by folks with bucket fulls from somewhere. Everyone was smoking, some with raw tobacco and some with regular cigarettes. I'd say a couple hundred people, certainly more than half the village, were participating. We watched and watched, not feeling it would be proper to take any photos. Thing got louder and more active as the drinking went on and on in this hot, muggy, smoking, fascinating environment. We were not really invited to participate to any extent but were given a small amount to drink and it sure was a lot better "wine" than I had anticipated. Made from sugar cane I think. Eventually, on queue, the men left the building for some fresh air and the woman took over in a similar but much quieter manner. They, by the way were dressed picture perfect like one sees in every advertisement for Panama. Later we finally left and took our fresh air boat ride back to our island and to bed. Quite a highlight, and lucky, experience. Our cabana was quite reasonable by the way compared to what I had expected, although still roughing it by some people's standards; electricity only a few hours of the day and only cold, well room temperature, water.

Sunday-2: Since we were only staying one night and the planes only fly early in the morning before the winds kick up, we were up by 6 AM. Had a reasonable breakfast and then back to our "airport" by "boat/canoe" we went. The we being Eirie and the two of us and a couple of boatsmen. Sat around the "terminal" for a bit and then a small plane landed, a few folks got out and we got in. Back to Panama City we went, this time with some viewing of the jungle below us possible but also a fair amount of time we were in clouds, which in such a small plane is more 'thrilling' than in a big one. After landing a problem developed. We had no return ticket and the chap at the airport wouldn't let us through and Eirie didn't know what to do about it. The whole paperwork thing on this excursion had been minimal but our experience in countries is they always know what they are doing when they are hustling tourists around. Initially, all we had was a fax from the Travel Agency that said we had paid for the trip. At the airport this turned into a ticket and a voucher. The voucher went over to Eirie and it turned out it was really "just" for our lodging and meals, and the ticket went to the airline. So, we had nothing, but we had our faithful guide, Eirie. Well now we were back but stranded and Eirie didn't have contact with the travel folks on a Sunday morning. After lots of attempted explanations and searching of luggage (for the supposed ticket) the fellow let us through after we promised that when we found the tickets he was sure we must have lost we'd call him at the airlines and straighten things out. Next step was to look for our ride via the Travel Agency. No luck so we took a taxi, helping Eirie get to where he was going as well. Back to Jennifer's eventually and had a bit of fruit and some coffee. Tried to call the travel folks to complain but no one was answering on a Sunday. Next, Dawna and I went to a nearby Budget Car Rental office to pick up a car, returning to J's in an hour or so with it. The travel folks had been there to try and explain all the mess. Basically, we were to have come back from the island on a different airline, I have no idea when, and the airline folks would have then had our tickets. I'd say the primary goof in all this was that Eirie didn't know what was going on so he took us to the wrong airplane (his) and "of course" there

was no paperwork at our island airport where folks just boarded the plane that was there at the time.

Anyway, put our bags in the car and off we went, heading westward on the Pan-American Highway, seeing new countryside as we went. First stop was at a small cheese (and more) shop in the village of Capira, identified via our LP book naturally. What a business they were doing! We got two each of the three different style empanadas (meat, chicken, and cheese). Had a picnic in our car with the air-condition running. Good stuff, especially the chicken. After lunch/snack, we continued a bit further on the PanAm and then headed off north to El Valle. This mountain town makes all the guidebooks as it has long been where rich folks from PCity have fine country homes in the cooler mountains. Splendid twisty road to it lined with 35 km or so of flower gardens, other flora, good mountain views, nice houses; the mansions are in the village itself. We had booked, via Jennifer, a B&B there she recommended, the Golden Frog, and followed the signs to it. Elaborate homestead but we were a bit too early to check in, so after a cool drink we left our bags and went into town for the famous Sunday (Indian) market. A bit disappointing but still OK and Dawna did get the twins a pair of Panama looking shirts. Did some more exploring and then back to the B&B where we checked in. Adequate room in a spectacular setting. Had some drinks with the owners (Larry and Becky) and one other guest couple and then went to dinner at a German restaurant. Quite good pork chops, Dawna having them one way and I had them a different way.

Monday-2: Fine relaxed breakfast on the patio with the 6 of us and more chatting. Larry is a retired sea-going tugboat captain and has spent a lot of time in Alaska. They only bought the homestead a year and a half ago, put a lot of effort into fixing it up (still nowhere finished) and have an offer they cant turn down in process for selling it. After that they may move to a smaller, more remote mountain village named Santa Fe. Becky also admits she isn't really into running a B&B on a day by day basis but thoroughly enjoyed fixing this one up. The other couple who were staying there are looking into buying something in Panama. In fact almost everyone we met is in Panama to consider buying something as an investment/get-away/retirement, or whatever; except us. And almost all are from the West Coast, more often from Oregon/Washington than from California. Interesting. Part of this is because the Panamanian government is making it very attractive financially for US folks to move there in this manner, while places that used to be attractive such as Costa Rica now make it quite costly.

After breakfast we drove around the area a bit looking at all the fine homes and gardens and then went to a small serpentarium. The chap there is really into his snakes and educating people about them and of course he and Dawna hit it off and she got to handle most of the different snakes. Turns out he also does bird guiding and we sure wish we had known that earlier in the day. After the snake place we went to the local zoo, which is combined with an arboretum. Saw lots of fine birds as well as good flora, and a couple of jungle cats. Then it was out of town we rolled, going back down the nice windy road and then onward/eastward on the PanAm highway.

On we went. Pulled off to see an old church in the village of Nata. Old/good/fine wood ceiling, and were even able to walk up the spiral stairway to the bell tower and look out over the surroundings. Next, we went off into the village of Aguadulce to find Johnny Tapia's shrimp eatery that was 9 km out of town over on the salt flats. At the edge of town we asked some folks

where Johnny's was and they pointed down the dirt road that I was guessing so away we went. About 8 km out we began serious looking and at 11 km we came to the ocean but no Johnny's. So asked folks there and they pointed back. Went backward, asked another set of folks and they pointed back some more, asked another chap and it was Johnny in his rather dumpy outdoor cafe. Ordered shrimp verbally, no menu, and after awhile got them. They had been cooked in (a seasoned I think) oil and were excellent as was the beer to go with them. No one else was eating there (it was mid afternoon) and Johnny was very friendly, especially after I showed him the paragraph in the LP book about him. He has a little English and explained how his son went to Iowa State University and is now an electrical engineer in Kansas City; or at least that's what I think he told us. Anyway, a grand experience (and good eating).

Got to where Panama hiway-2 splits off from hiway-1 (the PanAm one) and took the southern option (hiway-2) down the Azuero peninsula. This is the most colonial/Spanish part of Panama. Before we turned off for hiway-2, however, we had a bad experience. A cop on a motorcycle waved us over as we went by him. He insisted Dawna had been in the fast lane longer than need be for passing a car and we insisted we had done nothing wrong. Of course, I only think that's what was happening given the language differences. At breakfast folks had talked about how you can get shaken down for money from bad cops and how to argue/refuse to pay, etc, so we were semi-prepared to do just that. When it seemed like he had Dawna's passport and drivers license and wasn't eager to give them back but kept talking about tickets and Panama City, I got a bit more aggressive in arguing with him and insisting on his name and number and stuff like that. I think he asked for \$100. I got more unhappy and aggressive. Eventually he let us go our way. Not a pleasant experience and did put us a bit on edge. Also made us really follow the letter of the driving law from then on I admit. Some time later I found where LP suggests giving them \$10 or so just to end the hassle.

As it was getting dark we only drove though a bit of Parita, a village renown for being Spanish/colonial/historic, slowly rather than walking around. A bit further was the city of Chitra where we went to the best hotel and got an OK room. After a drink or two we walked a dozen or so blocks to the center of the town, checked out a cathedral where an evening service was just breaking up, considered a fish cafe that didn't look worth going in given that we really weren't hungry, and walked back to our bed for a night's sleep.

Tuesday-2: Drove the few blocks to town and had coffee and a pastry at a place we had walked by the prior evening. Then backtracked a couple miles to the village of Arena that is known for making pottery. Parked on the main drag where there were several shops but walked a few blocks off it to where there were many smaller spots where the kilns were and where people were doing the work and also selling things. Ended up buying some colorful pottery butterflies a frog and maybe another thing or two. Headed on down the peninsula as far as Las Tablas, where we turned around. Along the way we stopped at a church or two, bought (and had cut up) a pineapple, and had lunch at a roadside stand – where the chicken was lousy but the people were nice. As we went through Parita again we stopped and walked a bit of this nice old village. When we got back to the PanAm highway, westward we went for a drive nearly to Costa Rica. Initially the road was fine and then it turned into terrible what with enormous potholes, places where hunks of the pavement had dropped or rose many inches with sharp boundaries to ruin your car, construction activities (certainly needed but another obstacle to deal with), etc. Slow going.

Interesting scenery, however, with the mountain range off to the right and then fine rolling foothills as one got closer to the city of David. Arrived there just before dark and found the best hotel in town and got a room (it was fine but the AC was marginal). Cleaned up, cocktails, and off to dinner. Neither good sounding place in LP existed anymore so we ended up back at the hotel sitting at a bar and eating; Dawna's fish was actually excellent.

Wednesday-2: Headed out for a breakfast place in LP, but again it didn't exist. Don't know what the problem with LP was. But we found a place with good coffee and OK pastry. Gosh, it was already getting hot and muggy out so off we went, northward into the cooler mountain area. The destination was a village named Boquete, another famous (for Panama) resort/picturesque town in the highlands. Stopped at a visitor center on the edge of town to get information, look at their small museum, have a coffee (this now being real coffee producing country); and bought a pair of sort of strange earrings. Once in town we found a place to stay; quite new and fine accommodations in a garden setting but the hot water situation was all messed up. Then checked out the area, beginning with walking a garden on the edge of town that was quite nice and also strange. Then did a loop drive through spectacular mountain/jungle scenery. Had some excitement when we left the main loop to go to a National Park and at one spot the road was badly torn up with a huge hole and rocks and unclear if we could get across it. But a van came by us while we were staring at it and did it easily, so we went on the same route. This was going down hill. At the Park we decided it didn't make sense to go for a hike so we turned around and on the way back had a rather scary time (I was out of the car directing things both times) going up hill and over the bad spot especially when the car stalled. I kept mentioning to Dawna that after our episode in Belize we didn't dare wreck another car or our kids would probably put pressure on us to start acting our age (or some such thing). Anyway, the loop drive was great – mountain scenery, wildflowers (impatiences), nice geology, coffee plantations, mist at mountain tops, waterfalls, etc, etc.

Back at our nice lodging they had a patio, out in the garden, with a BBQ so of course Dawna got permission to use it. Went into town planning to buy some fish but ended up with meat since that's what was available. Fine views while BBQing. Dawna got familiar with the owner who was from the states and doing well financially with his house real-estate and this new property but also bored with Panama and ready to go back to the active US once he made his semi-fortune.

Thursday-2: A slow get up, during which I sat out on a porch writing some notes and taking in the early morning views and activities. Fine breakfast and then off we went. Stopped at a couple of places in town to see if we could buy a doll for Phebe et al but didn't find anything great and then found one in a window of a closed store but even after waiting until 9 AM (or was it 10 AM) they hadn't opened; so we missed that opportunity. Out of town and back toward David but took a fine angeling different local road and saw more countryside.

{{ It is now mid April, a couple of months after our trip, and I sat down to work on this ancient trip letter. Up to here it was a matter of editing what I wrote on the airplane, but beyond here it goes from scratch. And I can't find my notes. So, maybe I'll just guess at things and try to keep it short. After all, I see I'm already on page 11 and imagine anyone who has read this far is tired of reading anyway. So back to the story line. }}

Got to the PanAM hiway and headed eastward, toward PCity. The bad road wasn't as terrible this time since we had done it once before and were not pushing to get to some lodging before dark. At the town of Santiago we headed northward back into the mountains and went to the village of Santa Fe. Boy was it tiny and out in nowhere. The only place to stay was less nice than LP made it sound like, but who could be choosy and it was certainly friendly. Had drinks on a patio while watching birds with our binoculars and then went the mile or so into town and walked around. Ate some chicken at a nothing special place with an interesting forested view. Early to bed.

Friday-2: Fun breakfast at our lodging with the food being fine and the people being the real fun part of it. Back down the road we went, stopping at a famous church ("one of the best and oldest examples of Baroque art and architecture in the Americas that was created by Indians using native materials." At first we thought we couldn't get inside but then found a person living nearby who had the key and showed us around (for a tip, of course). From there it was driving back to Panama City with a stop at the cheese shop for another round of empanadas. Got to Jennifer's, turned in the rental car, and had dinner. I think this night we ate something she had cooked and in my opinion it was OK but somewhat of a disappointment. This evening was to be a pre-carnival active one according to some of the stuff we'd read but no one seemed to know what was going on so we didn't get fired up enough to go out hunting for the action.

Saturday-3: I had thought our plane was in the AM but it was really in the PM, so it made for a casual morning. Luckily we figured this out the prior day so didn't hurry and pack that evening so instead, had a lazy getup, did our packing and organizing, did a bit on the computer, did a walk of some of the neighborhood, and then went to the airport via a taxi driver that Jennifer likes to give business to. As I remember things there was nothing special about our airplanes. Had a window/isle combo again but this time a person between us. Oh, yes, in Houston we had a significant layover so we went to a fish restaurant and had fine fried shrimp and a quite good local beer and even watched a bit of the NCAA basketball tournament.

Summary: The canal was awesome and the main reason we went but many other items worked out quite nicely as well. I'm glad we spend a couple weeks there rather than a couple of days as so many people do. The people are friendly and not at all aggressive in selling you things, which sure makes for more relaxing looking. The bad cop, of course, was a downer. Hot and muggy is not my/our cup of tea but we've always know that. We found it somewhat crazy how all the Americans are down there buying things and hoping to make a killing, but I suppose based on history they may do well. No major trips presently coming up on the schedule but we are going to Hawaii in the end of May (a science meeting) and to the San Juan Islands (with the old Lockheed gang) in September; and beginning to look into other possibilities.