

General Surgery Elective Panama Steven Falowski
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Housing:

Responsibility of the student. Many hotel-apartment complexes with daily, weekly and monthly rates are within and outside of Panama City. Monthly rates vary from \$200-\$1000 depending on the housing and area you choose.

Transportation:

Everything is in walking distance when you are in Panama City. Taxis are readily available and can take you anywhere you want to go. Average taxi ride is \$1.50. There are also public buses that are \$.35 per ride. If you plan on living outside of Panama City, which is where housing is extremely cheap, you can rent a car at a reasonable price. Buses are available to take you anywhere in the country. The cost of a bus ride to travel from one side of the country to another is about \$15 and takes about 10 hours.

Food:

Hospital supplies meals while in the hospital. This includes breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It is of note that the food is not appealing and you will probably buy your own food. Food is the responsibility of the student when not in the hospital. Food is fairly inexpensive. It can be estimated that within Panama City food is about half the price of something equal in the U.S. You can obtain a nice dinner at a local restaurant for about \$4-\$6.

Safety:

You are reasonably safe within the areas surrounding the hospital and in most areas within the city. There is constant police patrol on foot and car in the city. You should always observe caution at night and possibly consider a taxi, as it is the major city in Panama.

Constant of Panama:

Panama City is the largest city in Panama. It is also the most developed city in Central America. It is comparable to a small New York City. The country of Panama, as a whole, is a very poor country. The countryside is very beautiful in most areas. People live very simple. Outside of Panama City everything is extremely cheap.

Healthcare:

Healthcare is divided into social security and private insurance.

Those who pay taxes have social security, which covers their medical expenses. Others can choose to pay for private insurance. Hospitals are divided evenly between private and public. Private hospitals only accept private insurance. Financially there is more of a strain on public hospitals that affects the quality of healthcare that can be obtained.

The setup of their medical training is different than our own. You attend a medical school program after high school that is six years and incorporates college. During the final three years of medical school you "observe" only in the hospital, which is combined with didactic sessions. After graduating medical school you enter into a mandatory internship for two years. This internship is equivalent to our third and fourth year of medical school training where you rotate through different fields of medicine. However they are paid at this time and are licensed physicians in the hospital administering care. After the two-year internship you choose your residency and career path.

Elective Experience:

You can expect to be exposed to many new experiences while working in the hospital. To understand the experience you will receive in the hospital you have to understand the mentality of the country as a whole. In general healthcare is under-financed and therefore usually not sought by people. This changes the presentation of many diseases and illnesses as people will defer medical care until extremely necessary. For example, an average appendicitis case will present two weeks after the onset of pain, which changes the presentation, diagnosis and treatment. You will also be exposed to illnesses that are considered very common there, but which would be extremely rare in the U.S. Some examples could include liver stones and gallbladder cysts in adults. The hospital care is extremely limited by lack of financing. This extends into many areas of diagnosis and treatment. Diagnostic tests are not performed unless extremely necessary. The hospital has one CT machine that is often not used. The country only has two MRI machines. Both of these machines are located in private hospitals and can only be used under special circumstances by people covered by social security. Therefore emergency diagnostic tests cannot be used in diagnosis. This leads to a very unique experience that has both pros and cons.

This experience gives you the opportunity to extremely enhance your physical diagnosis skills. When you evaluate your first patient in the ER with generalized abdominal pain and you narrow your differential diagnosis, but you are not able to. You are

limited to a history, physical exam and in some cases a CBC and Chem. 7. As you ponder what to do next, a resident or attending will come by and evaluate the patient and state it's mesenteric ischemia. You wonder how did they know that? By the end of your one-month rotation you will have fine-tuned your physical diagnosis skills and learn how to make a diagnosis and judgment call under the same conditions.

This experience also leads to many patients who will undergo unnecessary surgery. This is something that is widely accepted. Doctors are very well respected and their judgment calls are considered the final word. The country is not burdened by malpractice, which gives the physician much room for error. This mentality extends into every aspect of healthcare. This unfortunately leads to an experience where communication and informed consent with the patient is not what is expected or always practiced.

As fourth year American students, we were viewed as their second year interns. This led to an experience performing as a resident would in the U.S. This also led to an intense operating experience. Rajeev Dhupar and I were the first medical students to have done a rotation at this hospital. The hospital and medical school are not set up to receive outside students; therefore there was not a set regimen for what we should be doing. This led to an experience that was not structured and limited at times.

Is speaking Spanish necessary? Spanish is the primary language of the country and within the hospital. About a fourth of the people working in the hospital speak some English. Outside of the hospital it is not common to find English-speaking people. Therefore it is important to have a solid background in speaking Spanish. I considered myself an intermediate speaker of Spanish when I traveled to this elective. However I found the language to be spoken very quickly and difficult to understand. In the hospital most of the medical terms are different than their equivalent in English. This led to a very steep learning curve for my Spanish, which required many additional hours of study to be able to communicate and function in the hospital. I therefore believe that it is very important to be an advanced speaker in Spanish if an elective is sought here.

What do you do when you don't work? Panama City can be viewed as a small New York City. It offers many restaurants and stores for shopping, as well as an active nightlife. The country of Panama is very beautiful. You can easily visit many parts of the country on day or weekend trips via the bus system. There are also many beaches to

see. Panama has a wet and dry season. I was lucky enough to visit during the dry season that runs from about November to May and offers very nice, but really hot weather. It would be beneficial to purchase a tourist guide for Panama as you can plan on what you would like to see and do.