

Panama City and Havana: A tales of two cities

Two very different tastes of Latin America

BY ANNE GEORG, FOR THE CALGARY HERALD APRIL 5, 2013



Panama City has a vertical city scape with innovative modern architecture.

Photograph by: Anne Georg, Freelance

Panama City — Bright lights and boom times

The first impression I had of Panama City was of its vertically soaring skyline. A decade of frenzied construction has made the city a centre of modern architecture — and notorious for poorly engineered “ghost high-rises,” so named because several sit eerily vacant.

In the heart of the prestigious financial district, the newly constructed Revolution Tower, designed like a corkscrew, is wondrous to behold as it revolves around itself. Already grumbling thrums about the lack of elevators (only four) to service this 52-storey office tower, of which only four floors are occupied.

Pushing 1.5 million residents, Panama City is a melting pot of races and cultures representing the entire globe. They’re running businesses, investing — and these days, retiring. The country’s laws favour foreign investment and handsome incentives encourage foreigners to retire there.

Since 1999, after the U.S. turned over control of the Panama Canal to Panama, construction has boomed with the buoyant economy. Cranes reach into the sky and everywhere men and women in helmets and safety vests are building or restoring something — turning the city into a construction

zone.

Frequently stuck in the city's perennial traffic snarl, I had lots of time to hear cabbies complain about President Ricardo Martinelli's fevered push for more growth. However, they applaud the new subway slated to open in 2014, the same year the new canal will open. The Panama Canal, the largest income generator in the country, is being doubled in size to accommodate massive modern ocean liners.

From the time it was discovered in the mid-1500s, Panama has been a commercial crossroads, used to launch expeditions into South America and ship gold to Spain. Panama City remains a commercial centre.

It also boasts five huge shopping malls; myriad small shops; and vendors selling electronics and Gucci, lighters, indigenous crafts and all manner of merchandise. At the Caribbean entrance of the canal, cruise ships stop at Colon, the world's second-largest free port after Hong Kong. People laying over between flights can take shuttles to one of the big malls or to one of the city's 23 gambling facilities.

The streets are alive at night. Neon lights flash in the business centre and the tourist destination of El Cangrejo. Tourists and Panamanians alike cruise the streets looking to take in a nightclub show, try their luck at a casino or simply watch people.

It's all part of what makes Panama City a favourite destination for North Americans — whether they're gambling, shopping, investing or retiring.

Havana — A city in a state of change

In contrast, Cuba is one of the world's most retro economies. Foreign investment is strictly regulated. You won't see casinos or huge shopping malls in Havana. Neither will you see jaw-dropping modern architecture. No significant construction has occurred in five decades.

But you do see architecture that spans 16th-century Spanish Colonial, Baroque and Art Deco to 1960s Revolutionary. Unlike Panama, where the construction boom has resulted in shoddy workmanship, many of the old buildings in Havana are unsound for different reasons.

When wealthy Cubans and foreigners moved out after the revolution in 1959, they left behind elegant estate homes, confiscated by the state and occupied by ordinary Cubans. Now, many are collapsing due to decades of neglect. A small section of Old Havana is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is being restored.

Havana, a city of 2.5 million, has none of the bustle of Panama City. Its wide boulevards are almost devoid of traffic, with a few 1950s Fords or beaten up Ladas sputtering by with black diesel smoke in their wake. That these cars even run despite the ongoing U.S. economic embargo is a testament to Cuban ingenuity and resilience.

You won't hear Cubans grumbling about runaway growth. Instead, they complain about the stalled economy in the country where ordinary citizens earn the equivalent of about \$20 a month on the state

payroll. Their stress comes from the frequent shortages for basics, like eggs and potatoes.

I knew that Cuba was transforming itself from a rigid — and broke — communist state to a blossoming free enterprise system. The financially strapped communist government has allowed the nascent entrepreneurial culture to flourish because it needs to slash its payroll.

Cubans have embraced this brave new world and entrepreneurs are selling everything from real estate and car parts to the proverbial kitchen sink; but most are setting up business to serve the booming tourist industry, the primary source of foreign currency in Cuba.

Havana is a mecca for tourists from all over the world, except for the U.S., which restricts citizens' travel to the island. Tourists aren't coming for the shopping. They come for a cultural experience, the music, the dance and the art.

The sounds of rumba, salsa and traditional Cuban boleros waft from restaurants, bars, makeshift dancehalls and the street. It's an inescapable part of island life where every family seems to have raised a musician and every musician has a CD to sell.

The Cuban government supports the arts. Havana boasts several museums, galleries and bookstores and has one of the best ballet companies in the world, housed in the beautiful Baroque-style Gran Teatro de La Habana.

Panama has the wealthiest economy in Latin America, but it also has among the worst records for equitable distribution of that wealth. Cuba is among the poorest countries in the region, but everyone has a home, decent educational opportunities and access to free health care.

People in Panama City are open; but they face the pressures of an aggressively modern city. In Havana, people are friendly; but they have the stress of keeping up with the shifting economy.

Earlier this year, I met a Cuban man who advised me to “go to Cuba before McDonald's does.” That's sound advice.

If you go

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