

01/26/11 - The Panama Visit

What a Crazy week. Last week on Wednesday we, my husband and boys plus myself, boarded a flight to Panama. There is a wonderful Jewish community in Panama and we are lucky enough to have friends in that community. Recently our friend's son got engaged and they were kind enough to include us with a wedding invitation. How could we pass it up? Not only have all our children attended all the Bar and Bat Mitzvahs of our friends, but a Panamanian Jewish wedding between Sephardic, Ashkenazi, and Israeli families is something so fun, vibrant and visually stunning we wouldn't miss it for anything.

Panama is in Central America where the climate is tropical, hot and humid all year around. Our winter is the dry season. Disembarking at 7:15 PM after sun down did not affect that blanket of warm air and damp cling that envelope you the moment we exited the airport with our driver. Collected at the airport by a little roly polly elfin man, who spoke English and said his only aim was to please us and that he would be at our service for the entire extended weekend gave promise. We arrived, checked in at our hotel and immediately made plans for the next morning when we planned to do the turista thing and see the sites. Thursday night we would dine



Thursday dawned bright and hot, with thunder clouds threatening over the encroaching foothills surrounding Panama City. Although a clear day in Panama, there is so much humidity, that it hangs like a permanent haze in the air. We met

up with my sister in law and her husband and children in the breakfast room of the hotel. The hotel was very European style with an abundant breakfast buffet including an omelet bar, all with the price of the room. To my amazement even our 20 something boys were all down at breakfast in time to actually eat before the



First stop the Panama Canal. The canal is an amazing site and engineering feat tying two oceans together by creating a navigable waterway through the jungle between the two. The locks in the Canal serve to raise and lower the level of the navigable waterway, so the ships can climb up and down the mountains on land.

I am so glad that I ate an egg white omelet with vegetables, two pieces of toast, whole wheat fresh rolls with butter and preserves, a plate of fresh fruit including cantaloupe, oranges, sliced grapefruit segments and grapes, $\frac{1}{4}$ of one waffle and an amazing tasting slice of some kind of date nut bread, plus good strong Panamanian coffee to wash it all down. The breakfast fortified me for the long day.

After the canal we drove to old town, which is the old Spanish town in the center of Panama City. The town is being gentrified building by building and is in the European style, with charming Spanish style wrought iron balcony buildings, painted pastel hues built right down to the street with no set backs.



The buildings line narrow winding streets and every few blocks you come out into a square, where the main floors of the buildings are lined with shops and restaurants. We wandered into one restaurant with charming purple awnings and ate a sophisticated lunch. Vegetable topped Pizza to start, and next, pan fried local fish called Pargo served atop a bed of artichoke and potato puree with a salsa of chopped tomatoes, grilled red peppers and oil cured olives. Quite nice.



We made our way back to where the driver waited with a parked van. I stopped and haggled with some indigenous people who had their wares displayed for sale on temporary tables set up in one of the squares. In Panama they make Molas. Molas come with traditional indigenous designs which are usually geometric representations of medicinal herbal leaves, animals, or astronomical symbols. The complexity of the design and the amount of layers of fabric increase the value of the piece.

The temperature is 90+ and the humidity is 90+, we decide to drive to the antique ruins of the Conquistadors rotting in jungle vegetation. After this we were literally done. We all headed back to the hotel to refresh and chill. Around 8:00PM our driver picked us up for dinner.



I ordered a fish, fresh water, called Corbina served on a bed of cooked Yuca with green beans on the side. I had Ahi tuna tartar with fried plantain chips as an appetizer. Pass on the Crème Brule, I cannot eat one more bite.

FRIDAY

Somehow we all managed to make it to the breakfast buffet and be in the van on time to head out to Gamboa or the Monkey Island tour. Gamboa is about 45 minutes down the freeway and then off into a jungle reserve. We purchased our tickets at a resort located near the banks of a river that feeds into the Canal. We took a bus to the docks and boarded low riding little tour boats with canopy tops to protect us from the brutal sun.

It looked the jungle ride in Disney Land except that this was real. The guide was clear, do not stand up, do not put your hands in the water , these waters are infested with crocodiles! Did you know that monkeys won't hesitate to jump on the boat when you are close up. Keep your purse shut. Do not smile because showing teeth is a sign of challenge or aggression in the monkey world.



After the monkey excitement we returned to Panama City and went to Pita Pan a kosher lunch, bakery and take out place. We made it on time before they closed early since this was Friday afternoon. I had a fantastic fresh pizza on slightly sweet







I wore an elegant suit to dinner, but I felt under dressed when we arrived at our friends home for an intimate Shabbat dinner for 100 of the immediate family. This following menu is what was served for dinner, All I can say is it was served so selegantly on fine silver platters with exquisite flowers. Plates of marzipan and dark chocolate dipped fruit were all over.

Appetizers and Salads

Lah majeen

Kibbeh

Pastelicos

Hummus and tahina

Borekas, meat

Salad with black beans, tomatoes, and corn

Chinese salad with bok choy and garlic

Green salad

Eggplant and chicken bake

Kibbeh of bulgur and tomato

Israeli salad

Salad of endive, oranges and almonds with dried cranberries

Chinese chicken salad

Main Course

Pot roast with prunes

Turkey in mole with chestnuts

Chicken with dried apricots and prunes

Roasted potatoes

Rice pilaf with almonds

Chow Mein

Edamame with hearts of palm

Pastrami

Snap peas and carrots

Tamali pie with chicken

Eggplant

Stuffed grape leaves

Artichoke hearts in lemon with meat stuffing

Olives

Syrian peas

Dessert

Apricot, pistachio, and marzipan squares

Raha (pistachio lokum)

Chocolate mousse charlotte

Coconut cake

Caramel apple crapes

Chocolate mousse

Apricot tarte

Baklava

Strawberry Pavlova

Kanafeh (shredded filo dough with cream filling)

Chilled syrup with lychee, apricots, and blanched almonds

Some of the gifts to the bride to maintain a traditional Jewish home, like silver candlesticks, were on display in one of the other rooms. Dinner ended around 11:00pm. Will my dress fit me tomorrow, I wondered?

Thank god calories don't count on vacation!

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