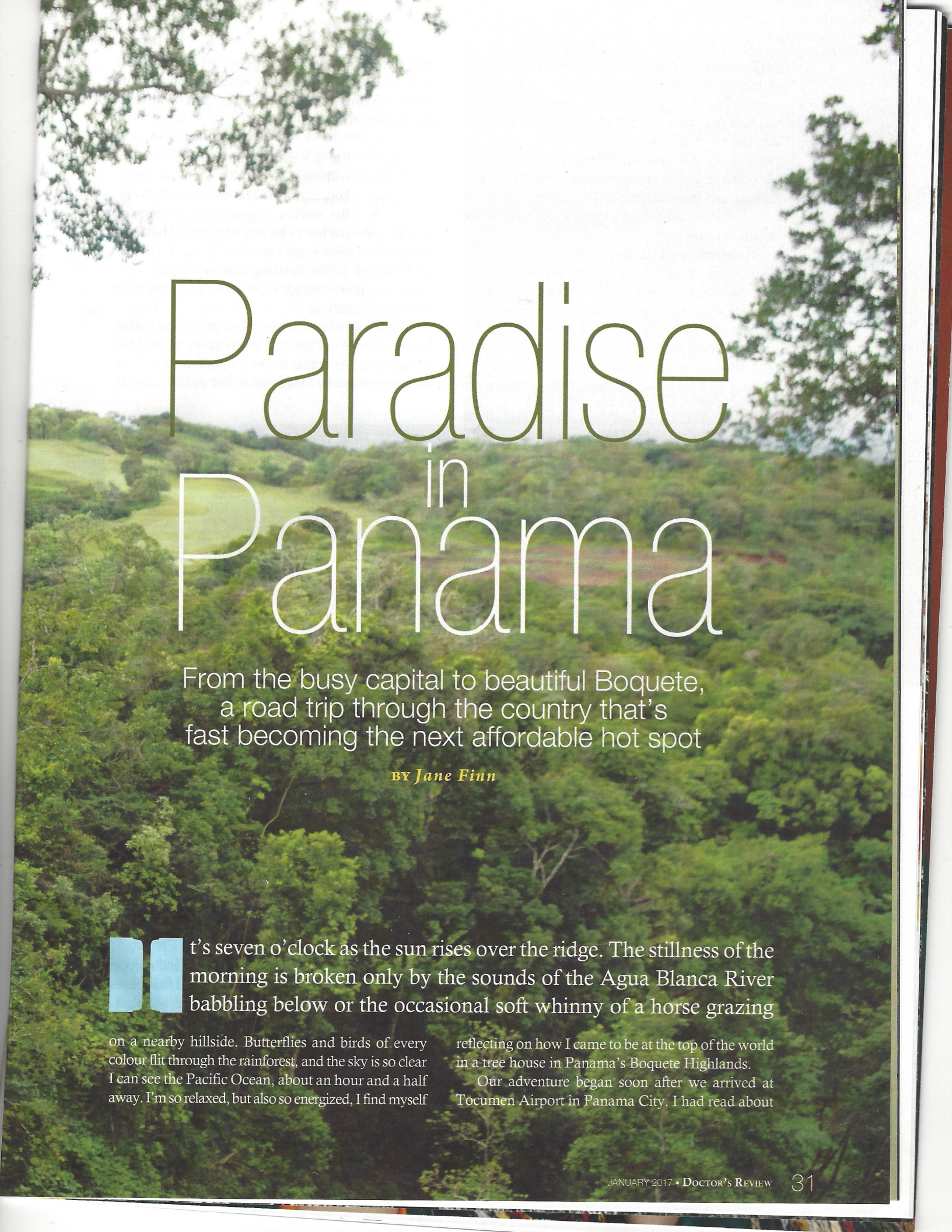




ALL PHOTOS DAVE FINN UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

The luxury tree houses at the Lucero Golf and Country Club in Boquete feature views that stretch to the Pacific Ocean.





# Paradise in Panama

From the busy capital to beautiful Boquete, a road trip through the country that's fast becoming the next affordable hot spot

BY *Jane Finn*

It's seven o'clock as the sun rises over the ridge. The stillness of the morning is broken only by the sounds of the Agua Blanca River babbling below or the occasional soft whinny of a horse grazing

on a nearby hillside. Butterflies and birds of every colour flit through the rainforest, and the sky is so clear I can see the Pacific Ocean, about an hour and a half away. I'm so relaxed, but also so energized, I find myself

reflecting on how I came to be at the top of the world in a tree house in Panama's Boquete Highlands.

Our adventure began soon after we arrived at Tocumen Airport in Panama City. I had read about



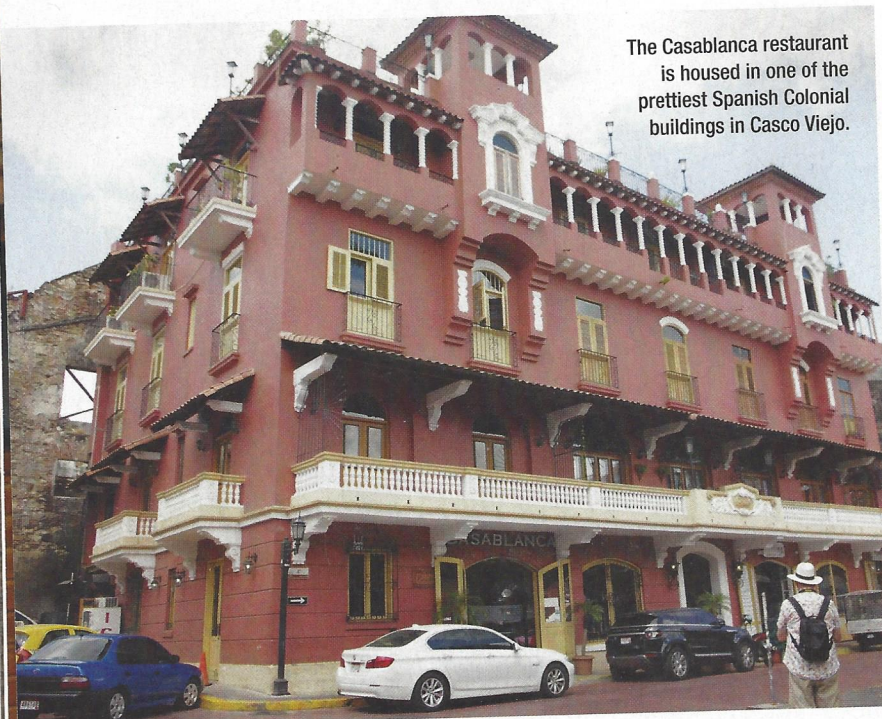
the Panamanian Papers, understood the importance of the Canal and knew that Panama was rapidly emerging as the best value travel destination in Central America, but I was still unprepared for the scene that greeted me as we made our way towards the city. Slowly, suburban enclaves gave way to towering office buildings, luxury condos, shopping malls, casinos and five-star hotels. The skyline reminded me of Miami, and before I knew it, we were in the downtown core.

The streets were teeming with people and traffic. There were runners and cyclists on the Amador Causeway, and shoppers laden with bags strolled along Avenida Balboa in search of more duty-free bargains. Taxis loudly honked their horns, anxious to get passengers to their next meeting, and street vendors vied with cafes and restaurants for passersby's patronage. It was a lot to take in, but after dining on tapas and

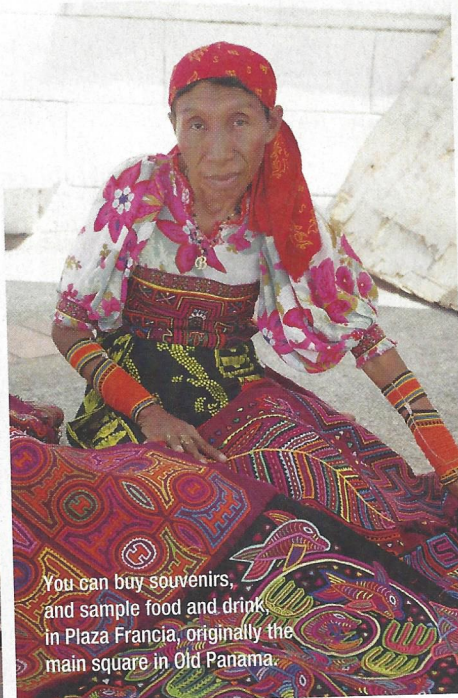
and extravagant new apartments, art galleries and night clubs were taking up residence behind the walls, a testimony to how the historical and modern can coexist in harmony.

A trip to Panama would not be complete without a visit to the Canal so before hopping on the Pan-American Highway, the world's longest road, enroute to our tree house, we stopped at Miraflores Locks to see what many consider the eighth wonder of the world. It was amazing to watch a giant container ship glide through the massive locks and then sail past a rainforest.

While I would have been hard-pressed to get behind the wheel in Panama City, once we crossed the Bridge of the Americas it was a comfortable drive to the string of coastal towns that lie just an hour outside



The Casablanca restaurant is housed in one of the prettiest Spanish Colonial buildings in Casco Viejo.



You can buy souvenirs, and sample food and drink in Plaza Francia, originally the main square in Old Panama.



ceviche, it occurred to me: the city is like Panamanian food — fresh, vibrant and a little bit spicy.

In contrast, when we toured **Casco Viejo** ([cascoviejo.com](http://cascoviejo.com)) the next day, I felt like I'd taken a step back in time. Founded in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, Old Panama is lined with buildings heavily influenced by French, Spanish and American architecture. Its narrow cobblestone streets, or *callejones*, encourage exploration on foot and when you stroll along the Esteban Walkway, the views of Ancón Hill and the Bay of Panama are spectacular.

The UNESCO World Heritage Site is experiencing a period of renewal and when we visited crumbling facades were under repair, plazas and hidden courtyards were being restored to their former glory,

the city. Punta Chame, Gorgona, El Palmar and San Carlos are all beautiful, but we decided to stop to check out Coronado, Panama's first resort community, to see for ourselves why tourists are relocating here in increasing numbers.

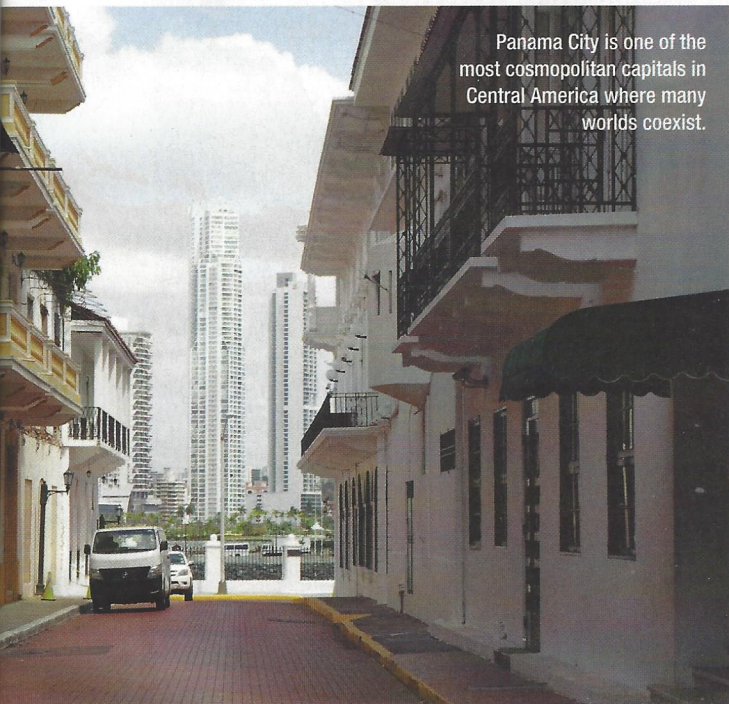
The new Scarlett Martínez International Airport at Río Hato provides North Americans and Europeans easy access to Coronado's spectacular white- and black-sand beaches, crystalline waters, five golf courses and large expat population, but that's not the only reason so many want to call these Pacific Shores home. It appears that many foreigners are impressed with the country's stable democracy, state-of-the-art medical facilities and affordable lifestyle based on US dollars.



Also, retirees, or *pensinados*, are entitled to numerous benefits including discounts ranging from 30 to 50 percent on airfare, restaurant meals, movie tickets and hotel accommodation, and there is no tax on foreign income. With an income of greater than \$1000 per month, Canadians and Americans can obtain a residential visa and start living the good life in less than three months.

**T**he last leg of our trip was north to Boquete in the Chiriquí Province, which has a more temperate climate.

In David, the provincial capital, we met up with Daniel, Boquete's unofficial ambassador who joined us as we made our way up into the mountains. The 45-minute drive passed all too quickly as he shared suggestions about what to see and do, and also insights about politics, real



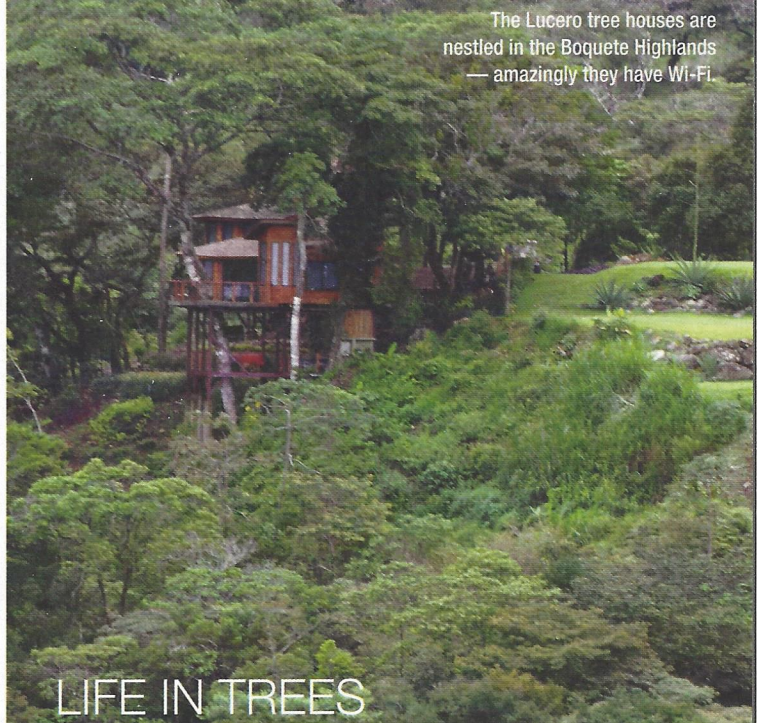
Panama City is one of the most cosmopolitan capitals in Central America where many worlds coexist.

estate investments and why Boquete has become a haven for backpackers, tourists and expats alike. His enthusiasm was infectious and set the tone for the rest of our trip. Although Dave was here to play Panama's only mountain golf course, Daniel left us in no doubt that we'd chosen well when we decided to visit Boquete to explore life like a local.

One of our first stops was **Sugar & Spice** ([sugarandspiceboquete.com](http://sugarandspiceboquete.com)), an artisan bakery and gathering place for expats. While sitting at an outdoor table, it was easy to strike up a conversation over a cup of coffee and gain their perspective on why they had left North America for the simpler life.

Later that afternoon, we hiked the Sendero Los Quetzales trail to Cerro Punta, Panama's food basket,

The Lucero tree houses are nestled in the Boquete Highlands — amazingly they have Wi-Fi.



## LIFE IN TREES

You know that expression “Life isn't measured by the number of breaths you take, but by the moments that take your breath away?” When we stepped onto the deck of our tree house at the **Lucero Golf and Country Club** (tel: 877-727-2476; [luceroandcountryclub.com](http://luceroandcountryclub.com); US\$395 per night, double occupancy, during high season), I literally experienced the latter. Standing 40 metres above the floor of the Caldera Valley, protected by the rainforest canopy and the Jaramillo Mountains, I felt a profound sense of peace. It was at least an hour before I tore myself away from the views to explore our very private, very romantic getaway.

Luxuriously appointed, our tree house included a walk-in rain shower, cozy sitting area with kitchenette and deliciously comfy bed where we could see not only the stars, but the twinkling lights of David in the distance.

Nestled next to the tee off blocks at the third hole of Lucero's mountain golf course, we were steps away from the clubhouse and Season's, the community's farm-to-table restaurant. Last year alone, the staff planted over 500 tropical fruit trees, 320,000 coffee plants and an extensive vegetable garden.

Adjacent to the restaurant is the pool, tennis courts, golf pro shop and, next year, a spa and fitness centre. In 20 minutes, you can also be in Boquete to shop, dine or dance the night away.

Be as active or relaxed as you like, but make sure you take time to savour the flavour of living life “at the top.” Whoever said the “world is your oyster” was surely staying in a tree house, not on a beach as I originally assumed!

Two tree houses are currently available. Two more are scheduled for completion this month. Continental breakfast, use of a golf cart, the pool and hot tub are included.



The formerly sleepy fishing village of Farallón is now one of Panama's hottest beach destinations.



*It was amazing to watch a giant container ship glide through the massive locks and then sail past a rainforest*

where we gorged on the plumpest, juiciest strawberries I've ever tasted, only to return by car the next day for a 10-kilogram sack of vegetables known as *puercas* for the princely sum of US\$6.

There is a magical quality about the Chiriquí Highlands and over the next few days, we quickly adapted to a more relaxed way of life.

We visited the Caldera Hot Springs on horseback, travelled to the top of Volcán Barú to see the sunrise, took in a soccer game on a makeshift pitch below a coffee plantation and learned how the indigenous people of the Emberá tribe live. We also explored La Amistad International Park, part of a Biosphere Reserve maintained by both Panama and Costa Rica, zip-lined through the cloud forest above a canopy of trees, went whitewater rafting past spectacular gorges and discovered hidden waterfalls.

Did I mention that we were able to do all this despite the fact that we were here during the rainy season? Like clockwork, around mid-afternoon, the rain would come. Sometimes it was nothing more than a gentle mist, other times it was biblical, but it didn't dampen our spirits. In fact, it was a welcome respite from the heat of the coastal areas.



Sugar & Spice in Boquete is a popular artisan bakery and gathering place for expats.

JANE FINN

One afternoon we got caught in a torrential downpour. Drenched and feeling a bit parched, we sought refuge in Boquete's oldest bar, Fusion J&B, and quenched our thirst with a Balboa, one of the country's local beers. It was then that we truly embraced the local culture and it embraced us.

We were the only non-Spanish speaking patrons in the restaurant — not that it mattered because English is widely spoken throughout Panama — and we had arrived during the final moments of the UEFA Championship game. Emotions were running high.

It was hard to keep up with the conversation, but then, suddenly, Ronaldo scored on a penalty shot and Real Madrid triumphed over their arch rivals, Atlético Madrid. Fans erupted and we were immediately swept up in the celebration, one of the crowd, rejoicing in the victory and the camaraderie of friends.

I'm not sure how it happened, but as I sit here on the evening before we depart, Daniel's prediction rings true: "we don't just like it, we love it." After our time in Boquete, Panama has captured our hearts. This little slip of a country, the gateway between two continents, may have satisfied our wanderlust — not just for a few weeks, but potentially a lifetime. ■