



I've lived in Panama for around 7 years now, though the time I tend to travel around the country is when friends or family are visiting. I've heard lots about how beautiful Boquete is and about the dynamic ex

pat

community that lives there, so I've been wanting to visit for some time now. So a recent visit from a friend took me on a road trip to check out the mountain town in Panama's famous region of

Chiriqui

. Here are some tips we picked up along the way. They might make your trip to

Boquete

easier, when you decide to make the drive.

The Drive to Boquete

It takes around 4 - 5 hours to get to Boquete from Coronado by road. Be sure to get on the road early so that you can get there while there is still daylight, especially in the rainy season. The drive to

Boquete is on the InterAmerican highway , a well paved 2 lane highway all the way to Santiago. Up to Santiago, there are restaurants and fondas

where you can grab a bite for lunch. After Santiago, services diminish, so make sure your gas tank is full for the remainder of the journey. After Santiago, the road changes to a one lane highway, which opens up only occasionally for passing lanes. While the road is still in good condition, it is bumpy and winds uphill with twists and turns.

In David, the road to Boquete is easily missed. We didn't see signs, and had to call our hotel to verify that we were on the right road. The landmark, so that you don't miss it, is a big box store called

NOVEY. Turn right at the Novey and follow the road up to Boquete

. This road will soon be a two lane divided highway, but on the day we travelled up to the mountain, one side was still under construction. It was dark and raining by the time we navigated the winding, ear-popping drive up into the town, which sits at 1200 meters above sea level. Visibility was very poor from the rain and the cloud-fog that we were driving into. Driving note: While on the road to Boquete, about half way up, keep right on the fork at the Terpel Gas station.

The Town: Boquete

Boquete itself was lovely. Nestled in the mountains, the entire town winds around steep and narrow roads. There was a light, misty rain, called Bajareque, going on for the much of the 3 days we spent there. The result is breathtaking rainbows. Dave, of Boquete Luxury apartments tells us that the temperature hovers around 75 degrees most days of the year. The climate feels like spring, and after coming from the hot, humid beach temperatures, the clean and cool mountain air felt refreshing.

One important point to note. If you plan to visit Boquete around one of Panama's Independence days, and if you want peace and quiet, change your plans, or choose a place to stay outside the main strip. The quaint town of Boquete changes into a very loud and noisy party zone starting the day before the holiday...and continues .

Boquete Luxury Apartments is located in the downtown area, above the MultiBank building. Clean, affordable and central, the unit we stayed in came with a full kitchen and washer and dryer for \$75 a night. A few doors down, we found a mini-super which carried all the necessities to turn a hotel into an apartment, with a few gourmet treats thrown in as well.

Boquete is known mostly for its coffee. The unique climate allows for sprawling plantations which produce some of the world's best coffee. As coffee grows well here, so do flowers. Each year the town hosts a flower festival which attracts people from across Panama and the world. The forested mountain areas are also popular with birdwatchers and hikers. In Boquete

, you will also find an exciting white water rafting experience down the Caldera River, one of the best zip-lines in Panama, hot Caldera Springs, horse back riding in the mountains as well as rock climbing.

Boquete has a number of good restaurants. Our stay was not long enough to experience all the fine places to eat, however we were lucky enough to dine at The Rock. Ask anyone from Boquete or who has been there recently and they will tell you, the Rock is one of the best restaurants around. Service is great, food is delicious with a selection of good wines. One of the treats of being in the Chiriqui region, is that the mountain rivers are packed with fresh trout (trucha). As a result, some of the nicer restaurants, like The Rock have some amazing trout dishes on the menu.

▣ **The Expat Community**

The Expat community in Boquete revolves around the Boquete Community Players (BCP), who at first glance appear to be a community theater group. A closer look lets you know that there is a lot more than theater going on at the BCP . The volunteer BCP board leases a large property, which is used as a center for events and theatre productions. They host there a weekly Tuesday market, which attracts vendors selling everything from fresh vegetables, to handmade candles, soaps and jewelry.

The building is a remarkable example of a community working together. When the location was offered to the BCP, it was a derelict structure. With money and sweat from volunteers, the community renovated the area into useable space. One of the key features is the theatre , complete with lights and sound board. They put on several events per year.

□ **What Next**

A popular next stop from Boquete is Bocas del Toro. A four hour road connects Boquete to Almirante, the small town from where water ferry's leave for Bocas. The road there takes you into much higher elevations and across the Continental Divide. The views are truly spectacular : forest- covered mountains and valleys hug both sides of the road and clouds, fog and mist engulf you to make you feel like you are driving at the top of the world.

And not just because you will want to take in the views is it slow driving. The hills are steep, the curves sharp and there are plenty of potholes and no shoulders on the road. It is not much more than a hundred kilometers in total but it will take you four hours or so because you just can't go more than 20 – 30 km an hour for much of it.

If you choose not to drive yourself, you can also find busses and taxis in Boquete that will gladly make the trip to

Almirante

. If you drive yourself, there are fenced-in secure parking areas in

Almirante

, where you can leave your car. Boats and ferrys

from

Almirante

to

Bocas

run daily from

8am

until

6pm

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