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A Special Winter Break Vacation to Panama: Our First ... And Last



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Last week, I was able to take my wife and our two youngest sons on a wonderful vacation over yeshiva break to Panama. This was a very big deal for us as a family as it was really the first time in our marriage that my wife and I were able to take most of our family on such a yeshiva break trip.

Allow me to explain. With our 23-year old son Zev now living in the Teaneck Bayit Association/Ohel group home that opened a month or so ago, for the first time ever we were able to plan and consider traveling somewhere without him for a week or so. While we love our son Zev very much and we know that some families are able to travel more easily with their children with autism/special needs, that was never the case for us. Traveling with Zev was and continues to be a fraught minefield of potential hazards as Zev is afraid of escalators, dogs, large spaces, large crowds and a host of other scenarios that make traveling with him range from generally nervewracking to near impossible. But with Zev now in his new group home, we were finally able to contemplate traveling without him as a 'mainstream' family would be able to.

I don't mean to blame our not going away over yeshiva break only on Zev. For sure, finances were always a big issue and prevented us from considering major trips. And I also have to blame my beloved paper, The Jewish Link, as well. You see, with most of my editors and staff also wanting to take time off to be with their families over yeshiva break and deservedly so, I really couldn't take off easily as I was always needed to play a backup or support role in the production of the paper. I used to always joke that while many in our community loved taking off for yeshiva week, I hated it as I was working harder than ever filling in for everyone away.

But this year, with Zev being in his new home and with my capable staff able to produce the paper without me, my wife and I realized that we finally had a unique opportunity to think about and plan the yeshiva break vacation that we could never do prior. Except there was a slight problem since we only had our 12th grade

youngest son Eyal at home to take with us and we didn't think he would want to travel alone with just his parents. So we called his 21-year-old older brother Noam, who is learning in his fourth year of beis medrash in Sh'or Yeshuv in Far Rockaway, and ordered him to take a full week off from yeshiva and join us and his younger brother on the yeshiva break vacation that we were never able to offer him during his younger years. Thankfully, he was happy

a shared WhatsApp group, and proceeded to plan together with them practically every aspect of our trip ranging from hotels, day trips, boat rentals, kosher restaurants, Shabbat meals, minyanim and more. They were incredibly helpful throughout the process, responded to our every question, made many excellent suggestions and bookings for us, and in general helped make our trip come together nearly perfectly. *I cannot recommend them enough!*



Our family at the Gamboa Rainforest Reserve in Panama.

to come with us and didn't need too much pushing. Unfortunately we couldn't also take our married daughter and son-in-law with their six-month-old with us as well. They had to work and this wasn't a trip to bring a six-month old on.

So now the question was; where to go? With our sons coming with us, any places that featured mainly beaches, minimal minyanim, and not so extensive kosher food weren't really viable options. Thankfully, I had an excellent idea of where to go.

Over the past few years, our paper and I have built a very nice relationship with our advertisers **Simi and Esther Schwartz**, a delightful couple who live in New Jersey and in 2020 founded **Go Koshier Panama**. Esther is a Panamanian native and she and Simi know the community inside out. They have been asking me for years when I was going to come visit Panama and I was happy to tell them a few months ago that 2025 would finally be the year.

My wife and I visited and reviewed their excellent website, **GoKoshierPanama.com**, and then called them up, set up

Any kosher traveler or family looking to visit Panama anytime simply *must* visit their site and check out the extensive resources, info, discount codes, and all of the planning help they offer. An absolute must! Check out their site (gokoshierpanama.com) or contact them by email at info@gokoshierpanama.com or via Instagram or Facebook at [@gokoshierpanama](https://www.instagram.com/gokoshierpanama).



As for the trip itself, it was a very special time for me and our family. We enjoyed all of the tourist sites such as the Panama Canal, Monkey Island, Casco Viejo (The Old Quarter), etc., but we were probably most deeply impressed by the Jewish community in Panama City, which is clustered into one to two neighborhoods ringed with large residential towers, shopping plazas and skyscrapers. My sons and I made the effort to daven at all of the ma-

yor shuls and we were blown away not only at how large and magnificent each of the largest shuls were (and by the extensive security as well) but also at how many people there were in the shuls just for weekday minyanim. At one of the largest Sephardic shuls, Sinagoga Ahavat Sion, I counted well over 1,000 men for a weekday Mincha/Maariv. It seemed like almost every male member of the community was there davening.

At the largest Ashkenazi shul, Sinagoga Beth El, the rabbi there, upon learning that we were from Teaneck, jokingly remarked to me that most of Teaneck had come through his shul over the past few years and that we were among the last of the Teaneck families to visit. I gently assured him that there would likely be more coming in the years ahead and we weren't the last. I also couldn't get over how virtually all of the men entering shul in the morning would immediately make a beeline for the ubiquitous coffee machines and pour themselves a small cup of coffee to sip and drink. Of course, by the end of the trip, I was doing the same myself. Not a bad minhag, I think, and I am not even that big of a coffee drinker.

Panama has also become known for its extensive kosher offerings and restaurants and for the significantly less expensive food prices, which were eye-poppingly low to us, probably half of what we are used to paying here in our corner of the U.S. With few exceptions, the restaurants we ate in were all excellent, attractive and, again, inexpensive. It was also so easy to get around as literally everything was either walkable from our hotel or just a short and affordable \$5-\$10 Uber ride away.

All in all, it was a special trip for us but also a tad bittersweet since in addition to it being our first-ever "real" or full fledged yeshiva break trip for my wife and I and our youngest two sons, it was also our "last" one as our youngest son will be graduating high school in June and heading off to yeshiva and Israel next year. We will then be completely out of the yeshiva break vacation cycle for good. And yes, while a part of me definitely regrets and wishes we could have taken them on other nice yeshiva break vacations over the past two decades, such is life. We can only look ahead, but we will certainly remember Panama for years to come.