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Ten, the bistro inside the Hotel DeVille, a new boutique hotel with soaring ceilings, comfortable beds and plenty of room to stretch out.

Hotel DeVille

VIEW FROM THE STREET: PANAMA

Is Panama City The Next South Beach?

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It was sticky hot, and I was grungy after a morning exploring the cobblestone passageways of Panama City's Casco Viejo, a 300-year-old cross between the crumbling charm of Old Havana and the restored glow of New Orleans's French Quarter.

In my baseball cap, khaki shorts and sweaty T-shirt, I was dressed for a sidewalk hot dog stand. But a Panamanian friend had been raving about S'cena, the new Mediterranean restaurant in this colonial-era part of town, and when I stumbled upon its entranceway, it seemed the food gods were summoning me.

Still, I felt a little sheepish as I passed the first-floor jazz bar and stepped into a scene of sophisticated serenity: white tablecloths, fresh flowers and waiters in pressed shirts. I braced myself for dirty looks and a dreary table near a swinging kitchen door.

Instead, the owner greeted me like a lost cousin, whisking me to a prime table and gently draping a linen napkin across my lap.

And apparently I wasn't the only one getting VIP treatment. They were calling the guy in the next room "Mr. President."

"No, no," the waiter whispered, "it *is* the president -- of Panama."

Somehow, it all made sense. After just a few days in Panama, you start to recognize faces, and the prospect of sipping a midday chardonnay a few feet from the country's most powerful man doesn't seem so far-fetched.

I had seen ads touting Panama City as the next super-swanky Miami, and I was prepared for velvet-roped lines and South Beach-style snobbery. Heck, Jenna Bush was clubbing here just before I arrived. So not having to deal with a waiter with an attitude was a relief.

But I can see why it gets the Miami comparisons. The city tucked on Panama Bay offers a hip urban vibe and a distinctive skyline. It has sunshine, seafood and shopping opportunities galore. And although Panama is part of Central America, its rhythm and stylish Latin inhabitants have a Caribbean flavor.

There are notable disappointments. Panama's tourism industry sometimes struggles to meet the demands of travelers. (The man at the Avis counter had no idea how to get downtown, and cabdrivers were no better.) And though the country has many exquisite beaches, none is within walking distance of the hotel strip as in Miami's South Beach.

But ultimately, the beauty of Panama City is that it hasn't become Miami yet. It's much more welcoming and manageable. And now is the time to go -- before the Panama Canal gets its third set of locks, before Donald Trump finishes his 65-story tower and before the prices shoot just as high.

Glitches, Then Fixes

The woman behind the Louis XV desk at the Hotel DeVille looks puzzled. "No, I'm sorry," she tells my fiance, Manuel, and me. "I do not have a reservation for you."

After arriving late at night in a foreign city where we do not know a soul, this is not the greeting we want to hear, especially because the lobby of this boutique hotel hints at a pleasant stay -- Persian rugs, plush sofas, soft lighting and newspapers on every table.

"It's not a problem," the woman chirps before I can pull out our confirmation slip. "I can take care of you."

It is a scene that will be repeated over and over in Panama -- a glitch followed by an enthusiastic fix. Our room, with 20-foot-high ceilings and exposed wood beams, has all the modern amenities of a five-star hotel, except it's larger and much more affordable. There's a desk with Internet access, piles of feather pillows and soft robes for us both.

We head back downstairs to the hotel's groovy new Ten Bistro, where the gimmick is \$10 entrees. (Yes, Panama's currency is the U.S. dollar, so dinner is a bargain.) After two flights, bad directions and a missing reservation, a decent meal and big goblet of wine are just what we need.

But there's a problem: The restaurant is closing at the very un-Miami hour of 10 p.m.

This being Panama, the problem evaporates as fast as it appeared. The manager stays open just for us, guiding us to a table aglow with orange candles. The soothing palette continues overhead, with glorious bird of paradise blooms sprouting out of suspended glass vases. And to top it off: a chilled bottle of a crisp, absurdly inexpensive Chilean sauvignon blanc.

The Canal, of Course

Even today, 93 years after completion, the Panama Canal is an awesome engineering feat, guiding ships the 50 miles from the Caribbean Sea to the Pacific Ocean.

We arrive at the Miraflores Locks and head to the outdoor viewing deck. The sight of 965-foot-long behemoths squeezing through the canal is unbelievable, the precision timing of the locks a marvel. Over a loudspeaker, a bilingual guide rattles off canal stats and fun facts. "The lowest fee ever assessed for passage was 36 cents," he says. "It was for Richard Halliburton to swim the canal." An impressive museum inside is complete with a simulator that gives a realistic sense of what captains experience as they navigate the narrow locks.

The next day, while Manuel works, I ask my cabdriver to drop me at the Plaza de la Independencia in the center of Casco Viejo. The modest square looks much as it did 100 years ago: narrow one-way streets, stone edifices and a few rusty cannons.

On the corner is a lovingly restored four-story colonial built by the French in the 1870s and now home to another canal museum. At one-fifth the price and almost empty, it is a much better deal than the locks museum.

The story of the canal -- from the failed effort by the French in the 1880s to current widening plans -- is presented in bright, colorful interactive exhibits. There's a full recounting of the 22,000 workers who died, most by malaria or yellow fever, and a sobering account of the segregated system that left dark-skinned workers with less money in their pockets at the end of each workday.

Outside the museum, the neighborhood offers the best of Panama City -- past, present and future. In 1671, after pirate Henry Morgan burned the original city to the ground, the King of Spain chose this boot-shaped peninsula to rebuild.

Although Casco Viejo fell into disrepair in the 1950s, today it is enjoying a revival. The two worlds meet on its labyrinthine streets: Elderly women hang laundry on wrought-iron balconies as construction workers transform dilapidated convents into swanky loft-style condos.

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By sheer luck, I happen upon the presidential palace just as four magnificent herons strut across the porch. A few blocks away, at the seawall, I take in a gorgeous view of a half-dozen ships queuing up under the Bridge of the Americas.

I'm intent on finding the Church of San Jose with its Golden Altar, and as I study my map, a 30-something man named Ricardo offers his services. In most big cities, this would be the signal to sprint in the opposite direction. But with squadrons of tourist police patrolling on bicycles, I accept the invitation.

Ricardo, a native Panamanian, makes the sign of the cross as we step inside the plain white church. The interior is an odd -- even unsettling -- jumble of periods. But the baroque altar, salvaged by a priest who hid it from the plundering Morgan, is a mouth-gaping gem, an enormous mahogany piece covered in gold leaf.

Later, another local, Julio, guides me to the dungeons used first by the Spaniards and later the Colombians. One has been converted into a touristy restaurant. But Julio leads me to another. I climb through a low-slung doorway, and in the dank, poorly lighted room is a genuine surprise: paintings of every shape, color and style. Portraits of the Virgin Mary lean up against seascapes; stacked in another corner, geometric abstractions are mixed with battlefield images. Many look to be schlock, but a few are captivating.

The paintings, Julio says, are all from the collection of jailed dictator Manuel Noriega. There's no proof of this, but the dungeons are super cool and Julio and his tale -- true or not -- sure beat the standard tour guide spiel.

Tropics to Mountains

We are driving through Cocle Province, 75 miles southwest of Panama City. As we negotiate yet another tight curve, the landscape shifts from the tropical palms of the capital to the sturdy pines of this mountainous region -- all in less than an hour.

As we reach the top of one particularly steep hill, I holler, "Stop the car!" On our right, in the distance, is the Atlantic Ocean's Caribbean Sea, and to the left, down a terrifyingly steep rocky cliff, is the Pacific. We are poised on a ridge separating two continents.

There are many reasons to escape the city and explore Panama's natural wonders. But it is hard to imagine a better one than this view, arguably one of the most distinctive vantage points in all of Central America.

Farther up the slope, we reach El Valle, a town that sits inside a crater created 3 million years ago when a huge volcano blew its top. Today El Valle is one of the largest inhabited dormant volcanoes in the world. The town's fresh air, leisurely pace and cooler temperatures make it a popular weekend retreat for Panama City's elite. (Signs along the

road tell the story: "Door to Paradise" and "Villa Nirvana.") Nature lovers rave about the region's hiking trails, waterfalls and horseback riding.

But the main "activities" we encounter are relaxing and eating. New Panamanian friends have arranged lunch on the patio of La Casa de Lourdes, a Tuscan-style mansion with an idyllic poolside restaurant and terraced gardens. Surrounded by Panama's leisure class, we follow their lead and order a bottle of wine. It goes well with a table full of fresh Panamanian and Creole seafood dishes accented by spice rubs, mango salsas and yucca, the ubiquitous root that locals mash, fry and even toss into cakes.

We take a room in the adjacent building, which is not nearly as architecturally inviting as the main house. But our suite is enormous, with a luxurious modern bathroom and tiny terrace looking out on a ring of mountains. At dinnertime, we stroll through the gardens to the restaurant, now aglow in candlelight.

The next morning, heading back to the city, we stop at a roadside stand and order two chichemes, a heavenly blend of milk, sweet corn, cinnamon and vanilla. If we sip them slowly, they should last us all the way to Panama City.

Fish Market Finds

With just a few hours left in Panama, we decide to go to the source of the country's culinary goodness: the Mercado del Marisco, or fish market.

We slosh around the smelly warehouse, marveling at the piles of beautiful, slimy sea creatures. The vendors, friendly if slightly surprised to see a pair of gringos, teach us words in Spanish. The mero we devoured one night is grouper, longo is a giant tubular clam, and corvina a buttery, rich sea bass.

We meet a vendor named Niño and tell him we're craving lobster. But he shakes his head. "Not fresh," he confides.

Standing 5 feet tall in his rubber galoshes, Niño tells us he has worked the same stall for 33 years. He wants to make a sale, but he also wants satisfied customers. He recommends prawns and calamari. A pound plus of super-fresh seafood for \$5.25? Who can argue?

With our catch in hand, we climb a rickety wooden staircase to a restaurant of sorts. Our waitress is brusque and the napkins are paper. There's a menu, but we don't need it.

We ask the kitchen to grill up Niño's goodies. The chef adds a pile of perfect French fries, and our bill comes to \$6.

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