

# “Shabbat Shalom Amigo” – Panama

**by William Choslovsky**

It's not every Sabbath you hear, “Shabbat shalom, amigo,” but so it goes in Panama City, a thriving, modern city that includes about 15,000 Jews.

To be clear, my wife and I did not travel to Panama in search of Jewish culture. It more found us, which was a treat.

Like most, we went to see and explore the canal, a relatively quick five-day trip that proved beyond memorable. We arrived on a Thursday night—an easy five-hour non-stop flight from Chicago—and stayed the first two nights in Cosco Viejo, old Panama City. On Friday morning we rode bikes along the city's beautiful Pacific Ocean spit, which juts out for spectacular views. In the afternoon we toured the old city and canal museum.

And then came Friday night. On a lark, I Googled synagogues in Panama and found five. I called a couple, and we decided to go to Shabbat services at Sinagoga Beth El, one of the Azhkenazi synagogues. We were stunned. The synagogue is one of the nicest, most modern we have ever seen. The people were equally cosmopolitan. Listening to the rabbi's short sermon in Spanish was fascinating. It reminded me just how universal Judaism is. It's one thing to go to Israel or Europe and hear Judaism in different languages, but seeing the Siddur transliterated in Spanish on the left side of each page was special.

The community—modern Orthodox—was most welcoming. I learned Panama's Jews have little assimilation (i.e., most keep kosher, go to Jewish day schools, and do not intermarry), yet they are warmly accepted and successful in Panamanian society. There have even been two Jewish presidents!

And some say, there might not even be an Israel today without Panama due to “Sam the Banana Man.” Sam Zemurray, a Zionist, was the Jewish banana king in Panama who apparently used his “influence” to get the central American countries to flip and be the deciding votes in favor of Israel's creation at the UN. Google it. Fascinating stuff. Who knew?!

Of course, the highlight was the canal. We did the “full” transit, ocean-to-ocean baby, which is only offered as a day trip twice a month. It was iconic. You start in Panama City in the Pacific Ocean—where because of the weird, sideways, shape of Panama, the sun rises in the east over the Pacific Ocean and sets at night in the west over the Atlantic—and ends in Colon in the Atlantic Ocean's Caribbean Sea. Just nine hours and you have literally travelled ocean to ocean, shaving more than 7000 miles off your journey around the tip of South America.

Most amazing, the boat we traversed in, the Isla Madora, was built in 1912 and owned by Al Capone—yes, that Al Capone—who used it to run rum from Cuba to the Florida Keys and then up to Chicago's speakeasies during Prohibition. Uncle Sam confiscated it when he went to prison, and now it runs tourists through the canal.

The canal ends in Colon, a tough, run-down town. We then visited an indigenous village (Panama has seven Indian tribes) where the Embara (Indian) people live. Then a night in beautiful Portobelo before we took the legendary Panama Railroad back to Panama City, a quick one-hour, beautiful jaunt that hugs the canal.

If you want any tips or are thinking of going, give a ring. And if you go, you must read iconic historian David McCullough's *The Path Between the Seas* before going, which frames everything perfectly.

In the meantime, “Shabbat shalom, amigo.”

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