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Four Wheeled View

Since moving from southeastern Brazil to the West coast of Canada, I have gotten used to long flights on a regular basis. Visiting family and friends in my homeland means at least three flights and around 24 hours of waiting, layovers and air time.

One time, my itinerary was to take me through Panama, home of the world's most famous canal and, from what I knew, not much else. I had never considered visiting Panama, to be honest, but my layover would put me in the capital city for over eight hours and that's about five hours longer than I'm willing to spend sitting in an airport.

Stepping outside, I was hit by a wave of humid heat, the kind that makes you feel like you're walking through molasses, to see a group of cheerful cab drivers leaning against their yellow cars, sweating under the sun and chatting in Spanish. I walked up, asking if anyone would be willing to take me to the Panama canal and bring me back in time for my flight and several of them volunteered. Upon asking if any of them spoke english (and informing them I spoke a little Spanish), the excitement turned to mumbles and most of them looked to the sky.

One man however, his skin wrinkly and tanned, his back a bit arched and his thin lips spread into a smile, volunteered saying he didn't speak a lot of english, but if I spoke a bit of spanish, he'd be willing to try his best. I hopped into the cab and, as we made our way through the crowded streets away from the airport, my driver told me a bit about him. His name was Ramon and he was a 77 year old retired history professor. When I asked him why he was driving cabs if he was retired he simply stated "because I don't want to grow old."

Ramon did take me to the canal and waited outside as I visited it and the museum of its history, but the enthusiastic cab driver was not done there. As we drove back to the airport, Ramon took me to the Old Town, to an interesting street with the ocean on both sides and to a lemonade stand by a beach filled with locals, narrating the history of the country, peppering it with fun facts and stopping so I could snap photographs. I discovered a bit of Panama City in those six hours, discovered some of the nooks and crannies of a place I never thought I'd see.

And I was lucky enough to do it in the company of a man who will never be old a day in his life.