

El Valle Cooking School and Tour

Written by T. Rob Brown (aka Roberto Chocolate)

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This article appeared in www.playacommunity.com - it was written by the The Three Sisters Cooking School (some editing by your truly) Roberto

Life in El Valle de Anton ☐ ☐

El Valle is a charming seven square mile village built in a crater, surrounded by the edges of volcano. It is the only inhabited volcanic crater in the world.

The numerous layers of lava and other materials were deposited by hundreds of eruptions over hundreds of thousand years with the highest part of the caldera reaching 2,888 feet.

The last magma producing eruption is thought to have occurred about 35,000 years ago when the lava flowed all the way to Coronado and the Pacific.

The last activity of any kind, caused by the reaction of ground water with magma, is thought to have occurred 13,000 years ago.

The valley existed for millennia as a deep lake, then several thousands years ago the crater sprung a leak and when it finished draining some of the richest volcanic soil in the world remained on the valley floor.

The original people practiced slash and burn agriculture which helped to further enrich the soil with sequestered carbon. This soil, called tierra negra or black earth, is so esteemed by local horticulturists that it's sold in bags throughout the republic and you can see its effect on many of the sprouting fence posts lining local roads.

The village of El Valle and it's namesake volcano are part of the Altos de Campana National Park, established in 1966 as Panama's first public space, covering a total of 4925 hectares or

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approximately nineteen square miles. It is located in Coclé Province, about an hour and a half from Panama City, then north off the Interamericana highway west of Coronado.

The first real road, tracing the meanderings of the builder's horse as it headed up the mountain, was built with donated funds and labor from the community in 1927 and repaved in 1997.

El Valle's cool 2,000 foot elevation has made it a coveted retreat for established Panamanian families since the early twentieth century.

The locals have been climbing the same hills and swimming the same streams for over 11,000 years which makes El Valle the oldest continually human occupied volcanic site in the world.

Because of its small size, and relative isolation from Panama City, El Valle is a stunning example of the cultural, environmental and culinary bounty of Old Panama.

The flat terrain of the valley's floor makes the bicycle the favored mode of transportation and during rush hour many, often loaded down with several family members, are seen quietly gliding down the main street.

There's no fast food in the village but a variety of smaller restaurants, four mini supers that stock fresh meat and dry staples, the farmers market for produce, a gourmet coffee shop, and even a sports bar. The artisans market is "must see" on most tourists itinerary, especially on Sundays. Come early to avoid the buses from Panama City bringing loads of tourists.

Both the village environment and the nearby, often cloud shrouded, Cerro Gaital National Monument offer an excellent opportunity to view some of Panama's 10,000 plant, 1500 tree, 1000 bird, 220 mammal, or 354 amphibian and reptile species.

They might not all call El Valle home but a significant number do and the local zoo, although

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somewhat disheartening in it's housing practices, also has several of the harder to find species.

You can ride a bike, horse or even walk to waterfalls, square trees, mud baths, a zoo, a museum, the forest canopy tour, pre-Columbian petroglyphs, artisans and farmers market, or cooking school, tours of the local organic farm, artisan bakery, and guided birding and fauna surveys are also available.

Here are some of the highlights of El Valle (Note: All v.'s in Panama are pronounced as a "b" - so it is "El Bi-yeah")

EL VALLE AMPHIBIAN CONSERVATION CENTER and EL NISPERO ZOO

Many ecologists contend that the current wide spread species demise is the sixth mass global extinction. Amphibians have been especially hard hit by an unstoppable fungus called Chytrid or Bd. In an attempt to stave off this impending demise of the 68 local and other world-wide species the EVACC eco-habitat was devised and spearhead by the Houston Zoo. This global heralded triage model takes infected species from the wild and washes them in a solution of itraconazole once a day for 10 days. The 200 different resident amphibian species are then kept in clean room habitat to wait out the plague or until a method of environmentally sound eradication can be found.

Special exhibits related to the local golden frog, a cultural icon and the Panama's emblematic conservation symbol, are interlaced with some extraordinary examples of other Central American frogs and amphibians that are sure to astound. The center is a world-wide model for cooperation between American universities, zoos and grass-roots volunteers. On the grounds of El Nispero Zoo-Reserve-Nursery that has many examples of the local fauna, flora and wildlife ecology up close.

EL VALLEY ORCHID CONSERVATORY

A place where the orchidophile can experience orchidelirium since 6% of the world orchids are grown in Panama. Over 1300 varieties are thought to grow in the Coclé Province and of those

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200 endangered samples that have been gathered from the local area by harvesters for preservation and propagation. Before the village was accessible by road oral history states that there were over 1000 varieties in the six square mile area of El Valle and of course there are examples that have yet to be catalogued in the more remote areas of the Republic.

The JICA, COSPA, APROVACA center is one of just a few in the world and is sponsored by a consortium of Japanese and Panamanian orchid growers. The center offers technical advice and in situ conservation and propagation expertise to village inhabitants who then assist in gathering field samples of endangered endemic species.

THE VILLAGE BAKER

Visit the local panadero who bakes his hand kneaded bread in a clay horno as it's been done for millennia and sample some fresh, hot micha rolls. Perhaps you'll purchase a dozen for sixty cents and have them for lunch, experiencing their wonderful smoky nuance.

El Valle Eco-Tour:

Points of Destination and Interest

TIPICO LUNCH IN A TIPICO HOME

When we return to the village a typical Panamanian lunch will be waiting for us at the home of Liliana Gil Rodrigues. Using locally grown ingredients she will prepare an everyday meal with no tourist pretensions just lots of cultural immersion. Then will drop you off for the easy hike to the famed rock carvings of El Valle and you'll take the easy walk back to the villa. Laundry hanging on the bushes and scores of birds in the trees, this is Panama!

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This El Valle tour is offered on demand 7 days a week and takes about 4 hours. You'll be picked up at your hotel and be transported first to the Amphibian Ark at the Nispero Zoo where will spend about an hour. Then will motor to the El Valle Orchid Conservatory for a half to three-quarter hour tour of the 200 plus orchids. Then its snack time t the local bakers for a quick fifteen minute survey because it's a really small place. Our last stop of the day is at Lilly's house where you'll have some real food of the people. You can spend the rest of the afternoon at the various sights in the village in eager anticipation of tomorrow's cooking class and farm tour. The street maybe cobbled or unpaved so be sure to where comfortable shoes and bring a little water along in case you get thirsty.

FINCA RINCÓN DE LA BIODIVERSIDAD (El Valle's Organic Farm)

Next up is the organic finca of Thomas Garcia who is a government educator and certifier of organic farms. He grows a variety of crops on his 2 acre farm and also has a tilapia pond both illustrative of the methods widely used here in the Republic. He'll provide a brief synopsis of his farming methods and will even roast up a few coffee cherries and brew a cup of coffee for us much as your great-grandmother may have. Imagine using the rain forests own natural pesticides to protect and nourish crops; a return to the past or portent of the future? You decide!

Upon arrival we'll check the daily menu board listing organic medicinals, herbs, vegetables and ornamentals fed by the natural artesian spring with many grown using the century old technology of conuco plant beds. Will visit the laboratory where Thomas compounds natural-organic insecticides, rooting solutions and soil amendments using components like molasses, citrus juice, vinegar, fruits, ash, rice hulls and wood shop shaving.

THREE SISTERS COOKING SCHOOL

One of the best ways to explore a culture is through its food and this local Panamanian Cooking School provides an in-depth look at the history, culture, ecology and food-ways of Panama. Classes are held in the expat owner's home and include plenty of hands on instruction, Panamanian recipes and more sampling then most can eat. You can also harvest some of the local tubers like cassava, taro, yams and chayote from the on site vegetable garden and maybe even pull some bananas, mangoes or papayas off the trees if it's the season. And there's the

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added treat of meeting The Three Sisters who are the owners Vietnamese Pot Bellied Pigs.

The program at the Three Sisters is the only eco/culinary/historical tour of its type in the lower Americas. The owners of the Panamanian Cooking School have 65 years of shared hospitality experience in the San Francisco, California Bay Area and settled in El Valle in 2005. Their program is the only farm to fork; sea to plate ecotourism tour available in Panama where you'll harvest, prepare and relish native cultivars and Panamanian cuisine that have existed here for thousands of years. The lecture portion of the tours and classes will address the history, geography, ecology and social culture of the region and how these components formed the cuisine of Panama while the hands on segments will teach you to cook regional dishes better than a Panamanian! And the class is offered in both a carnivore and vegetarian modes.

To contact the Three Sisters Cooking School, visit their website:

<http://elvalleecotour.wordpress.com/>