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Portobelo, Panama

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Travels Through History

Portobelo, Panama

By Tristan Murray



Figure 1: Portobelo Fort Musuem in Colon, Panama.
Photo by author.

Flying into Panama City, I wasn't exactly sure what to expect. I had never traveled outside of the United States borders prior to my Latin American adventure in Panama. I sat nestled against the window seat of a crowded single isle Jet Airliner not sure what the next 10 days would bring me. As I pondered my inquiry into the unknown, the familiar puff of the airliners ventilation system sputtered as the plane prepared for takeoff.

Arriving in Panama was a bit of a shock for me, as I wasn't expecting the symphony of insects and animals that awaited me outside the airport doors; birds, beetles, and all types of animal cries that one would expect in a Science Fiction film. The equatorial heat was apparent from the moment I walked off of the plane, as the air conditioning systems struggled to keep the dampness out of the airport. My plans were not concrete, so I was unsure where my quest would take me. Within the next few days I found myself at a historic fort that signified much of Panama's legacy as a Spanish colony.

Nestled along the Caribbean coast of Panama is Fort Portobelo. We drove down winding tropical roads, through large canopied rainforests occupied by toucans, howler monkeys, spider monkeys, and various other animals that brought nothing but wonder to my mind. As we wound through small beach town villages with rustic stranded ships and fishing vessels, a clearing in the forest brought into view a village sitting on the site presuppose of an old fort that stretched several hundred yards in either direction. Our driver informed us of our arrival, found a small parking space on top of coral cement and from there I began my journey into this mysterious place.



Figure 2: Portobelo Fort Museum in Colon, Panama. Photo by author

We wandered the fort, which was populated by local market sellers and teenagers. I was surprised at the lack of upkeep for a place with such historical significance. We stopped in at a small museum covered with small dusty examples of firearms, cultural icons, religious trinkets and other small historical tidbits of information with display cases and informative brochures. Also included in the museum tour was a short video of which I found myself drawn to. I learned that the fort was a significant site in Spanish and Central American history. It was a noteworthy site for Spanish forces in Latin America during the push for Latin American silver during the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. Most silver siphoned out of the America's via Spanish colonialism made its way to the fort before shipping to Europe. This made the small fort a target for many pirates, including Captain Henry Morgan who plundered and looted the fort in 1688. Several other small battles took place here in the name of profit for countries in Europe. It has a natural inlet harbor that allows for excellent defense, but was still a prime target for battles to gain the vast treasures inside the fortifications en route to Europe. For Central America, it established a permanent presence of Spanish cultural influence that would color the civilization of Central America through today.

The small fort itself was ghostly in appearance. It maintained a tint of moss green as the humid climate seemed to breathe life into anything left stagnant in the tropical heat. Dozens of bronze cannons lay pitched where they were left abandoned by the Spanish armadas upon leaving the Americas, their wooden supports long decayed away. The small rifle and watch towers stand idle and alone overlooking a small beautiful, but deadly tropical cove. The fort overlooks a deep blue inlet with land on either side and smaller fortifications on the lips of the inlet. This allowed for cross fire onto any hostile armada entering the harbor. Small modern fishing vessels were scattered throughout the small harbor, anchored sporadically across the inlet. Some were half sunk, others still functioning, but all in all a beautiful view.

I began my small adventure near the fort to investigate the mysteries that lie ahead. Walking around the fort, one of the first things I noticed was the rather ragged state this historical site was in. I understood that this was indeed an old Spanish ruin hundreds of years old, but after years of visiting other historical sites I couldn't help but notice the lack of preservation efforts on the fort.

Trash and litter were rampant while climbing the heavy walls. One observation turret appeared to have been turned into someone's private bathroom. Parts of the fort's walls had slowly become supports and stands for local residents to build their homes and shops. This was a rather depressing and unfortunate site as I began to understand the economic situation of most Panamanians throughout the country. The residents of the small town of Colon, nestled in and around the fort, have little choice but to use portions of the fort for shelter because of the low income of the local populace.

Another interesting observation over the course of my investigations was the walls of Portobel itself. The walls are made from coral reef, which one can plainly see upon a close inspection of the walls. The tour of the museum explained that coral was used because it has the natural ability to diffuse the momentum of cannon fire better than brick or stone. Rather than falling apart or crumbling like stone and brick, coral absorbs the cannon ball along with the momentum and stands fast upon prevailing cannon fire. The old coral had different types of moss and lichen growing consistently within the crevices of the walls and decaying foundations. Years of tropical environment had certainly taken its toll on the old ruins of a fort.



Figure 4: Portobelo Fort Museum in Colon, Panama. Photo by author



Figure 3: Portobelo Fort Museum in Colon, Panama. Photo by author

While my tour of Fort Portobelo was short, I learned a great deal about Latin American history, and the Spanish influence in Central America. The people in Colon were amiable and welcoming. The tour guides seemed more than willing to answer questions and comments regarding Portobelo and admitted openly that they were pleased Americans were taking an interest in Panamanian history. The greatest observation I made in my short visit to this fascinating piece of history was the lack of preservation efforts being made. This is easily understandable given the current economic strain that Latin America is experiencing. It is unfortunate that countries worldwide must often allow priceless pieces of human history to decay under the heavy strain of economic burdens. This lesson, along with many others gained through a love of history, has cemented in me, and hopefully those I contact throughout my life, the importance of preserving our human history worldwide.

