

Making fantasy real in Panama

HIGHLANDS: Coffee tasting is prime perk of misty region

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Boquete, Panama -- It was in Boquete, a green jewel of a town nestled at the edge of a cloud forest in the western Panamanian highlands, that I discovered that most of what I thought I knew about coffee was wrong. My wife, Judy, and I had just concluded a tour of Cafe Kotowa, one of the many small coffee farms that dot the mountainsides around Boquete, a place esteemed among java aficionados for its exquisite beans. It was an afternoon early in January during what was supposedly the beginning of the dry season, but it seemed suspiciously wet as a chill drizzle fell on us.



Of course, after sweltering in **Panama** City, bathing in the sun of **Panama's** Caribbean coast and sweating in the country's steamy lowlands, the cool high country surrounding the nation's tallest peak, Volcán Barú, was an oasis. And the occasional rain shower, which the locals call bajareque, led to many rainbows during our stay in the flower-filled town of Boquete, which is becoming a popular tourist destination. Close to two national parks, it offers panoramic mountain vistas, temperate breezes, cloud-forest hiking, whitewater rafting and a vast array of bird and animal life.

Boquete's status as one of the world's prime spots for growing the much-sought Arabica bean, the source of premium coffee, comes from the ideal location and climate in the surrounding valley. At an altitude over 3,000 feet, it's cool, with rich volcanic soils and alternating sun and rain that seem to shift by the minute. The Hacienda La Esmeralda is there, the coffee estate that set what was then a record wholesale price of \$21 per pound in an online auction two years ago.

Coffee has become an integral part of the tourist experience in Boquete. Of the dozens of coffee estates in the valley, several offer tours and tastings to visitors. It helps that the town has a wide choice of restaurants, hotels and cabins, and a well developed network of roads and trails.

"It's sort of the Napa Valley of coffee, without the pretension," said Mike Ferguson, spokesman for the Speciality Coffee Association of America.

The region has not yet developed the theme-park-like ecotourism of neighboring Costa Rica, though guides and outfitters are available for more adventurous trips. Exploring the mountains, rivers and forests around Boquete tends to be a mellow and more solitary experience.

On our first morning in the area, we drove our rented car about 15 minutes west from town to the edge of Volcán Barú National Park, where we picked up a trail leading

along a fast-running stream through a canyon. It was gray and overcast, and, for the first time in **Panama**, I put on my sweater.

After a mile or so, we found ourselves walking through climax cloud forest, lusher than anything we had experienced in our temperate-zone world, the rain forests of the Pacific Northwest included. It was filled with tall trees, long lines of leafcutter ants hauling their improbably massive loads, exotic flowers and plants growing on plants -- including orchids of the sort we usually expect to see in a hothouse or pinned to a gown, not growing wild. Later, we chanced on howler monkeys making their way through the canopy above us, flashing their rumps in a display of contempt.

Boquete is a few miles from the Continental Divide separating the Pacific and Caribbean drainages, and a half-day walk on the Quetzal Trail to Cerro Punta, through some of the most dramatic high country Central America offers. When conditions are right in winter, the multicolored quetzal bird, deemed by many the world's most beautiful, is more easily spotted than any other readily accessible place on Earth. As one binocular-toting visitor put it, "In Costa Rica, one quetzal for 50 birders. In **Panama**, 50 quetzals for one birder."

But the main reason we were there was to drink deeply of the local brew. Our hosts were Terry and Hans van der Vooren, a cordial Dutch couple who moved to Boquete eight years ago and now grow coffee in a little finca farther down the valley. Terry led the two of us and a couple from Seattle among the coffee trees, planted in neat rows along the slopes, the branches of the unpicked plants heavy with deep red berries.

As darkness began to fall, we entered the farm's processing rooms, a maze of pipes and conduits. We examined the machines that separated ripe beans from immature ones, removed the skins and inner layers, and washed and dried them, struck by the meticulous care Kotowa took to ensure the quality of its coffee.

Then we joined a group of Dutch visitors in Kotowa's tasting room, a cozy, wood-paneled chamber decorated with posters illustrating the fine points of "cupping" coffee. Hans, who had the look of a very tall Indiana Jones, led the tasting, turning the session into a caffeinated version of Miles' wine adventures in the movie "Sideways." At one point, I found myself, just like Miles, sticking my nose deep into a cup of newly roasted beans, capturing the notes of chocolate and cinnamon they released.

As a good Berkeley resident, my notions of fine coffee had largely been formed by Peet's, and I had become accustomed to that store's very dark roasts. Hans, passionate and opinionated about his beloved beans, dashed my prejudices. He offered us light, medium and dark roast versions of Kotowa coffee, picked and roasted just days before. He had a point to prove -- with every step up the roasting ladder, flavor elements were lost, overwhelmed by the taste of scorched beans.

"Dark roasts are used to hide inferior beans," he admonished.

I also learned that I had been committing a cardinal sin -- pouring boiling water over coffee in my French press without letting the liquid sit, a recipe for a burnt, bitter brew.

To my taste, Kotowa's light roast lacked body. I found myself gravitating to the medium roast, which I thought offered the best compromise of flavor and heft. I left

with gratitude toward Hans and Terry, and a new appreciation for the subtleties of my essential morning beverage.