

Panama untouched by deadly storm

Written by T. Rob Brown (aka Roberto Chocolate)

Tuesday, 01 June 2010 13:52 - Last Updated Thursday, 03 June 2010 16:13

Central America is reeling under the devastation of Tropical Storm Amelia this week. This was not a hurricane. It was "just" a tropical storm with winds under 75 km/hr.

Yet over a hundred and seventy people are dead, and thousands more are left homeless. It is a heartbreaking tragedy; a nightmare for all who experienced it. Our hearts go out to each of the victims and to their families. Especially the children.

In Panama, the only indication of the deadly storm was an unusually high tide. We do not watch TV news (it got so depressing we switched to watching DVD's). I now get my news from the Internet.

When I was much younger, I day-dreamed of living on a private island with soft sand, palms trees, and semi-clad women in bikini's frolicking on the beach while I lounged in my hammock; my umbrella drink in my hand. (finances have no place in day-dreams)

Then I spent ten days in a Florida ICU (intensive care unit) and saw my own heart monitor flat-line from a pancreatic attack (you are not supposed to see your own heart monitor flat-line - of that, I am sure - it is the scariest sound/screech you will ever hear)

After that, I wanted to be able to see the damn hospital from my retirement house. Priorities change.

I quit smoking, gave up beer (and for a Canadian - especially an Irish-Canadian, that was like giving up life-sustaining fluids). I drink only white wine now, which interestingly lowers my blood sugar levels. But, I digress.

Like everybody else in Ontario or Quebec, our next real thoughts of a retirement destination was Southern Florida. It was fairly close, we could drive there, they sort of spoke English... So, my wife and I and our two dogs set out and drove to Florida in our mini-van. We spent a month looking for the "right" place.

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We had visions of bringing our 1956 Chris Craft down the ICW (Inter Coastal Waterway) and living on board.

We liked the Ft. Meyer Beach area. They have one of the few "dog friendly" beaches, and it is one of the few areas that would allow live-a boards on boats. However while the marina would allow live-a boards, they would not allow dogs. It turns out, most marinas and yacht clubs in Florida forbid live-a boards, and most don't allow dogs.

However, that is not what convinced us not to retire in Florida.

While we were there, South Florida got hit by FOUR - count 'em, four hurricanes.

We moved on. We finally put a deposit down on a marina in our favorite city in USA - New Orleans, sixteen days before Katrina struck.

That was it.

USA was out - and this was before the real state debacle which has destroyed the US - and especially the Southern US, economy - not somewhere I would ever sink my money - at least not in the foreseeable future - and spare me the "insiders" who hype deals in Florida - of course there are deals - no-one wants these dog foreclosures, and with 10% plus unemployment continuing and in the recent Met Life survey, fifty per-cent of people living in the USA admitting they are one paycheck away from defaulting on their mortgage and in danger of losing their homes - my guess is there will be a lot more houses on the market in the coming months/years. I am sorry they are having such a difficult time, but I am not sinking my hard-earned money into that mess. But that is just me.

Our search focused on finding somewhere we could retire that would not be threatened to wipe out our entire life savings in a single storm (hurricane insurance is either impossible or impossibly expensive to get).

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That limits one's list of potential retirement destinations considerably.

In fact, only the very southern tip of Costa Rica and Panama are left. I loved Costa Rica, and almost bought property there in 2000. Thank God I didn't. (see my articles on why you don't want to retire in Costa Rica).

That fact that Panama is below the hurricane belt and has never been hit by a hurricane in recorded history is just one of the reasons we chose Panama as our retirement home.

Close friends from Prince Edward County, Ontario e-mailed me a few months back saying that we might soon be neighbors, because they were considering buying a winter home in Costa Rica.

It only took two e-mails to convince them that Panama was a much better bet.

Last week they bought a great spot in a small development in Gorgona, (Pacific beaches area of Central Panama). They got a 2 bedroom unit with a shared infinity pool over-looking the ocean, in a safe, gated and secure 18 unit development for under \$100,000.

Welcome to Panama, Bruce, Melody, Gary and Jazmine. Euchre anyone?

Another Canadian friend is looking at a unit in the same complex, (3 bedrooms, fully furnished) for \$135,000.

I warned the Panamanians, if they did not spray, that the Canadians would spread - and we have!

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According to the Mortgage Brokers Association, Canadians made up 1/3 of all real estate purchases in Central America in 2008 and 2009.

I am biased now - as I now live here. As the Retirement Detective, I was unbiased. I researched dozens of retirement destinations, even driving from Canada to Panama with my wife and two dogs, stopping in on every self-proclaimed "best retirement destination".

I found out that many of the international retirement websites were nothing more than fronts for real estate pitches. Their list of "Top Ten Best Retirement Destinations" just happened to coincide with where the happened to have condos for sale.

My advice? Check it out yourself. Talk to people who actually live there - not the real estate agents, the developers or the tourism hypsters - talk to other ex-pats that are living in the destination you have in mind - full time. A month-long party over Christmas does not give you a realistic picture of what is is really like to live in that county.

Get your questions answered; Will you make friends? Is is really safe? What if you get seriously ill? Do the doctors and nurses speak English? Is medical insurance affordable? What are the locals like? Can you communicate? What is there to do - other than drinking or laying in the sun reading a book (you need more than that - trust me).

Check out my article: The Seven "C"'s to help you determine what your priorities really are.

Then go visit at least twice - three times if you can. Go in the rainy season and the dry season. Rent a place until you decide if this is where you want to spend the rest of your life - or at least a few great years.

We decided that Panama was right for us - and I have many articles explaining why.

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But that is us - you have your own needs, desires and priorities. You don't need a list of the Top 10 - because those are someone else's top 10, not yours. Chances are there is a hidden agenda behind their list.

I will be focusing all future articles that I write on Panama. I will include the occasional article from other sources written about Mexico and Central America. I believe in writing about what you know, and after three years, Panama is what I am getting to know.

I hope you find the information on this site useful, and if there is anything I can do to help you with this wonderful decision, please do not hesitate to send me an e-mail.

If it is a question I think others would benefit from, I will answer it on the site. If not, I will try to answer it personally.

Please understand we get tens of thousands of people on the site, and I try to keep up as best I can. It might take some time to get back to you.

Now, if you will excuse me, my new swimming pool is almost finished - and I must go see what the workers are up to (read - get a glass of wine, go lay in the hammock and watch them work while I work on the detective novel I am writing). It really sucks to be me.

Stay healthy my friends,

Roberto Chocolate