

# Oh, how cute is Panama with iaeste

*1st of July 2006, 10 a.m.: The plane sets off in Munich heading towards Atlanta. My first flight across the Atlantic Ocean... it took ages to get there (yes I'm a quite restless person ;-). When I arrived in Atlanta I realised that I didn't even know if someone would pick me up in Panamá City...*

...fortunately, Karla did (and another girl, but I didn't get her name, since I didn't know a lot of Spanish when I arrived). They drove me to the place where I was supposed to stay the next two months. Finally both realised my lack of Spanish and clarified that I'm gonna have a hard time.... but I'm hard to frighten :-). I learned fast, very fast, because English speaking people are not as frequent as Lonely Planet says.

I've spent two wonderful but also exhausting months in Panamá. I lived with a Panamanian (Eddy) and an English (Edward) guy which was great for enhancing both, my English and Spanish.

Edward and I tried to make most of our stay by travelling a lot. Of the nine weekends I had, I've spent only three in Pan-

amá City. We visited the best places of the country, caribbean islands - Isla Colón and Isla Grande - as well as pacific islands - Isla Taboga and Isla Coiba. Edward left in mid - august, so I had two weekends to go on my own. Since I am some kind of mountain addict, I took the plane to the mountain range in the western part of Panamá in a province called Chiriquí. And yes, I climbed the highest mountain of the country with 3470m! Domestic flights in Panamá are very cheap and I had two long weekends... great stuff :-)



## Work

Certainly, I had also some work to do. Universidad Tecnológica de Panamá (UTP) maintains a nationwide network. The main task during my 8 weeks was to deploy and configure the open source network surveillance Nagios. Since it looks nice I also integrated the traffic visualization suite MRTG into the Nagios web frontend. Furthermore I assisted in some typical day-to-day tasks, like setting up

web servers and solving programming problems.

The atmosphere was very friendly and productive. Panamanian people are generally very friendly so I had no real problems to integrate, although my lack of Spanish was a problem at the beginning since not everyone in the office knew or rather wanted to know English. This fact was a very good opportunity for me to learn fast. I prepared myself before going to Panamá by attending to a Spanish course for one year, I knew quite a lot of grammar, but this is not worth anything without adequate vocabulary.

When my colleagues recognised that I wanted to learn, they practised with me every day. After a couple of weeks I was even able to have a little smalltalk with a taxi driver (as long as they didn't speak too fast ;-). Latin american Spanish is a little bit different from Castellan, it's faster, they flip some phrases (e.g. ¿Que sopa? instead of ¿Que páso?) and don't like to use the letter 's' (e.g. Okar, instead of Oskar, bueno dia instead of buenos dias, do instead of dos).

## Conclusion

An IAESTE placement is great. Be prepared for a little culture shock at the beginning. I really liked practicing 2 languages, English with Edward and Spanish with all my Panamanian mates. You have the chance to actually live within a certain culture which is not as easy when you are just a tourist. I played street soccer (fútbol de calle) with the kids in my street, I visited "no-go" areas which is not advisable as a tourist, I ate the best chicken in town at a kiosk in a 100% tourist free street. And last but not least you get professional training, which is great for your CV.



Martin and Friends

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