

Stress and the City; More on Tropical Construction in Taboga and Panama

by Cynthia Cudmore-Mulder

Construction in Panama can be a roller-coaster ride; enjoy both the ups and downs!

Several years ago, I was sitting in a shrine in Japan enjoying the tranquility, feeling the incense whiff by, listening to the shuffle of monks and the cling of coins dropping into the collection box; then I was the essence of calm. I would have never imagined that now I would be awakening my Latino side (must have been from a former life), juggling ferry and school schedules, trying to have macho construction workers heed to my beck and call, swinging a pick axe at stubborn rocks, fighting over saving every nickel and dime, and screaming like a madwoman at taxi drivers in the big city.

What did my Asian life teach me? How to handle Panama without more grey hair (among other things, like how to make sushi). The wonderful thing about the lessons I learned in Japan is that they can travel with me.

A lot of people move to Panama with a fairy tale vision of the tropics. I didn't, I had a step-up on many as I had already lived in the tropics twice before this move; and three times if you consider southern Japan the tropics (in reality it is, but 'la vida' is quite different). For the first few months newcomers need to adjust to a lot. There are fabulous sides to this great country and some downsides as well—it's balanced for the most part. If they haven't made the decision beforehand, people will start by narrowing down where they want to live.



The city has benefits and drawbacks: almost everything is available and accessible including great medical care, there is great social life and shopping; the average person is quite friendly, but traffic and noise is at times third-world (as well as a few neighborhoods). Fighting for a fair price in every transaction (if you care) can be tiresome, as well as watching out for the few, not so honest salesmen. The countryside with its glorious beaches, islands and highlands has its pros and cons too: fresh fragrant air, resplendent environment, kind and helpful country folk, peace and quiet, economical; but everything moves slower, shopping is poor if any, and depending on where you live you may have to drive for miles for a good social life, and go to the city for excellent medical care, and all kinds of tropical bugs make the countryside their home too, from spectacular butterflies to stinging ants.

So here we are, living in Panama City, and building on Isla Taboga which is about 45 minutes from the city. Complicated at times, but every day we get on the ferry for the island I can feel the city air and stress wash away with every waft of ocean breeze. By the time I step on the island I feel calm.

So back to the story about building or renovating something yourself in the tropics. My view is tilted toward constructing in an isolated spot as we are building on an island, in the tropics, in Panama.

Well, that comes with its own set of problems as well as benefits. Here are just a few that may apply to many newbies:

1. Building regulations and standards are definitely not up to American or European standards; the downside is obvious but the benefit is you can do a lot yourself and save money, and inspections if any, are relatively easy.

2. Finding an architect you can work with, trust, and speaks English (you are the customer after all), and that understands your needs is more time consuming here. Fees are reasonable and the architects are quite skilled; they can save you hours by recommending suppliers and specialized craftsmen. You can do many things by yourself, but for a big project or renovation, it is best to hire an architect.

3. Nine times out of ten, your workers can't communicate with you if you don't speak Spanish. That is a big problem, the only benefit is that sometimes you can talk about them without them understanding you...not always.

4. When you hire part timers, your workers are hoping you will pay them eventually as if they are full time employees, with social security benefits and more thrown in. Sometimes if you are not very careful, they will take you to labor court, and 9 times out of 10 you will lose. The benefit of the part time worker is that you can fire them easily if they don't work out, the money paid out is obvious and there are no hidden costs. It is very casual and they cost between 10\$ and 25\$ (for skilled labor) per day, not per hour!

5. Oh, materials! Groan. We are building on an island. That's expensive; you will hear that from me as well as every other person who has ever built on Isla Taboga (or any island for that matter). The ferry service doesn't like construction materials on their boat (once in a while in very small amounts only), there is no bridge, no weekly barge. So we are forced each time we buy a load to find a fishing boat who will take it over for us at a cost of about \$70. And then, we need to pay men to move everything on and off the boat, and onto a truck, (another cost) to take to the site. Building in the city you will not have this problem as most places deliver, and quite possibly for free. Outside the city you are looking at delivery charges, and possibly some labor for unloading. The main benefit to isolation is the surrounding pristine nature and kind townsfolk, the secondary benefit is that in Panama, as anywhere, it is tough to build in isolated spots so you won't have mad rushes of people coming to be your neighbors.



6. Material quality can often be much lower than North Americans and Europeans are accustomed to. From cement blocks to wood to light fixtures. When you finally get it on your property, some of it may be unusable. And then try to return it; this is usually a struggle. The benefit of this besides learning to repair, and argue in Spanish? frequently the materials are quite economical.



7. Little critters. If you are building in the tropical countryside, or very possibly the city, there will be a number of lovely tropical insects and some nasty critters you will have to possibly exterminate, or at the very least learn all about.

8. People say: "Aren't you lucky, on a tropical island with a beach! What paradise." This makes me think of landscaping and gardening; our property, as with many I am sure, has never ever been landscaped. Trees cut, that's all. The soil is hard, clay in places, black volcanic in others and once in a while a combination. But always without fail there are HUGE rocks in the middle of wherever we want to plant. In fact, those who know me will be amused... I have had a fight with a 2 ton boulder for 6 months. It was up our

hill and I wanted it down, I had 8 men push it down, but instead of trying to control it, they let it roll! Now there is a house in front of ours – thank heavens it stopped on our property and not in theirs as it would have knocked down one of their supporting pillars. What a pickle that would have been! Ok, so it is still not in the right place and there is no heavy equipment on the island. I asked friends who visited who were experts, construction people, geologists... all looked at me with amazement. Everyone would say: "You want to move this one more meter with 10 men?" "Then 15?" I asked. I still received the same look.

Some suggested we landscape around it, others suggested dynamite (what about our friends' house?), other suggested we build a big fire and heat it then throw cold water on it, great ideas but not what I had in mind. So this week, 2 men with wedges and sledge hammers broke it in half. Now we have a bench and more small rocks – I am beginning to think rock gardens. Whenever I sit on my rock now, I have a sense of immense satisfaction (remember the game: rock, paper, scissors? I won) and I know once we are finished construction, I can actually go to the beach, and maybe even scuba diving!

So you want to live in paradise and go through the learning curve which comes with it, take heed. Every day stop, take a deep breath of ocean or mountain air, and enjoy the glorious place you have chosen to live.

HERE ARE SOME TIPS for those who may be interested:

1. Study Spanish, learn the words you need for construction, purchasing materials, dealing with workers and lastly, money, learn the \$\$\$\$ lingo. You will be ripped off if you don't know what is going on. Some Panamanians will offer to handle it all for you; still keep a sharp eye on where your money is going. Although you may think many locals don't speak English because they told you so, literally this is true but ... oops they forgot to tell you, they understand English just don't speak it – that one is from personal experience be very careful what you say and where you say it.
2. Get recommendations from trusted people in the area on architects, contractors etc. and then interview several. Choose the one you are most comfortable with, they will be invaluable.
3. An inspector in a good mood can be particularly helpful, offer coffee, tea, cake, beer whatever they seem in the mood for...they are human too after all.
4. While they have benefits, non- contract 'camarone' workers are to be handled very carefully. Do not keep them employed for long periods of time – a few weeks at most. If you are happy with them, give them the next few weeks off while you are recuperating/working in a different area/waiting for more money (just about any excuse will do) because this makes it very difficult for them to claim they have been working for you full time. Be aware though that if they get hurt on the job, it can be your responsibility to pay the doctor bills. Make a simple contract with them by the job; that will eliminate most problems.
5. Labor can be very cheap but also can be substandard. So you have to rewire that room, change the plumbing, additional cost and time. Inspect all the work carefully and demand corrections. Never-Ever give advance payments on jobs that are not complete and have been inspected by you or someone you trust. Make sure you have a guarantee, in writing. Sometimes workers will take their advance payment and RUN. Leaving you with an incomplete job and looking for a replacement.
6. Bring books from your home country on basic plumbing, electrical, woodworking and concrete work so at least you have some vague idea what something should look like. It will be different here in Panama but it's a good guide.
7. Allow plenty of time to compare prices at different locations; I have saved hundreds and in the end several thousand dollars by checking around, and asking for discounts. The selection is NOT as wide as in North America or Europe, except in tropical hardwoods. Check the quality as not all materials are created equal; they vary widely. Learn to negotiate on everything.
8. Wear gloves and shoes which fully cover your foot, not sandals; if you are in the jungle wear a hat. This is the tropics and it brings all those lovely plants, insects, reptiles and other little critters that come part of the package. Watch where you are walking, and working with your hands. Be careful while gardening, wear gloves, some plants and insects sting. (don't let your kids run around in tall grass without shoes and long pants).
9. Get rid of your workers who are threatening the neighbors with machetes! (this is true!) but don't fire them, take one of those deep breaths, tread carefully; be calm and very, very nice.

10. Remember if you are in a small town or on an island, townsfolk are likely related, territorial and protective. If you decide to hire outside help, do so quite diplomatically. You may end up living among the clan you didn't support.

11. Learn to live on tropical time; people here are RARELY punctual. They can be hours or days late, and possibly even never arrive. After all, you moved here to enjoy the tropics didn't you?

So after a year's worth of work and learning the above lessons; we have 2 fully complete and furnished new apartments, plus one renovated, for a total of 6 bedrooms, a large patio surfaced with a tile mosaic backed by a Tabogan bamboo wall; in the garden itself we have blossoming native bushes, fully blooming flowers, coconut palms sprouted, native Tabogan pineapples planted, as well as a cactus & succulent rock garden on the way, and a herb garden planned. It really has been worth every bug bite.

I am proud of what our little Isla Taboga team has accomplished, my hat is off to them; I often hear the phrase that islanders are lazy. I am in a position to differ (having lived most of my life on islands). Motivation and teamwork can move mountains almost literally, even on a beautiful laid-back tropical island.

So now finally this weekend, I can take a deep breath of fresh ocean air, go for a boat trip, snorkel and look for my tropical fish friends, take a hike up to the historic Spanish Cross, read a great book in the hammock, kick back and watch the full moon rise over Isla Taboguilla while sipping a nice glass of Shiraz.

Wow, life in the tropics, who wouldn't love it?

Taboga Island is not utopia, but it is a lovely place to stop, smell the flowers it is so famous for, to play soccer on the beach, to fish on the pier, and to swim when the tide is in. Life is relaxed and on island time.

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