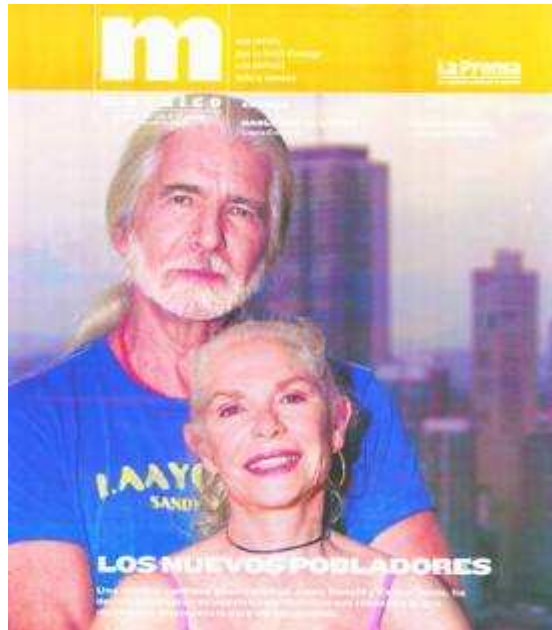


Panama, Sunday August 6, 2006

LA PRENSA NEWSPAPER MOSAICO SUNDAY MAGAZINE

COVER THEME:

THE NEWCOMERS



Upon dedicating time to ample research, a sizable quantity of foreigners has decided to live in our country. Learn the reasons for their selection.

### **ESTHER M. ARJONA & DANIEL DOMÍNGUEZ**

Ronald and Esther Davis received us with ample smiles in their new residence in the 28<sup>th</sup> story of a Punta Paitilla building. Very few places will enjoy a better view of the bay and the rising skyscrapers. Inside their apartment, in addition to finely selected furniture, there's an incredible collection of objects from diverse origins: oriental masks, posters from Spain, Darien *tagua* carved figurines, photos that speak of other times and places, antiques and devil masks. There are some pending details. The time the couple has spent in their new apartment is short. Even then you can breathe home warmth. Their favorite spot is the balcony. There they enjoy fresh air, a beautiful panorama and dining with old and new friends. In short, they feel at home.

Ronald met Esther in their jobs as professors: she taught English as a second language and Ronald, history. Studies had taken Ronald to India and Esther came from Trinidad & Tobago. They had much in common.

“I had not met an American who ate hot food”, she laughs. “The first thing we did after we arrived here was look for *aji chombo* (a local chili). We love hot food”, Esther comments.

The couple lived almost 20 years in New York where he worked as a real estate promoter. She was also a model. With time they decided to move on.

“We lived in Spain almost eight years, but the Euro was killing us”, they said.

Having Dollars is a disadvantage versus the European currency, their expenses became unbearable. They had to think about moving again.

The decision was neither arbitrary nor hurried. “We conducted much research looking at Australia, New Zealand, Argentina, Puerto Rico and the results pointed directly to Panama”.

The Davis' based their decision on articles published in newspapers from various countries, web pages about Panama and a visit.

If you ask them what were their reasons that made them decide on Panama, they have them very clear:

#### THE PANAMANIANIANS

“The people were a surprise to us. You don't realize how polite you are”, Ron says with total conviction. “Every country has good and bad people, but I don't believe we've found in any other place – and we've traveled a lot – so many sweet, warm and friendly people”.

The etiquette in large cities is different. So much that upon entering an elevator they were surprised because someone that they didn't know greeted them with a “good morning”.

Communicating was simple. “So many people speak English that it's very easy to connect. It bothers me that people speak to us automatically in English because we look American and I've lost a bit of my ability to speak Spanish”, Esther confesses.

On the other side of the coin, Americans are not always well received and in some places they've been victims of less than cordial and even offensive treatment. “They don't like U.S. policies and that hatred is transmitted, but in Panama we've not felt this”.

According to the Davis', the people are Panama's best resource. "We've met many very good Panamanians that have traveled extensively, are educated, know the country and even offer advise".

#### COST OF LIVING

"Life in Panama is really thrifty if you compared to the U.S. having a U.S. salary", Ron assures. "In the U.S. we would probably be considered high middle class. Here with the same amount of money we're considered wealthy. Everything's cheaper here, there's no Euro or conversion problem".

To this situation, we must add the Panamanian law benefits to foreign retirees.

"What the government is doing is very good. I believe it's very good when you are extended a discount when you go dining. It's good that the government is worried about people who have worked so long".

#### FAR, YET CLOSE

One of the reasons the Davis' decided to establish residence in Panama is the political difference they have with the current U.S. government. "We're not in agreement with what is happening in the U.S. under the George W. Bush Administration". Nonetheless it's an advantage to travel to the country of origin without complexities.

Travel to the U.S. takes less than three hours. This allows them to visit their family and take advantage, if necessary, of medical benefits.

#### MEDICAL SERVICES

"Many of the physicians that practice here have been trained in the U.S., thus there is no significant differences in medical services", Ron says.

In some cases, some of the doctors practicing in Panama do so in some cities of the U.S., which offers a great advantage.

#### CLIMATE

"Esther comes from Trinidad & Tobago, she's used to warm weather. I studied in India so I like the climate. While others are sweating, we're happy. I can live the remainder of my life in sandals and shorts", Ron states.

The Davis' accommodate to a climate that besides being hot and humid, allows them to enjoy themselves without air conditioning or heating.

"Sometimes if we leave the windows open it's so cool we feel cold and must close them".

On the other side, temperatures in Panama are not as high as some areas of the U.S. during the summer nor do you have to fight snow in the winter.

#### POLITICAL STABILITY

“Panama has a relatively stable government, whether you’re a supporter or not. We realize that crime, with some exceptions, is relatively low as compared to the U.S. There is a corruption problem that reaches the Supreme Court but every country has its problems, the difference is their graveness”, Ron affirms.

“We feel that Panama is a great place to live and we know that other Americans are awakening to this feeling”.

“Are you living in the jungle? Do you have electricity, do you have a TV?”, were some of the questions that some friends asked the newcomers.

“The reality is that the image the majority of Americans have of Panama is that this is an absolute third-world country that only a fool or an ecotourist would like to visit and that after going rafting or scuba diving one has to leave quickly. We sent them a photo with a view from our balcony and they couldn’t believe it”.

This false impression is changing thanks to articles published in newspapers like The New York Times and web pages, in addition to mouth to mouth information that even the Davis’ have passed on to friends.

They’re familiar with Panama City restaurants, coffee shops, movie theatres and music clubs. The variety, when compared to other cities is limited but they realize things will change.

“More people are moving and the demand for certain types of food and cultural events will increase. We enjoy the coffee, sitting on a corner café and seeing people walk by as it’s done all over Europe, now there are three places where you can do that, but as Panama becomes more sophisticated there will be more, there will also be more movie theatres offering not only Hollywood but also other countries’ movies”.

In reference to the interior of the country, they’re familiar with various places. “The countryside is beautiful. We’ve been in Bocas, Boquete, San Blas, Contadora Island, Volcan, El Valle, Coronado and in some towns of the Azueros peninsula”, says Esther.

The Davis’ idea is to be more than foreigners that live in another country. They want to know, enjoy the countryside and the city and be part of the community. “If I am going to live here I want to know the country and its people. We’re not interested in meeting other Americans, unless the opportunity comes knocking, nor in living in a gated community”.

The Davis' swim as fish in the water in their new home and walk almost every place. "I like the idea that people are now recognizing us. They call us 'Johnny Walkers' because we walk every place". This is the way they go to the malls, a doctor's appointment, the supermarket or dining. And the people that see them daily in their walks already know them. "We recently bought a car. A cab driver took us to the dealership and we told him we were buying a car. A few days ago we were driving around and a car behind us didn't stop honking and when I turned around it was the cab driver waving at us".

They love Panamanian food. Ron is a *patacon* fan. Esther's favorite food is *carimañolas*. "I'm very impressed with Panamanian food, it's too bad it's fattening", Esther insists while Ron says he understand why Panamanian women in light of having beautiful figures usually have a little belly. "Too many patacones".

In spite of the good times they're enjoying, they would like some things to improve.

"You can get practically anything in Panama, but you have to insist, insist, insist. You have to try and stay away from "mañana".

The lack of punctuality, typical of the Caribbean, is something they've not become accustomed to, even though they realize that's the way things are here.

"If you confirm an appointment, people will never arrive less than a half hour later. If we have guests and we want them to be here at 7:00, we ask them to be here at 6:00 and it works perfectly".

Another thing that confuses them is that no one seems capable of giving them an address using a street number, but rather make reference to a gas station, a tall building or the supermarket, something they perceive with good humor.

What truly worries the Davis' is the situation they see as "a great bridge between rich and poor".

Situations such as the Social Security legislation they witnessed last year, placed in evidence that there is a social problem. "There is a problem here, just like in the U.S. and this is that the rich are becoming richer and the poor, poorer. Why not give all people a space in society?", Ron argues.

This is the reason, according to the Davis', why some countries in South America are again making a shift to the left without a need. "The best advancement tool is capitalism, even with all its evils. If Panama takes a balanced route it will have a brilliant future".

Taking all in consideration, the positive overrides the negative. “That’s why we’re here, you can’t demand perfection because human beings spoil everything they touch. You reach for something that is good and has improvement opportunities. We hope that’s what Panama does”.