

Raise a hat to Panama

The country has man-made wonders and natural beauty in abundance, yet few visitors, says a grateful Richard Robinson.

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A raging, tropical thirst had been tightening my throat since I arrived in Panama City and I was on my way for a cold beer.

I had not expected to bump into the President just outside the presidential palace, whose hand I was able to shake with only a couple of jumpy security guards for company. When I found a bar, a Lebanese establishment and air-conditioned to the point where you could almost see your breath, a group of businessmen sat around a hookah, drawing long on the water-cooled smoke.

My first few hours in Panama had certainly produced some jumbled and unexpected images. I was in the Casco Viejo, the old Spanish part of town, a wildly cosmopolitan, sea-bound spit of land where palaces and mansions had sagging slums for neighbours, waterfront dives competed with trendy cafés for business, and presidents walked in the same streets as paupers.

I had come here on foot, a hot walk from my hotel in a very different part of the city, along the plush avenues of the financial district, a cityscape that might have been lifted from the United States but for the screech of tropical birds and the sprays of greenery bursting from the gaps between the banks and department stores.

Expensive cars cruised by but there were also tricycles selling ice-cream, and public buses - old, imported school buses airbrushed with biblical characters, sci-fi scenes and superheroes. These were the diablos rojos, the red devils, whose private owners strive to outdo their colleagues in both speed and flamboyance.

I continued along the Pacific promenade of Avenida Balboa, past the statue of the explorer, Vasco Núñez de Balboa, who has given his name to the country's currency and its favourite beer. I turned towards Casco Viejo at a pier, where the idle sat among the fishermen's torn nets and detritus, and pelicans scabbled on the tin roofs of decaying booths. Stacks of oily machine parts and piled-up trays of rusty nails were on offer, fruit mulched underfoot and curious eyes glinted from dark doorways.

I wove a way through the milling crowd in front of the public market and escaped to the calmer precinct of the presidential enclave. I had wandered through rich districts and poor and yet, I reflected over a chilled Balboa, I had not felt remotely threatened. Neither had I noticed the strong Yankee influence that pervaded neighbouring Costa Rica - this was clearly a country with its own distinct identity.

I left the Lebanese bar as evening fell. Children played on the cobbled roadways, extensions of their homes. Door and windows were open and shafts of light dappled the street. Decaying, balconied mansions ran the length of dead-straight streets that emerged at park-like plazas or seafront promenades such as the French Square, a trysting place, where couples leaned against the seafront wall, murmuring endearments to one another as the sun set below the hills. In the distance I could see the high arch of the Bridge of Americas, at the entrance to the Panama Canal.

It's impossible, of course, to come to Panama and not visit the canal. It took the US some 10 years and \$336 million to build. Despite this, I had been fully prepared to be underwhelmed by it - but I was to leave with a sense of wonder. I took a bus to the Miraflores Locks, five miles from the city centre, where there is a viewing platform.

These immense locks lower ships over 50 feet to Pacific tidewater level and I watched as towering container and cruise ships squeezed through, assisted by special locomotives called "mules". From here, ships continue up into the Lago Miraflores or proceed down towards the Bahía de Panama.

Where the Canal broadened at a flooded valley, forested hilltops became islands, and a jungle of Amazonic exuberance crowded the banks. Freighters and gleaming cruise liners edged forward against this backdrop of rampant greenery, while fishermen in dugout canoes tossed in their wake. The secret of its Amazonic quality is the swathe of virgin rainforest that has been preserved along the length of the canal, to help conserve the vast amounts of fresh water needed to fill its locks.

I took a boat trip on the Canal, speeding beneath the road bridge to join the flooded forest that forms its central portion. We were still close to the city, yet when we disembarked to enter the shadowy world of the forest I saw howler monkeys, spider monkeys, iguanas, yellow-rumped caciques and a score of fauna besides, all in the space of half an hour. More than 500 species of bird and 100 species of mammal live in the area, a national park.

We returned to the jetty, where our boatman had not been idle. Half-a-dozen rainbow coloured fish were stashed beneath the seat, destined for the pot. We scrambled back on board. I was back in Panama City in just over an hour; I had yet to chalk-up the full 24, but felt I been here a week.

A few days later I was on the pavement terrace of a traditional city restaurant called El Trapiche (The Sugar Mill) enjoying fried plantains with sancocho, a thick stew of chicken, rice and vegetables. A grey-haired security guard was leaning on a lamp post, watching the traffic and singing softly.

I had just returned from the delightful Bocas del Toro islands, where the painted wooden villas, the empty streets and deserted beaches evoked the Caribbean of 20 years before. I had carved white arcs of wake through the mangroves, tramped through a national park and found machinery brought from Aberdeen 90 years before, still working on a coffee estate in the cool highlands of Boquete.

I reflected that neighbouring Costa Rica draws a billion tourist dollars a year, compared to Panama's mere fistful. And yet Panama easily outscores Costa Rica in every department. I raised a bottle of Balboa in salute to a fine country that I had practically to myself.