

# Bocas del Toro Province



Located 32km from the Costa Rican border, the Archipiélago de Bocas del Toro consists of six densely forested islands, scores of uninhabited islets and Parque Nacional Marino Isla Bastimentos, Panama's oldest marine park. Although Bocas is Panama's principal tourist draw card, a fair measure of authenticity remains. Low-key development has maintained the charm of small-town Caribbean life and the absence of megahotels has preserved the archipelago's idyllic beauty.

The laid-back Caribbean vibe of Bocas is enhanced by the archipelago's spectacular natural setting. The islands are covered in dense jungles of vine tangles and forest palms that open up to pristine beaches fringed by reeds and mangroves. Beneath the water, an extensive coral reef ecosystem supports countless species of tropical fish while simultaneously providing some seriously gnarly surf breaks. In Bocas, hiking through huge swaths of rainforest to arrive at an empty stretch of wave-pounded shore is pretty much the norm. The mainland is home to the Panamanian half of the binational Parque Internacional La Amistad. Here, primary rainforests are home to megafauna including the elusive jaguar, as well as a handful of Ngöbe-Buglé settlements that are still clinging to their traditional ways of life.

Unfortunately, the secret is out, and although local opinion is divided on the merits of increased tourism in Bocas, there's no sign that development is likely to slow. Bulldozers have already started clearing land for condos and resorts, and the influx of foreign investors is an economic force to be reckoned with. It's difficult to predict the future of the province, but one thing is certain – see Bocas now as its unspoiled beauty won't last for much longer.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Soaking up the Caribbean charm of laid-back Bocas del Toro town before venturing out to the beaches and forests of **Isla Colón** (p219)
- Strolling along the pristine beaches of **Isla Bastimentos** (p229) while they're still pristine
- **Surfing** (p224) some of the sickest breaks you'll find in the Caribbean – just watch out for those shallow reefs!
- Exploring the Panamanian side of the **Parque Internacional La Amistad** (p237), home to one of Panama's remaining indigenous groups, the Naso (Teribe)
- Gliding by boat through the wildlife-rich wetlands at **Humedal de San-San Pond Sak** (p236)



■ POPULATION: 95,000

■ AREA: 8,745 SQ KM

■ ELEVATION: SEA LEVEL TO 3300M



## History

When Christopher Columbus visited Bocas del Toro in 1502 during his fourth and final New World voyage, he was so taken by the beauty of the area that he affixed his name to many sites, including Isla Colón (Columbus Island), Isla Cristóbal (Christopher Island) and Bahía de Almirante (Admiral's Bay).

During the 17th century, the archipelago became a haven for pirates. The buccaneers repaired their ships on the islands, built others with wood from their forests and fed upon the many sea turtles that nested on the beaches. The pirates are said to have buried treasure on a number of the islands, but to date none of this loot has been found (or at least reported).

Gold was not plentiful in Bocas del Toro, so the Spaniards did not colonize the region with the same ruthless efficiency that was unleashed on other parts of Panama. However, following the arrival of the French Huguenots on the coast in the 17th and 18th centuries, a Spanish militia was sent to Bocas to dislodge the settlers. As a result, the indigenous populations of Bocas were virtually wiped out by Old World diseases and Spanish swords.

In the early 19th century, wealthy aristocrats looking to establish themselves in the province arrived in Bocas with large numbers of black slaves from the USA and Colombia's San Andrés and Providencia Islands. However, when slavery was abolished in 1850, the blacks stayed put and began to eke out a living as fishers and subsistence farmers. Towards the end of the 19th century, Jamaican blacks joined them as the province's banana industry began to develop.

Bocas del Toro's banana industry dates from 1890, when three American brothers arrived in Bocas del Toro and founded the Snyder Brothers Banana Company. In the years that followed, the brothers planted banana trees all along the shores of the Laguna de Chiriquí. In 1899, however, the United Fruit Company planted itself in Bocas town and took complete control of the Snyders' young company. In the century that followed, United Fruit established vast plantations that stretched across the entire peninsula. They also constructed elaborate networks of roads, bridges and canals as well as entire towns and cities to house their workers.

Today, United Fruit is part of the multinational Chiquita Brands International. Chiquita's workers in Bocas del Toro Prov-

ince grow and export three-quarters of a million tons of bananas annually. They also comprise the largest workforce in the province and the most diverse workforce in the country; on the payroll are West Indians, Latinos, Chinese and indigenous workers.

## ARCHIPIÉLAGO DE BOCAS DEL TORO

For most travelers, the archipelago is Bocas – Caribbean clichés aside, there's no shortage of picture-postcard beaches, emerald waters and a healthy dose of swaying palms.

### ISLA COLÓN

The archipelago's largest and most developed island is home to the provincial capital of Bocas del Toro, a colorful town of wooden houses built by the United Fruit Company in the early 20th century. Today, Bocas is a relaxed community of West Indians, Latinos and resident gringos, and the town's friendly atmosphere seems to rub off on everyone who visits. In fact, visitors to Bocas have a reputation for cancelling future travel plans – it's an easy place to get stuck and an even easier place to call home.

Owing to its infectious charm (and bargain real estate), Isla Colón is in the middle of a major development boom. Since the mid-1990s, foreign investors have been buying up land like hot cakes and there are constantly new hotels, restaurants and condos springing up around the island. Fortunately, there's still a heavy dose of local flavor left on Isla Colón, and the lack of beachside Burger Kings is a testament to the fact that development is still years behind similar destinations in nearby Costa Rica.

Bocas also serves as a convenient base for exploring the archipelago as *taxis marinos* (water taxis) ply the waters, and can whisk you away to remote beaches and snorkeling sites for a few dollars. However, as most travelers learn after spending their first few days idly wandering the streets, the allure of Bocas is simply slowing down and soaking up the Caribbean vibes.

### Orientation & Information

Bocas town is laid out in a grid pattern, with most of the hotels and restaurants on Calle 3.

The only airport in the archipelago is on Av E, four blocks from Calle 3.

Note that the town, the archipelago and the province all share the name Bocas del Toro or simply Bocas. Isla Colón and Bocas del Toro town are also referred to as Bocas Isla.

Bocas gets an incredible amount of rain. Like other regions along the Caribbean coast, rainy and dry seasons don't mean much, especially since it can downpour for days on end in the 'dry' season. The least rainy time of year is mid-August to mid-October, when the seas are calm, and February and March.

For more information on the islands, see the useful English website [www.bocas.org](http://www.bocas.org). For a rundown on the good, the bad and the ugly, check out the island's monthly bilingual publication, *The Bocas Breeze*.

## EMERGENCY

**Fire** ☎ 103

**Police** ☎ 104

## INTERNET ACCESS

**Bocas Internet Café** (Map 223; Calle 3; per hr US\$2;

☎ 8am-10pm).

**Bravo Center** (Map 223; Calle 3; per hr US\$2; ☎ 10am-7pm)

## MEDICAL SERVICES

**Hospital** (Map 223; ☎ 757 9201; Av G; ☎ 24hr) The island's only hospital has a 24-hour emergency room.

## MONEY

**Banco Nacional de Panamá** (Map 223; cnr Calle 4 & Av E; ☎ 8am-2pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) Exchanges traveler's checks and has a 24-hour ATM.

## POST

**Post office** (Map 223; Governmental Bldg, Calle 3)

## TELEPHONE

**Cable & Wireless** (Map 223; Calle 1)

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**ANAM** (Map 223; Autoridad Nacional de Ambiente; ☎ 757 9442; Calle 1) Not really set up as a tourist information office, but they can answer questions about the national park or other protected areas. If you want to camp out in any of the protected areas, you must first get a permit from this or any other ANAM office.

**IPAT tourist office** (Map 223; Instituto Panameño de Turismo; ☎ 757 9642; [ipatbocas@cwip.net.pa](mailto:ipatbocas@cwip.net.pa); ☎ 8:30am-3:30pm Mon-Fri) In Centro de Facilidades

Turísticas e Interpretación (Cefati) on the eastern waterfront. A color map in English and Spanish is available. The center also houses an interesting display on the natural and anthropological history of the area.

## Dangers & Annoyances

The surf can be dangerous on some of the island's beaches, and there are frequently strong riptides – use caution when going out into the waves. For more info on what to do if you're caught in a rip, see the boxed text, p222.

Unlike in most other places in Panama, tap water is not safe to drink in Bocas del Toro. Bocas town has a water treatment plant, but locals say the tap water isn't to be trusted. The water is certainly fine for brushing your teeth, but you're probably best off sipping with caution and purchasing bottled water for drinking. Bottled water is readily available and costs about US\$1.50 for a 1.5L bottle. Gallon jugs for US\$2 are better value if you can find them.

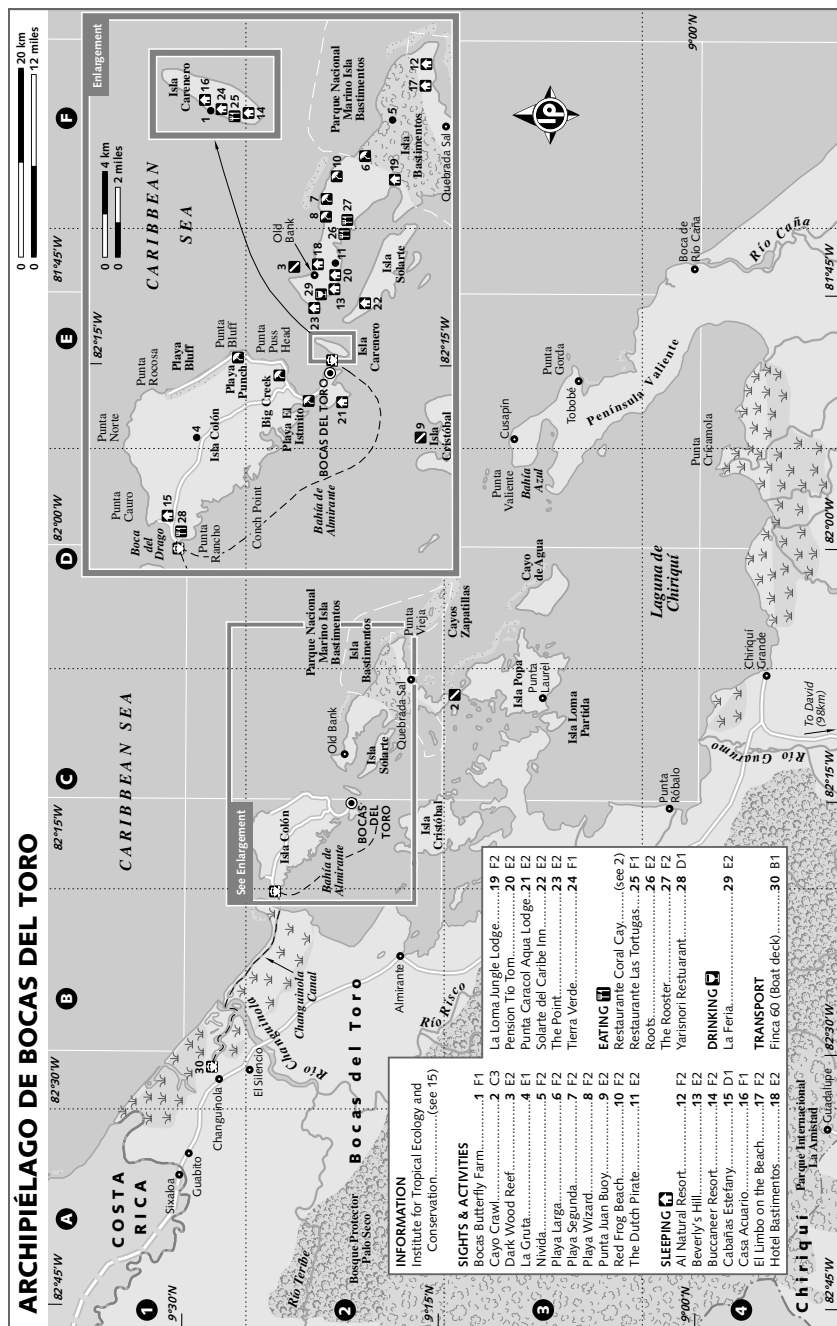
Bocas del Toro is a conservative place and local law prevents men (and obviously women) from walking down the streets topless. Even if you are on your way to the beach, wear a shirt or you will be sent back to your hotel if spotted by police.

## Sights

### BOCA DEL DRAGO

Located on the western side of Isla Colón, this sleepy beach is famed for its huge numbers of starfish, particularly around the bend. The calm and relaxed atmosphere at Boca del Drago is perfect for beach bums, though the swimming and snorkeling here is good, especially when the sea is calm and the water is clear. Although not as stunning as the wilderness beaches on Isla Bastimentos, the lack of surge means that this is the safest spot for swimming in the archipelago.

The beach is also home to a branch of the **Institute for Tropical Ecology and Conservation** (Map 221; [www.itec-edu.org](http://www.itec-edu.org)), a nonprofit education, research and conservation organization. Specifically, the field station at Boca del Drago offers field ecology courses to undergraduate and graduate students, provides facilities for tropical researchers, operates marine conservation programs and engages in community development. For more information on research, employment and volunteer opportunities at the station, contact ITEC via email.



## OTHER BEACHES

There is a string of beaches on the eastern side of Isla Colón that can be reached by a road that skirts up the coast from town. There's no public transportation to the beaches, but a 4x4 taxi will take you to any of them and pick you up at an appointed time for a negotiable price – expect to pay US\$16 for a round-trip taxi to Playa Bluff.

**Playa El Istmito**, also called Playa La Cabaña, is the closest beach to town, though it's on Sand Fly Bay and the *chitras* (sand flies) that live here have an itchy bite. This is not the most attractive beach, and unless you're walking, it's worth heading further north.

Further up the coast is **Playa Punch**, which is dangerous for swimming but good for surfing.

After you round Punta Bluff, the road takes you along **Playa Bluff**, a secluded wilderness beach that is pounded by intense waves. Although you wouldn't want to get into the water here without a board, the soft, yellow sand and palm-fringed shores are pristine. Playa Bluff stretches for 5km all the way to Punta Rocosa and serves as a nesting area for sea turtles from May to September.

## LA GRUTA

If sun, sand and surf aren't your persuasion, then consider a trip to **La Gruta** (Map 221; The Cavern; admission US\$1), where you can wade through waist-high water while trying not to disturb the thousands of sleeping bats overhead. The entrance to the cave, which is marked by a statue of the Virgin Mary, is located 8km from Bocas town along the road to Boca del Drago – a round-trip taxi should cost about US\$10.

## BOCAS BUTTERFLY FARM

A great afternoon trip from Bocas town is this adorable **butterfly farm** (Map 221; ☎ 648 35741; admission US\$5; 🕒 10pm–4am), which houses species from every corner of Panama. Water taxis can whisk you away from Bocas town to the entrance to the farm on nearby Isla Carenero for only US\$1.

## Activities

### DIVING & SNORKELING

With nearly 40 rivers unloading silt into the seas around Bocas del Toro, the archipelago's waters are notorious for their poor visibility. If it has rained a lot in recent days, visibility may be limited to only 3m.

## SURVIVING A RIPTIDE

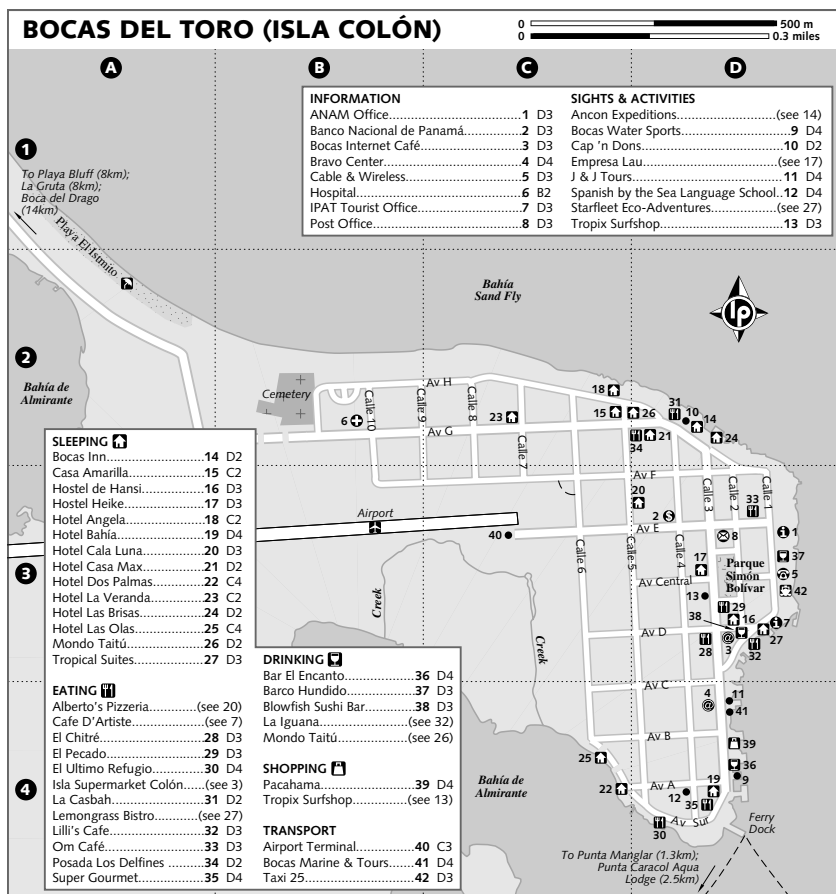
Riptides account for the majority of ocean drownings, though a simple understanding of how these currents behave can save your life. Rip currents are formed when excess water brought to shore by waves returns to the sea in a rapidly moving depression in the ocean floor. They are comprised of three parts: the feeder current, the neck and the head.

The feeder current consists of rapidly moving water that parallels the shore, but isn't always visible from the beach. When this water reaches a channel, it switches direction and flows out to sea, forming the neck of the rip. This is the fastest moving part of the rip and can carry swimmers out to sea with a speed of up to 10km/h. Finally, the head of the rip tide current occurs past the breakers where the current quickly dissipates.

If you find yourself caught in a rip tide, immediately call for help as you only have a few seconds before being swept out to sea. However, conserve your energy and do not fight the current – this is the principal cause of drownings and it's almost impossible to swim directly back to shore. Instead, try one of two methods for escaping a rip. The first is to tread water and let yourself be swept out past the breakers. Once you're in the head of the rip, you can swim out of the channel and ride the waves back to shore. Or, you can swim parallel or diagonal to shore until you're out of the channel.

Rip currents usually occur on beaches with strong surf, but temporary rips can occur anywhere, especially when there is an off-shore storm or during low tide. Fortunately, there are indicators such as the brownish color on the surface of the water that is caused by swept-up sand and debris. Also, look for surface flattening, which occurs when the water enters a depression in the ocean floor and rushes back out to sea. If you're ever in doubt about the safety of a beach, it's best to inquire locally about swimming conditions.

Remember, rips are fairly survivable as long as you relax, don't panic and conserve your energy.



Although experienced divers accustomed to crystal clear Caribbean diving may be disappointed with Bocas, the islands still have much to offer. The emerald green waters of the archipelago are home to the usual assortment of tropical species and with a little luck you might see barracuda, stingrays, dolphins and nurse sharks. Better sites include **Dark Wood Reef**, northwest of Bastimentos; **Hospital Point**, a 50ft wall off Cayo Nancy; and the base of the buoy near **Punta Juan** north of Isla Cristóbal.

**Starfleet Eco Adventures** (Map 223; ☎ 757 9630; [www.explorepanama.com/starfleet.htm](http://www.explorepanama.com/starfleet.htm); Calle 1) and **Bocas Water Sports** (Map 223; ☎/fax 757 9541; [www.bocaswatersports.com](http://www.bocaswatersports.com); Calle 3) offer diving trips. They cost around US\$35 for a one-tank, one-site dive, and US\$50 for two tanks and two sites. PADI

open-water and advanced-diver courses are available. Starfleet offers instruction in English and enjoys a sterling reputation amongst locals and travelers.

## BOAT

The most popular tours in the area are all-day snorkeling trips, which are perfect for nondivers who want a taste of the area's rich marine life. A typical tour costs US\$15 per person, and goes to Dolphin Bay, Cayo Crawl, Red Frog Beach and Hospital Point. A trip to the distant Cayos Zapatillas costs US\$20 (plus an additional US\$10 for admission to the marine park), and includes lunch, a laze on the beach and a jungle walkabout on Cayo Zapatilla Sur.

## SURFING IN BOCAS

Although everyone and their grandmother seems to have picked up surfing in nearby Puerto Viejo, Costa Rica, Bocas del Toro is still emerging as an international surf destination. However, the archipelago offers an excellent mix of beginner beach swells, ripping reef breaks and some seriously suicidal barrels. The following is a rundown of the major surfing spots in the archipelago, though the local fishers assure us that this list is just scratching the surface of what's out there. For a full surfer's map, featuring the following spots, see Map pp68–9.

If you don't have your own board, you can rent fairly thrashed surfboards for US\$10 to US\$15 per day from **Tropix Surfshop** (Map 223; ☎ 757 9727; 🕒 9am–7pm; Calle 3) in Bocas town. The guys at **Mondo Taitú** (Map 223; ☎ /fax 757 9425; Av H; dm/s/d US\$7/8/16) also rent boards for negotiable prices. If you're heading out to Isla Bastimentos or Isla Carenero, you will need to arrange your board in advance as there are no surf shops on either island.

Remember that unlike the Pacific, which has fairly consistent sets of waves most days of the year, the Caribbean can be hit or miss. If the swells are out, the ocean will be calm and glassy, so grab your suntan lotion and work on your tan; if the swells are in, the ocean will be angry and surging, so grab your board and work on your carving. But seriously – watch out for those shallow reefs!

### Isla Colón

Beginner surfers looking for a bit of reef experience should check out **Playa Punch**, which offers a good mix of lefts and rights. Although it can get heavy when big, Punch generally offers some of the kindest waves around.

Just past Punch en route to Playa Bluff is a popular reef break known as **Dumpers**. This left break can get up to 3m and should only be ridden by experienced surfers as wiping out on the reef here is a dangerous affair. There is also an inner break known as **Inner Dumps**, which also breaks left but is more forgiving than its outer brother.

Be careful walking out on the reefs as they are sharp and full of urchins – don't go barefoot. If you wipe out and get cut up, be sure to properly disinfect your wounds. Although saltwater heals, seawater doesn't, especially in the Caribbean where the water temperature means that the ocean is full of live bacteria.

The island's most notorious surf spot is **Playa Bluff**, which throws out powerful barreling waves that break in shallow water along the beach, and have a reputation for snapping boards (and occasionally bones). Although the waves close quickly, the tubes here are truly awesome, especially when the swells are strong.

### Isla Bastimentos

If you're looking for a solid beach break, both **Wizard Beach** and **Red Frog Beach** offer fairly constant sets of lefts and rights that are perfect for beginner and intermediate surfers. When the swells are in however, Wizard occasionally throws out some huge barrels, though they tend to close up pretty quickly.

### Isla Carenero

If you've got some serious surfing experience under your belt, then you're going to want to build up the courage to tackle **Silverbacks**, an enormous barreling right that breaks over a reef and can reach heights of over 5m. On a good day, Silverbacks is a truly world-class break that wouldn't look out of place on Hawaii's North Shore. Silverbacks breaks off the coast, so you're going to need to hire a water taxi (US\$3 round-trip) to get out there.

Many 'tours' are really little more than boat transportation to a pretty spot. If you have your own snorkel gear (or if you rent it), you can also get the local boaters to take you around the area in their small, motorized canoes. They know several good snorkeling

spots and this option can be cheaper than the dive companies' trips, depending on the size of your group. Agree on a price before you go.

In addition to the dive operators listed above, a recommended tour operator is **J&J Tours** (Map 223; ☎ 757 9915; transparentetour@hotmail.com; Calle 3).



## KAYAKING

Although you will need to be wary of boat traffic and the occasional swell, a great way to travel between islands is by sea kayak. **Cap 'n Dons** (Map 223; ☎ 757 9248; Calle 3; 🕒 9am-7pm) rents kayaks for US\$10 per day as well as paddle boats, sailboats and a big water trampoline.

## BIKING

Whether you're heading to Boca del Drago on the paved road, or taking the dirt path to Playa Bluff, a bike can seriously increase your mobility. Note that the bike ride to Boca del Drago is taxing, especially when the sun is beaming. If you're unsure of your fitness level, it's advised that you head to Punta Bluff instead, even though the road can flood after heavy rains. You can rent a bike for US\$8 per day and support a local Kuna by heading to **Empresa Lau** (Map 223; Calle 3; 🕒 9am-7pm), located next to Hostel Heike.

## HIKING

If you're looking to seriously get off the beaten path, there is a network of undeveloped hiking trails that fan out across the island. One of the more popular hikes starts at the end of the coastal road in Mimbi Timbi and carries on along the coast to Boca del Drago. You will need about six hours of daylight to complete the hike and you must carry in all your fresh water. The trail winds past caves, caverns and plenty of vine-entangled jungle. A bike will help speed things up a bit, though you will be carrying it part of the way, especially if it's been raining recently.

## BIRD-WATCHING

While the bird-watching on the islands isn't as good as that on the mainland, it can still be rewarding. Particularly rare birds, or at least those poorly known to Panama, have been recorded on the islands in recent years, and include the semiplumbeous hawk, white-tailed kite, zone-tailed hawk, uniform crane, olive-throated parakeet, red-fronted parrotlet, lesser nighthawk, green-breasted mango, chestnut-colored woodpecker, snowy cotinga, brown-capped tyrannulet, yellow-bellied elaenia, stub-tailed spadebill, purple martin, tree swallow and black-cowled oriole.

## FISHING

The best budget option for aspiring anglers is to go surf casting with the local water-taxi

drivers. The hand lines are a bit tricky at first, though you'll get the hang of it. It's best to go early in the morning when the fish are biting; prices are negotiable.

## Courses

**Spanish by the Sea** (Map 223; ☎ /fax 757 9518; www.spanishbythesea.com; Calle 4) is a reader-recommended language school that offers affordable Spanish classes in a relaxed setting. Rates for group/private lessons are US\$70/US\$130 for two hours a day, five days a week, though cheaper rates are available for more comprehensive packages and longer stays. The school also offers a popular traveler's survival Spanish course (US\$40) that includes six hours of instruction.

Homestays can be arranged (US\$12 per night with breakfast), or you can rent one of their simple dorms (US\$7.50 per night) or private rooms (US\$12.00 per night). Spanish by the Sea also organizes parties, dance classes and open lectures. English, Spanish, French, German and Dutch are spoken.

## Festivals & Events

Bocas celebrates all of Panama's holidays, with a few enjoyable local ones besides. Annual events celebrated on Bocas and Bastimentos include the following:

**May Day** (May 1) While the rest of Panama is celebrating Labor Day, the Palo de Mayo (Maypole dance) is performed by local girls.

**Día de la Virgen del Carmen** (third Sunday in July) Bocatoreños make a pilgrimage to La Gruta, the cave in the middle of the Isla Colón, for a mass in honor of the Virgen del Carmen.

**Feria del Mar** (September 28 to October 2) The 'Fair of the Sea' is held on Playa El Istmito, a few kilometers north of Bocas.

**Fundación de la Provincia de Bocas del Toro** (November 16) Celebrating the foundation of the province in 1904, this is a day of parades and other events; it's a big affair, attracting people from all over the province, including the Panamanian president.

**Día de Bastimentos** (November 23) Bastimentos Day is celebrated on the island with a huge parade and drumming demonstrations.

## Sleeping

The town of Bocas has become a major tourist draw. Both expats and locals run hotels and a few Bocas residents rent rooms out of their houses. Reservations are a good idea between December and April and during national

holidays and local festivals. The following accommodations are featured on Map p221.

## IN TOWN

### Budget

**Our pick Mondo Taitú** (☎ /fax 757 9425; Av H; dm/s/d US\$78/16) This legendary backpacker joint is reason enough to cancel your travel plans and post up in Bocas for weeks on end. Owned and managed by three fun-loving Americans, Mondo is a wacky treehouse-like building that is locally famous for its wild events. On Tuesdays and Fridays, the bar at Mondo hosts a variety of festivities ranging from 'Sake Bomb' parties to '80s Night,' though you can kick back here any time with a beer in one hand and a hookah in the other. All of the usual backpackers amenities are on offer here including a communal kitchen, lounge area, laundry facilities, free bikes and surfboards.

**Hostel Heike** (☎ 757 9708; Calle 3; dm US\$8) The sister hostel to Mondo Taitú, Heike proudly serves as the yin to Mondo's yang. Awash with colorfully painted murals and natural woods, Heike is the perfect spot for chilling out and soaking up the Caribbean ambience. The upstairs balcony overlooks the town's park and is a perfect spot to indulge in a cold beer and a good book. Like Mondo, the amenities at Heike are perfectly suited to backpackers.

**Hostal de Hansi** (☎ 757 9932; Calle 3; s US\$10-16, d US\$22) Run by a cheery German woman, this intimate spot features well-designed rooms with colorful wooden planks, set amid a tropical garden. Cheaper singles have shared facilities while the more expensive rooms and doubles have private bathrooms. In the grand German tradition, the hostel is immaculately clean and well run.

**Hotel Las Brisas** (☎ 757 9248; brisasbocas@cwv.net.pa; Calle 3; d with private bathroom US\$17-40; ☺) On the northern end of Calle 3, Hotel Las Brisas is built over the water and offers a variety of rooms to meet your budget. Cheaper rooms are definitely starting to show their age, but a few extra dollars can get you nicer furnishings, better views and even air-con. Ask to see a few rooms and shop around – variety is the spice of life.

**Hotel Casa Max** (☎ 757 9120; casa1max@hotmail.com; Av G; s/d/tr with private bathroom US\$20/25/30) This Dutch-owned spot offers a handful of brightly painted wooden rooms with high ceilings and

private hot-water bathrooms. Some of the rooms come complete with dreamy balconies, which overlook the town and the ocean. The free breakfast of fresh fruits and strong coffee sweetens the deal.

**Hotel Dos Palmas** (☎ 757 9906; Av Sur; d/tr with private bathroom US\$22/28) Proudly touting the hotel as '100% Bocatoroño,' the friendly owners of Dos Palmas offer basic wooden rooms with old-fashioned furnishings. The entire hotel sits above the water and boasts exceptional views of the bay. If you're looking for a locally run spot, the Dos Palmas is your best choice.

**Casa Amarilla** (☎ 757 9938; Calle 5; d with private bathroom US\$35; ☺ ☑) Run by a lovely retired couple from Denver, this quaint yellow house is one of the best deals on the island. For only a few more dollars more than other budget hotels, you can rack in the amenities, which include cable TV, private hot showers and free wireless internet. The owners are also always on-site to answer any of your questions, or to share a morning cup of coffee with you.

## Midrange & Top End

**Hotel La Veranda** (☎ 757 9211; www.explorepanama.com/veranda.htm; Av G; d US\$30-50) This lovely residence-turned-inn was built in 1910 and has been maintained with pride, down to its gleaming hardwood floors and pretty antique windows and doors. None of the six guest rooms are alike, except that all contain early-20th-century antique furnishings. There's a decked-out veranda, which is a great spot for a morning cup of coffee, an afternoon sundowner or a strong nightcap.

**Hotel Las Olas** (☎ 757 9930; Calle 6; s/d with private bathroom US\$37/42; ☺ ☑) Like a beacon for sailors (or surfers) at sea, the new Hotel Las Olas shines bright yellow from the southern tip of Bocas town. It's a beautiful three-story wooden affair that is built on stilts and acts as a magnet for travelers looking for simple comfort with great seaside atmosphere. The rooms themselves are constructed entirely of polished wood and there's a full range of amenities on offer including private hot-water showers, air-con and wireless internet.

**Hotel Angela** (☎ /fax 757 9813; www.hotelangela.com; Av H; d US\$40-82; ☺) Hotel Angela is a perennial seaside favorite in a quiet section of Bocas town. The positive vibe, terrific service and perched-over-the-water location has proven a winning combination for this veteran of

the Bocas hotel rat race. Choose from units with side-facing balconies or those with ocean views, or splurge on the deluxe suite complete with a Jacuzzi and stunning vistas.

**Hotel Bahía** (☎ 757 9626; www.panamainfo.com/hotelbahia; Calle 3; d from US\$45; 🏠) This historic Bocas landmark was built in 1905 by the United Fruit Company to serve as its local headquarters. Today the building serves as a modest hotel, though a series of careful restorations have revived the original splendor of this fine building. The American pine lining the halls is original, as are the oak floors throughout the building, though the modern bathrooms were, needless to say, a later addition.

**Hotel Cala Luna** (☎ 757 9066; www.catalunabocas.com; Calle 5; s/d/tr/q US\$45/55/65/75; 🏠 📺) Built atop legendary Alberto's Pizza, the Italian-owned Cala Luna was built with an impeccable attention to detail. The entire hotel, inside and out, is constructed out of wood and features cathedral windows, brightly lit outdoor spaces and crisp, functional rooms. As an added bonus, guests can watch planes coming in for a landing 30m above their heads from a pair of lookouts on the roof.

**Bocas Inn** (☎/fax 757 9226; www.anconexpeditions.com; Av H; d from US\$66; 🏠) Managed by the highly recommended Ancon Expeditions of Panama (p89), this water's-edge lodge caters primarily to guests on private tours. Spotless rooms with hardwood floors and rustic furnishings are spacious and altogether lovely, and the communal seaside porches are great for lounging around with other guests. It's worth booking a room here through the Ancon office in Panama City, especially since they offer a variety of well-priced packages that include lodging, meals, transfers and tours.

**Tropical Suites** (☎ 757 9081; www.tropical-ste.com; Calle 1; ste with/without seaview US\$140/174; 🏠 📺) If you can't live without your creature comforts, then look no further – Tropical Suites boasts the island's only elevator! Of course, the amenity list doesn't stop there, especially since this bright and cheery hotel consists entirely of shiny new suites. The list goes on, but the most attractive perks include flat-screen TVs, high-tech air-con units, modern bathrooms with Jacuzzis and kitchens with range-tops and refrigerators.

## AROUND THE ISLAND

**Cabañas Estefany** (Map p223; ☎ 618 3155; d US\$15; 2-/8-person cabin US\$30/55) This cute clutch of cabañas

is one of the only places on Isla Colón to be located on a beach. In addition to basic rooms with shared bathrooms, Cabañas Estefany has small two-person cabins with a bathroom and kitchen, and larger cabins for up to eight people. The cabins are often booked with researchers from the nearby Institute for Tropical Ecology and Conservation, so it's recommended that you call ahead.

**our pick Punta Caracol Aqua Lodge** (Map p223; ☎ 612 1088; www.puntacaracol.com; s/d with 2 meals & tours in low season US\$290/355, high season US\$365/440) If you can afford it, do it! Accessible only by boat, this luxury ecolodge is built of wood and *penca* (palm tree leaves) in conformity with traditional Caribbean architecture. Two-story stand-alone cabins feature upstairs bedrooms that are made for romance with a king-size canopy bed, big skylight window with canvas closures, and soft lighting. The living room has fine bamboo furniture and a pair of couches opening onto a private porch-dock with hammock and sun. The small bathroom exudes the same classic, tropical style with bamboo detailing and signature. And the chef is French, so you can expect to eat divinely!

## Eating IN TOWN

Although Bocas town is a small place, there's no shortage of great restaurants serving up an impressive offering of international cuisine. If you're self-catering, the **Isla Supermarket Colon** (Map 223; Calle 3) is the largest supermarket on the island, though the boutique **Super Gourmet** (Map 223; Calle 3) has everything from Japanese *panko* (bread crumbs) to California wines.

A number of food carts ply their wares around town – local favorites include the 'Chicken Lady,' the 'Batido Lady,' the 'Chicken Sandwich Guy' and the infamous 'Meat-on-a-stick Guy.'

**Panadería Europeo** (Av D; pastries US\$0.75-1.50) Sample the island's best baked goods at this tasty bakery, though be warned that the huge, fluffy cinnamon rolls are highly addictive. Wash it all down with a cup of gourmet brew for a fine start to the day.

**Café D'Artiste** (Map 223; Calle 1; coffee US\$1.50) This eclectic café is a great place for a freshly brewed cup of Panama's finest grains and you can't beat the views of the harbor and nearby islands. Don't leave without perusing the excellent art and curios that are available for purchase.

**Posada Los Delfines** (Map 223; Calle 5; breakfast special US\$2.50) The cheapest breakfast on the island is yours to be had at this hotel restaurant, which is a popular spot for locals in the know. Order your eggs anyway you want and don't be afraid to get a second helping of rice and beans.

**El Chitré** (Map 223; Calle 3; plates US\$2-3) Adored by locals and travelers alike, this no-frills cafeteria-style hole-in-the wall is the best spot in town for cheap but tasty grub. It will fill the stomach without emptying the wallet and aficionados claim it's the best meal on the island.

**Lilli's Cafe** (Map 223; Calle 1; plates US\$3-6) Whether you feast on an omelet packed with fresh veggies or a club sandwich made with homemade bread, be sure to go heavy on the homemade 'Killin' Me Man' pepper sauce. After all, nothing says the Caribbean like an ocean view and a fire on the palate.

**Alberto's Pizzeria** (Map 223; Calle 5; pizzas US\$4-6) Nothing fills the gut like a big and cheesy pepperoni pizza, especially if you've been on the road for a while and are in need of comfort food. Stop by this Italian-run spot, and long-time resident chef Alberto will make sure you're well taken care of.

**Om Café** (Map 223; Av H; mains US\$6-10) There are only a handful of tables on offer at this handsome outdoor Indian restaurant, which serves up traditional family recipes that are guaranteed to make your brow sweat. Unadventurous eaters can choose from a variety of standards including tandoori chicken or tikka masala, though die-hard Indian fans will enjoy the chili-packed vindaloo.

**El Pecado** (Map 223; Calle 3; mains US\$8-13; ☎ 5pm-10pm) This well-established upstairs restaurant near the park is one of Bocas' best-known institutions. El Pecado specializes in unique Thai-Panamanian combinations, such as fillet of fish smothered in coconut milk-based curry and spicy chicken satays, and uses fresh, local produce.

**Lemongrass Bistro** (Map 223; Calle 1; mains US\$8-12) A new contender in the ever-changing Bocas restaurant scene, this Asian-fusion restaurant gets rave reviews from the local gringo community. The breezy, open-air deck is perfect for enjoying the cool, ocean breezes, though you shouldn't let this distract you from the flavors and aromas of what's cooking.

**El Último Refugio** (Map 223; ☎ 640 1878; Av Sur; mains US\$8-13; ☎ 11:30am-10pm) This rustic, mel-low place on the edge of the sea specializes in seafood dishes such as calamari, red snapper

and tiger prawns. It's located in a quiet spot on the southern edge of the town, which makes it a great spot for a quiet, romantic dinner out.

**La Casbah** (Map 223; Av H; mains US\$8-15) Whether you're a shoestring living on US\$20 a day or you're dropping dollars like they were going out of style, everyone needs a good meal sometimes and there's no better place than this Mediterranean-inspired restaurant. One bite of the steak with blue-cheese sauce and you'll already be planning a second trip here.

## AROUND THE ISLAND

**Yarisnori Restaurant** (Map 221; mains US\$6-9; ☎ 7:30am-7pm) Overlooking the beach at Boca del Drago, this charming, open-air seafood restaurant is a local favorite. Grab an outdoor table on the sand and feast on the catch of the day – just make sure to wait at least a half hour before swimming!

## Drinking

A great place to kick off your crazy Bocas night is at **La Iguana** (Map 223; Calle 1), a popular surfer bar that serves up two-for-one cocktails from 6:30pm to 7:30pm. This is a great spot for a frothy piña colada, though you can't go wrong with an ice cold Balboa lager.

Next, head to backpacker central, namely the **Mondo Taitu Bar** (Map 223; Av I), which always guarantees a good time. On Tuesdays and Fridays, the party-loving owners entertain their guests with a variety of themed events, though the creative cocktail list and hookahs (US\$5) make Mondo a good choice any night. If you're feeling brave (and cheap), order a tequila suicide – a snort of salt, a squeeze of lime in the eye and a shot of the worst tequila they can find (at least it's free!).

If you're looking for a little local flair, **Bar El Encanto** (Map 223; Calle 3) is all the rage among the island's youth. Although most nights are heavy on the reggaeton, there is the occasional live performance here.

If you want a wild night out, the **Blowfish Sushi Bar** (Map 223; Calle 1) offers the unlikely combination of raw fish, girls dancing on bartops and a fireman's pole.

Most nights in Bocas end at the **Barco Hundido** (Map 223; Calle 1), an open-air bar that's affectionately known as the 'Wreck Deck' – the name comes from the sunken banana boat that rests in the clear Caribbean waters in the front. A short boardwalk extends from the bar to an island seating-area that's perfect for

stargazing. The fun-loving American owner also arranges private parties on his *Barco Loco* (Crazy Boat), which is arguably the most unique sea-going vessel you've ever seen.

## Shopping

You'll find a large selection of *molas* (textiles) and a range of other handicrafts for sale by local Kunas at stands near the park.

**Pacahama** (Map 223; Calle 3) Features arts made by most of Panama's indigenous peoples, plus a range of Guatemalan textiles, Nicaraguan hammocks and Emberá baskets.

**Tropix Surfshop** (Map 223; Calle 3) Sells custom-made surfboards and a few used boards, as well as a large selection of bikinis and other island apparel.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Bocas del Toro has a fine airport that's the pride of the town. **Aeroperlas** (☎ 757 9341) and **Air Panama** (☎ 757 9841) offer daily flights connecting Bocas with Panama City (US\$74, one hour, one to two per day). Aeroperlas also has flights from David to Bocas (US\$35, 50 minutes, one daily from Monday to Friday). Air Panama also has flights from San José, Costa Rica to Bocas (US\$100, 1½ hours, one per day on Monday, Wednesday and Friday).

### BOAT

If you don't fly into Bocas you'll have to take a water taxi to Changuinola on mainland Bocas (for more information, see p236). The majority of travelers prefer to use Changuinola as a jumping-off point for the archipelago.

The boat ride to Changuinola goes through the old canal formerly used by the banana plantations – it's a scenic trip that's well worth taking. **Bocas Marine & Tours** (Map 223; Calle 3) has a regular boat service to Changuinola (one-way US\$5, 45 minutes, eight daily); the first departs at 7am, the last at 5:20pm.

Boats coming from either direction can let you off in Boca del Drago (one-way US\$3), but make sure your captain knows you're going there. If you go for the day, be sure to arrange a pick-up time with the secretary and the driver.

## Getting Around

### WATER TAXIS

To reach nearby islands, you can hire boats operating motorized boats and canoes

along the waterfront. As a general rule, you should always sort out the rate beforehand, and clarify if it is for one-way or round trip. Although rates vary, you will get a better deal if you speak Spanish, are with a group and arrange for a pick-up. Although most fishers will perceive you as a rich gringo (and comparatively, you are), don't get angry – most boaters are just trying to feed their families.

Round-trip rates are generally as follows: US\$4 to the near side of Isla Bastimentos, US\$2 to Isla Carenero and US\$10 to Red Frog Beach. Although you should always pay on the return leg – this guarantees a pick-up – most boaters will want some money upfront so that they can buy petrol.

### BIKES

You can rent bicycles from **Empresa Lau** (Map 223; Calle 3; ☎ 9am-7pm) for US\$8 per day as well as mopeds for US\$20 per day.

## ISLA BASTIMENTOS

### pop 1500

Although it's a mere 10-minute boat ride from the town of Bocas del Toro, Isla Bastimentos is a different world. The northern coast of the island is home to palm-fringed wilderness beaches that serve as nesting grounds for sea turtles, while most of the southern coast consists of mangrove islands and coral reefs that fall within the boundaries of the Parque Nacional Marino Isla Bastimentos.

The main settlement on Bastimentos is the historic West Indian town of Old Bank, which has its origins in the banana industry. Here, you'll hear Gali-Gali, the distinct Creole language of Bocas del Toro Province that combines Afro-Antillean English, Spanish and Ngöbe-Buglé. The island is also home to the Ngöbe-Buglé village of Quebrada Sal, which is separated from Old Bank by a huge swath of jungle.

Unfortunately, the face of Bastimentos is changing rapidly as construction has already begun on the controversial Red Frog Beach Club (p232). Although the development project is outside the confines of the Parque Nacional Marino Isla Bastimentos, it will completely transform the face of island and set a precedent for future development projects in Bocas del Toro.

## Orientation

The small village of Old Bank has no roads, just a wide, concrete footpath lined on both sides with colorfully painted wooden houses.

From the town, there is a path leading across the island to Wizard Beach and Red Frog Beach, though the route can turn into a virtual swamp following the rains.

### LOCAL VOICES: THE GUYS FROM MONDO TAITÚ ON SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL

*David Harmatz, Daniel Saxe & Daniel Smetana*

Travel is intrinsically linked to the timeless search for self-discovery – we all harbor a common hope that we might return from each adventure wiser than when we left. Unfortunately, sometimes we get so caught up in our own personal exploration that we overlook the environment around us. However, we all have the capacity to travel sustainably and it's not too difficult to leave a place better than we found it.

The basic idea of sustainable travel is that a destination is visited in such a way that the community's environmental, cultural and economic needs are met. Here in Bocas del Toro (and throughout the world), there is no shortage of ways that we can lessen the impact of our stay. For example:

- Minimize your impact on the local environment. Although humanity carries the responsibility to protect our world, the power to influence sustainability begins with individuals. We as travelers can easily help to conserve a community's natural resources. Reuse plastic bottles and fill up from rain water collection systems or by purifying tap water. When you arrive in a new town, ask around to see if there are any recycling programs – if a system is in place, spread awareness. While walking along a beach or a trail, pick up any garbage you see – your actions might inspire another traveler or local to do the same. And of course, treat our underwater world with respect. Follow the basic snorkel/scuba guidelines, keep garbage out of the ocean and remember not to eat or purchase endangered or undersized seafood.
- Respect the local culture. The cultural ruin of a destination is irreversible, though this is one area where travelers can make the biggest difference. While talking to locals, ask about the area's customs and traditions. An eagerness to learn on the part of the traveler may reassure a local that there is something precious about their customs, even if everything is changing around them. In fact, the best window into a local culture might be sitting next to you on the bus, having a quiet drink on the stool next to you in the bar or sharing a park bench with you. And, you never know where a conversation will take you. Ask a few questions. Show interest. Listen.
- Be aware of the power of your money. Many local economies in Panama (and the world) have been adversely affected by this rise in tourism. So, if the opportunity arises to spend money at a locally run business or vendor, give a little back. Enjoy the flavors at a local restaurant. If there is a kid selling an empanada out of his shoulder satchel, don't worry about your stomach – just buy one. Enjoy the creativity of a local artisan. If you spot a piece on display that catches your eye, buy it instead of saying you'll come back later. In all cases, you'll be surprised how far your dollar can stretch, though remember that no one likes people who flaunt their money.

Common sense combined with the basic tenets of sustainable travel will ensure that destinations remain desirable for both the traveler and the local. Regardless of whether you're sitting on a beach, roaming the streets, hiking through the jungle or sitting in a bar, never forget how much power you have to effect change in a positive way. And please, don't be afraid to give suggestions to other travelers – the best advice always comes from your peers.

Take only pictures. Leave only footprints. Kill only time.

*The Guys' from Mondo Taitú originally hail from the San Francisco Bay Area. After completing university in 2004, they moved to Panama to try their hands at running a hostel – they've been stuck in Bocas ever since then.*

On the southeastern side of the island is the remote Ngöbe-Buglé village of Quebrada Sal. Tropical forest covers the interior of the island; you can explore it, but go only with a guide, as it's very easy to get lost.

## Sights

### OLD BANK

Located on the western tip of the island, Old Bank (Bastimentos Town) is a small enclave of 1500 residents of West Indian descent. Until the 1990s, most of the adults in Old Bank traveled to Changuinola daily to tend to the banana fields, though today residents have taken to fishing, farming small plots or just hanging out.

Although Old Bank is very poor and devoid of any real sights, it has a much more pronounced Caribbean vibe than Bocas town and it's a relaxing place to stroll around and soak up the atmosphere. It's also the best place in Bocas del Toro to hear Gali-Gali, a fascinating Spanish-English Creole that's native to the island.

### BEACHES

Bastimentos has some amazing beaches, though be careful swimming as the surf can really pick up on the north coast of the island.

The most beautiful beach on the island is **Wizard Beach** (also known as Playa Primera), which is awash in powder-yellow sand and backed by thick vine-strewn jungle. Although Wizard Beach is connected to Old Bank via a wilderness path, the mere 30-minute walk can turn into an all-day trek through the muck if it's been raining heavily.

Assuming the weather is cooperating, you can continue walking along the coast to **Playa Segunda** (Second Beach) and **Red Frog Beach**. Like Wizard, both beaches are stunning and virtually abandoned, though it's likely that this will change as development on the island continues (see the boxed text on p232). If the weather isn't cooperating, you can access Red Frog Beach by water taxi via a small marina on the south side of the island; entrance to the beach is US\$2. While you are on Red Frog Beach, keep an eye out for the *rana rojo* (strawberry poison-dart frog) as they might not be on the island for too much longer.

The path continues past Red Frog Beach to **Playa Larga** (Long Beach), where sea turtles nest from April to August. Playa Larga

and much of the eastern side of the island fall under the protection of Parque Nacional Marino Isla Bastimentos.

## PARQUE NACIONAL MARINO ISLA BASTIMENTOS

Established in 1988, this was Panama's first **marine park** (admission US\$10). Protecting various areas of the Bocas del Toro archipelago, including parts of Isla Bastimentos and the Cayos Zapatillas, the marine park is an important nature reserve for countless species of Caribbean wildlife.

You can get current park information from the IPAT or ANAM offices in Bocas del Toro (p220). The dive operators and boaters in Bocas are also good sources of information about the park and its attractions. If you want to camp out anywhere in the park, you are required to first obtain a permit from ANAM.

## QUEBRADA SAL

On the southeastern edge of Bastimentos at the end of a long canal cut through the mangrove forest is the Ngöbe-Buglé village of Quebrada Sal (Salt Creek). The community is made up of 60-odd houses, an elementary school, a handicrafts store, a general store and a soccer field. For the most part, the community depends on fishing and subsistence farming, travels mostly by canoe, and resides in wooden, thatched-roof huts without electricity or running water.

Although the Quebrada Sal is slowly modernizing along with the rest of the archipelago, the villagers are friendly and open to visitors, especially if you can speak Spanish. If you have the time, it's worth hiring a local guide to walk with you along the cross-island trail that leads to Playa Larga (about one hour each way). Water taxis can also drop you off at the entrance. You will need to pay the US\$1 entry fee and sign the visitor's log.

## Activities

### DIVING & SNORKELING

Diving trips are offered by **The Dutch Pirate** (☎ 6567 1812; www.thedutchpirate.com). There is a small booking office in Old Bank, though it's best to phone ahead to make a reservation. For more information on diving and snorkeling, see p222.

### THE RED FROG BEACH CLUB

In October of 2006, Lonely Planet author Scott Doggett published an open letter in the *Bocas Breeze* calling attention to the Red Frog Beach Club (RFBC), a massive residential development project that is well underway on Isla Bastimentos. According to the developers, the RFBC will consist of luxury villas, condos and three marinas, and will provide resort amenities including a clubhouse, swimming pools, restaurants and an 18-hole golf course. Although the development project is outside the confines of the Parque Nacional Marino Isla Bastimentos, it will completely transform the face of Red Frog Beach and set a precedent for future development projects in Bocas del Toro.

The poignancy of Scott Doggett's letter caused uproar in Bocas, especially since it pointed out what locals, resident expats and concerned tourists were already thinking. The RFBC has launched a flashy public relations campaign espousing their involvement in rural development. However, since they are a private residential development, it is unlikely that homeowners will have any impact on the economic livelihood of locals. Furthermore, it is difficult to overlook the effect that the inevitable outcomes of a large residential community, such as air pollution and human wastes, will have an environmental impact on the island.

The principal concern amongst area locals is that future beach access will be restricted once construction of the RFBC is completed. Although beaches in Panama are considered public property, the concentration of wealth at RFBC will necessitate the presence of a private security force. One need only look at case studies of similar residential developments in Mexico, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic to predict that public access to Red Frog Beach will be tightly controlled if not restricted altogether.

Another concern is that the RFBC will adversely impact sea turtle populations. According to the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI), maps provided by the RFBC show encroachment of marine park boundaries and annexation of the land bordering on and including Playa Larga, an important sea-turtle nesting site. As the STRI points out, even if construction does not actually occur on Playa Larga, increased human presence in the area can disturb nesting females and impact habitat suitability. Furthermore, light-pollution from the RFBC will illuminate the coastline and may cause sea turtles to avoid Playa Larga all together.

The final concern is the environmental impact of the proposed 18-hole golf course on Isla Bastimentos. According to the RFBC, the golf course will be built on an existing teak plantation in order to preserve the island's primary forest. Unfortunately, however, access to the construction site is heavily restricted, which makes it near impossible to verify that the primary forest is being preserved. Furthermore, golf courses require huge amounts of agrochemicals and there is little that developers can do to prevent runoff from being absorbed by the outlying reef.

Despite increasing local and foreign opposition to the RFBC, it is unlikely that the project will be halted. Experts ranging from conservationists to marine biologists continue to petition ANAM, Panama's environmental authority, though it is suspected that the RFBC's principal investors are too influential for ANAM to make a difference. However, frequent setbacks have slowed progress and the opposition hopes that this extra time will enable them to influence the RFBC's agenda. It is almost certain that Isla Bastimentos will be the home of an exclusive residential community in the years to come, though there is hope that the developers will take it upon themselves to make their community more ecofriendly.

For more information on the Red Frog Beach Club, visit their website at [redfrogbeachclub.com](http://redfrogbeachclub.com).

### SURFING

For information on surfing near Isla Bastimentos, see the boxed text on p224.

### SPELUNKING & HIKING

**Nivida** is the name of a cavern recently discovered by one of the residents of Bastimentos. Although the cave is one of the island's most fascinating natural wonders, half the fun of

the place is getting there. To reach Nivida, go to Roots (p234) to arrange a trip (prices negotiable) with Oscar, a very reliable local guide. You'll then travel by small motorboat up a channel through lush vegetation full of wildlife. A short walk through the jungle leads to a massive cavern complete with swarms of nectar bats and a very swimmable subterranean lake.



Oscar can also arrange a challenging hike to Laguna de Bastimentos, a jungle lake completely surrounded by dense vegetation. This swath of rainforest is the terra firma section of the Parque Nacional Marino Isla Bastimentos.

## Sleeping

Although the majority of the action is on Isla Colón, accommodations on Bastimentos are perfect for travelers seeking rustic digs and a laid-back atmosphere.

## BUDGET

**Hotel Bastimentos** (Map 221; ☎ 757 9053; dm/d US\$5/10) On a hill off the main path, this rough-and-ready budget hotel has bright and airy rooms with balconies overlooking the shoreline. More in-touch with backpacker needs than other hotels on the island, Bastimentos offers a common room with a bar, TV, dartboard and views as well as a well-equipped communal kitchen. Hotel Bastimentos follows the standard recipe for success: offer clean, economic accommodations in a chilled-out setting with shared living space for mingling.

**Beverly's Hill** (Map 221; ☎ 757 9923; s/d US\$10/15) Rooms in clean cabins set amid a lush garden make Beverly's excellent value. Although it's a few dollars more than other budget hotels on the island, the difference here is the personalized service of the friendly hosts, Beverly and Wulf, who will make you feel welcome the moment you arrive. You can also sleep well at night knowing that the on-site composting and water filtration system makes this one of the most environmentally friendly hotels on the island.

**Pension Tío Tom** (Map 221; ☎/fax 757 9831; tomina@cw.net.pa; d without/private bathroom US\$10/20) This plank-and-thatch building has been offering cheap, clean and unfussy rooms for years, which has earned it a reputation as a backpacker palace. Hugely popular and justifiably so, Tío Tom epitomizes the type of rustic backpacker place that blazed the Gringo Trail through Central America. The friendly German owners foster a laid-back environment that's reinforced by the eclectic cast of international characters that are usually found here. It also helps that everyone usually has a full belly – the owners can cook up some seriously gourmet dinners for pennies.

## MIDRANGE & TOP END

**The Point** (Map 221; ☎ 757 9704; cabin US\$40) At the northern tip of Bastimentos lie two cabins overlooking the sea, with crashing waves just a few meters from the doorsteps. Each of the cabins boasts handsomely designed rooms with wooden accents, ecologically designed septic systems, and private hot-water bathrooms. Guests also have free use of the kayaks and you can surf right off the tip of the island (bring your own board).

**La Loma Jungle Lodge** (Map 221; ☎ 592 5162; www.thejunglelodge.com; r per person with 3 meals & activities US\$80) Integrated into the forest and the community, La Loma is one of those rare places that offers environmentally sustainable and culturally attuned lodging. The handful of bungalows epitomize natural sophistication with locally made furnishings that are adorned with tropical flowers. Each bungalow also has a propane-fuelled, rain-water-fed bathroom, a hand-hewn bed with mosquito net and a solar-powered energy system. The hosts also practice permaculture, which means that your delicious meals incorporate the organic vegetables grown here, plus the fresh-bread baked on the premises.

**El Limbo on the Beach** (Map 221; ☎ 6205555; www.elimbo.com; d US\$85) Every room is different at El Limbo, with lots of unique touches such as headboards made of driftwood, and seashells arranged in room corners for artistic effect. However, the overall design is understated elegance, which is achieved through a combination of natural building materials, attentive service and a striking location. As the names implies, you're on the beach and there's even a small reef out front that beckons to be explored.

**Al Natural Resort** (Map 221; ☎ 623 2217; alnaturalbobas@cw.net.pa; r per person with 3 meals & activities from US\$100) This desert island hideaway for hippie bourgeoisie beach-lovers lends a bohemian twist to the all-inclusive idea. Based on traditional Ngöbe-Buglé architecture, the round wood-and-palm bungalows here have an open design that delivers full frontal sea views, though you need to have a laid-back travel approach to stay here. Being exposed to the elements is not everyone's cup of organic, young-leaf tea, especially if the rain and the wind picks up.

## Eating & Drinking

Although you're just a short boat ride away from Isla Colón, there are a handful of interesting spots on the island worth checking out.

**The Rooster** (Map 221; mains US\$2-4) This inexpensive, low-key spot is run by the friendly and garrulous Pete, who bills himself as the ‘antifried guy.’ Pete is a talented and creative cook who likes to use the region’s fresh fruits and vegetables, and everything that comes out of his kitchen tastes fresh and healthy.

**Roots** (Map 221; mains US\$3-5) This universally loved over-the-water restaurant is a Bocas institution and is famous for its masterfully prepared dishes of local meats and seafood that are perfectly accented with fresh coconut milk. Coowner Oscar Powell has also done much for the community of Isla Bastimentos and he’s a personable fellow with a sharp sense of humor.

**Restaurante Coral Cay** (Map 221; dishes US\$6-12; ☎ 8am-5pm) An island unto itself, this place is a cluster of thatched-roof *bohios* on stilts beside a clump of mangrove and a field of coral reef. This is a terrific place to relax, lie in the sun, snorkel and eat, and the boat ride out is an adventure in itself.

Built partially over the water, the large, barnlike La Feria (Map 221) is the seat of Bastimentos’ nightlife. After the sun sets it’s an easy spot to find – just follow the sound of reggae.

## Getting There & Away

To get to Isla Bastimentos from Bocas del Toro, just walk down to the waterfront and ask a boaters to take you over. The ride will cost about US\$2 to get to the near side of the island or US\$4 to the far side.

## ISLA CARENERO

A few hundred meters from Isla Colón is the oft-forgotten island of Isla Carenero. The island takes its name from ‘careening,’ which in nautical talk means to lean a ship on one side for cleaning or repairing. It was on Careening Cay in October 1502 that ships under the command of Christopher Columbus were careened and cleaned while the admiral recovered from a bellyache.

Today, the wave of development that transformed Isla Colón is also making headway on Isla Carenero. Although the majority of the accommodations on Isla Carenero are borderline resorts, staying on this lovely island is a great alternative to Isla Colón, especially if you’re looking for a bit of peace and quiet.

## Orientation

Water taxis dock at the small marina on the tip of the island. From here, there is a path that leads to the island’s fledgling town and continues across the island.

## Activities

### SURFING

For information on surfing near Isla Carenero, see the boxed text on p224.

## Sleeping & Eating

Although not as popular as Isla Colón or Isla Bastimentos, Isla Carenero is a good option for travelers who want a different view of the islands.

**Tierra Verde** (Map 221; ☎ 757 9042; www.hoteltier raverde.com; s/d/tr US\$45/50/55) Offering excellent value for money, this lovely three-story building sits back from the beach in a shady area full of palm trees. The seven spacious rooms feature beautiful wood details and windows that allow ample light and are designed in a contemporary island style. Tierra Verde is Panamanian-run, a rarity for midrange hotels in this expat playground.

**Buccaneer Resort** (Map 221; ☎ 757 9042; www.bocasbuc caneer.com; d US\$65-85, 4-person suite US\$200; 🍷) Located on a lovely strip of sand, this low-key resort is more of a humble clutch of romantic cabins. Each self-contained unit is elevated and features polished hardwood floors and walls, a thatch roof, a screened porch and a modern tiled bathroom, though the star of the show is the secluded honeymoon-worthy suite. Also located on the grounds is the La Almeja Barbuda, an open-sided restaurant that is a popular expat hangout.

**Casa Acuario** (Map 221; ☎ 757 9565; d US\$75; 🍷) Pulling up to the porch-dock that serves as Casa Acuario’s welcome mat, you’ll see why they named it ‘Aquarium House’ – the crystal-blue waters here teem with tropical fish. Short of pitching a tent on a wilderness beach, you’ll be hard pressed to find accommodations that take such advantage of the archipelago’s exquisite beauty. Rooms at this cute, two-story guesthouse are impeccably outfitted with modern amenities and the requisite tropical decor.

**Restaurante Las Tortugas** (Map 221; mains US\$4-6) This low-key restaurant boasts fine views of Bocas town and the local seafood on offer is about as cheap as it gets. If you’re staying on Colón or Bastimentos and in need of a

change of scene, this Carenero spot is the perfect choice.

### Getting There & Away

Isla Carenero is a quick and easy US\$1 boat ride from the waterfront in Bocas town.

### ISLA SOLARTE

Isla Solarte (Cayo Nancy) is distinguished by Hospital Point, which is named after the United Fruit Company hospital that was built here in 1900. The hospital was established to isolate victims of yellow fever and malaria – at the time, it was not yet known that these diseases were transmitted by mosquitoes. Although the hospital complex eventually included 16 buildings, it was abandoned after two decades of operation following the blight that killed all of United Fruit's banana trees.

Today, most visitors to Solarte are day-trippers on boat tours, who dock just off of Hospital Point to snorkel the 20m underwater wall. Although much of the island is private, an attractive option for anyone looking for a little tropical seclusion is the **Solarte del Caribe Inn** (Map 221; ☎ 757 9032; www.solarteinn.com; d/stg incl breakfast US\$65/110), which enjoys the privilege of being the sole hotel on the island. The property has the air of a country inn, complete with a spacious open-sided dining room

and cozy guest rooms with lovely hardwood floors and private bathrooms with flushing compost toilets.

Isla Solarte is a quick and easy US\$1 boat ride from the waterfront in Bocas town. If you want to snorkel at Hospital Point, you can either organize a private tour or negotiate a price with a water taxi.

## MAINLAND

The mainland jungles of Bocas del Toro Province teem with wildlife and are pocketed with remote indigenous villages – the contrast with the archipelago couldn't be greater.

### CHANGUINOLA

pop 50,000

Headquarters of the Chiriquí Land Company, the very same people that bring you Chiquita bananas, Changuinola is a hot and rather dusty town surrounded by a sea of banana plantations. Although there is little reason to spend any more time in Changuinola than you have to, overland travelers heading to the archipelago will have to pass through here. Changuinola also serves as the access point for the Humedal de San-San Pond Sak (p236), the Parque Internacional La Amistad (p237) and Las Delicias (p239).

### Orientation & Information

The main street, Av 17 de Abril (also called Av Central), runs north to south, and serves as the town's main artery. The bus station is located near the city center, close to a number of restaurants, bars, markets and hotels.

The town has a Banco Nacional de Panamá, an immigration office and an internet café, all located on Av 17 de Abril.

The **ANAM office** (☎ 758 6603, 767 9485; ☎ 8am–4pm Mon–Fri), near the center of town, should be able to provide information on national parks in the province. Some English is spoken here.

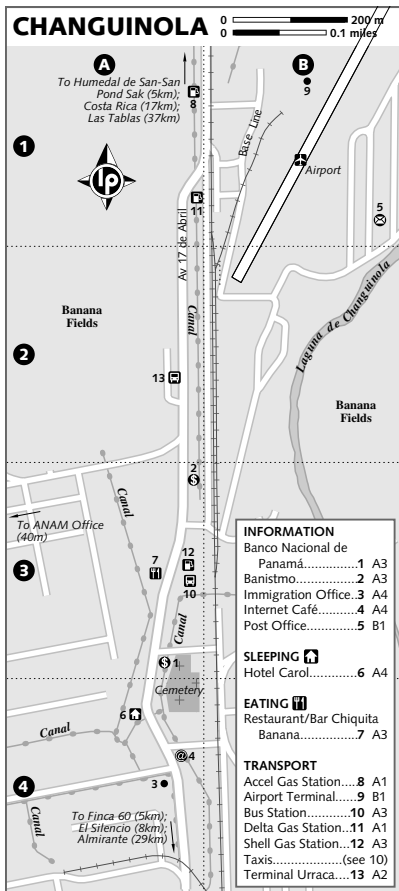
### Sights

In 1903 a 15km **canal** connecting the Río Changuinola and Bahía de Almirante was dug parallel to the Caribbean shoreline, running within several hundred meters of it for most of its length. The work was begun in 1897 by the Snyder Brothers to facilitate the barging

#### EXPLORE MORE OF BOCAS DEL TORO

Tired of the tourist crowds? Looking for a bit of an adventure? Hire a boater and try these author-tested excursions to spice up your travels:

- **Cayo Crawl** Clear your schedule and get lost in the mangrove-dotted channels of Cayo Crawl near Isla Bastimentos.
- **Cayos Zapatillas** Apply some sunscreen and set out for the pristine white-sand beaches and virgin forests of the Cayos Zapatillas.
- **Dolphin Bay** Break out your camera and spot dolphins frolicking in your wake at this densely populated breeding ground.
- **Swan Cay** Polish your binoculars and keep your eyes peeled for red-billed tropic birds and white-crowned pigeons in Swan Cay near Isla de Los Pájaros.



of bananas from the fields to ships. The 30m-wide channel allowed transfer of the fruit without interference from the open sea.

The canal, which sliced through dense rainforest, was abandoned years ago and until the mid-1990s it was a bird-watcher's dream. Today however, much of the jungle on both sides of the waterway has been cleared for cattle pasture, though there is still wildlife in the area.

Boats running between Changuinola and Isla Colón pass through the canal.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Carol** (☎ 758 8731; Av 17 de Abril; d with private bathroom US\$12-16; Although the rooms here could inspire a horror film, it's cer-

tainly the best of the lot. Of course, there is little reason to actually spend the night in Changuinola, but if you end up in a pinch, you could do a lot worse than this spot. The Hotel Carol is conveniently located across from the cemetery – a room with a view.

**Restaurant/Bar Chiquita Banana** (Av 17 de Abril) On the main road opposite the bus station, this local favorite serves Panamanian fare, but surprisingly no bananas. (Indeed, bananas are hard to find in town as they are marked for export).

## Getting There & Away

### BOAT

Bocas Marine & Tours operates water taxis between Changuinola and Bocas town (US\$4, 45 minutes, eight daily). Departures are from Finca 60, which is located 5km south of town. *Colectivo* buses run regularly from the bus station in town to Finca 60 for US\$0.40.

### BUSES

Buses depart from the station in the center of town.

**El Silencio** (Parque Internacional Amistad; US\$0.50; 30min; every 20min, 5am-8:30pm)

**Guabito-Sixaola** (US\$0.50; 30min; every half hour; 6am-7pm)

**Las Tablas** (Las Delicias; US\$1.75; 1½hr; hourly)

**Panama City** (US\$24; 10hr; 1 daily; 7am)

**David** (US\$12.50; 4½hr; every half hour; 5am-6pm)

**San José** (Costa Rica; US\$8; 6hr; daily; 10am)

### TAXI

You can take a taxi from Changuinola to the Costa Rican border at Guabito (US\$3 per person, 15 minutes).

## HUMEDAL DE SAN-SAN POND SAK

These relatively undiscovered wetlands are located a mere 5km north of central Changuinola, yet they harbor an incredible variety of tropical fauna. In addition to sloths, river otters, white-faced monkeys, caimans, iguanas, sea turtles and poison-dart frogs, the fresh waters of San-San are also one of the few known Central American habitats for the manatee.

This protected area is administered by a conservation organization called AAMVE-CONA, which works in close conjunction with ANAM. The US\$3 park entry fee helps

support the conservation organization. To arrange a trip, stop by the Changuinola **ANAM office** (☎ 758 6603) or contact **AAMVECONA** (Association of Friends & Neighbors of the Coast & its Environment, in Spanish; ☎ 758 9461) directly. Trips cost between US\$25 and US\$35 per day depending on the size of your group, plus an additional US\$8 per person for accommodation.

Although it's possible to visit the wetlands in a day trip from Changuinola (or Isla Colón if you get an early start), the best way to appreciate the area is to stay overnight. Located inside the park on a stunning wilderness beach is a rustic house on stilts, which has three simple rooms, cold-water showers, a flush toilet (fed by rainwater) and a cooking area. However, the biggest perk about staying here is that guests are allowed to accompany the rangers at night to observe the turtle nesting sites (see the boxed text, below).

Bring your own food and drink, as well as a sleeping bag or blanket – bedding is not provided. You will also want to bring a mosquito net and bug spray as the sand fleas and mosquitoes here will show no mercy.

## PARQUE INTERNACIONAL LA AMISTAD (WEKSO)

The 407,000-hectare Parque Internacional La Amistad was established jointly in 1988 by Panama and Costa Rica – hence its name, La Amistad (Friendship). In 1990 La Amistad was declared a Unesco World Heritage site and later became part of the greater Mesoamerican Biological corridor. In Panama, the park covers portions of Chiriquí and Bocas

del Toro Provinces, contains seven of the 12 classified life zones, and serves as a refuge for a great number of endangered flora and fauna.

La Amistad is also home to members of three indigenous groups: the Naso (Teribe), the Bribrí and the Ngöbe-Buglé. Although these groups are still clinging to their traditional ways of life, their numbers are dwindling fast, especially as outside influences continue to invade their culture. However, in an effort to preserve their identity while simultaneously providing a means of income, the Naso have created an ecological center at Wekso, the former site of the infamous US-run Pana-Jungla survival school. Today, this ecotourism project is thriving as more and more travelers discover the beauty of both the rugged wilderness of La Amistad and the ancestral culture of the Naso.

## The Naso (Teribe)

According to the colonial records of the Spanish empire, the Naso were present in mainland Bocas del Toro when the first explorers arrived in the region in the 16th century. The Spaniards referred to the Naso as the Teribe, or the Tjër Di (Grandmother Water) in Naso, which is the guiding spirit that forms the backbone of their religious beliefs. Nomenclature aside, however, the Spaniards gradually squeezed the Naso off their lands, and drove the population to exile in the highlands near the Costa Rican border.

Although the establishment of the modern Panamanian state has enabled the Naso

### TURTLES' TRAGIC TROUBLES

Four of the world's eight sea turtle species nest on the beaches of the Archipiélago de Bocas del Toro, particularly the long beaches on the northern side of Isla Bastimentos. The loggerheads appear from April to September, the leatherbacks in May and June, the hawksbills in July and the greens in July and August.

Sea turtles leave the water only to lay their eggs. Two months after the eggs are laid, the hatchlings break loose from their shells, leave their sandy nests and enter the sea – if they are not first eaten by raccoons, birds or dogs. Many hatchlings, which are guided to the sea by moonlight, die because people using flashlights unintentionally steer the tiny turtles into the rainforest, where they are preyed upon or get lost and die from starvation or the heat.

The turtles also have human predators to contend with. Throughout Panama, many communities still eat turtles and their eggs, an unfortunate reality that has contributed greatly to their dwindling populations. Fortunately, AAMVECONA, which is based in the Humedal de San-San Pond Sak, is one community-based organization that is working toward their preservation. If you have time to spare, AAMVECONA accepts volunteers to help with their turtle nesting and hatching projects.

to return to their ancestral home, their survival is threatened by the lack of a *comarca* (autonomous region) of their own. This scenario contrasts greatly with other Panamanian indigenous population groups such as the Kuna, the Emberá, the Wounaan and the neighboring Ngöbe-Buglé. The plight of the Naso is further amplified by the fact that there is tremendous ecotourism potential in Parque Internacional La Amistad, as well as growing national and international interest in building a massive hydroelectric project in the region. Although proposals for establishing a *comarca* are on the table, in true Panamanian form, progress is being held up by bureaucracy.

It is estimated that there are only a few thousand Naso remaining in Panama, the majority of which live in Bocas del Toro Province and survive as subsistence farmers. Although they remained virtually autonomous for generations, the Naso have recently started losing their cultural self-sufficiency due to missionary activity, Latino encroachment and youth migration. Today, most Naso are bilingual (Naso and Spanish), wear Western-style clothing and practice some form of Christianity. However, strong elements of ancestral Naso culture remain, especially considering that they are one of the few remaining indigenous groups in the Americas to retain their traditional monarchy.

### Orientation & Information

Admission to the **park** (admission US\$3, parking US\$1, camping US\$5; ☎ 8am-4pm) is paid at the Wekso entrance near Changuinola. Permits to camp in the park are payable at the ranger station.

Wekso is administered by **ODESEN** (Organization for the Sustainable Development of Naso Ecotourism; ☎ 620 0192), a community-based development organization that promotes ecotourism in the park as well as the cultural preservation of the Naso.

Keep in mind that the guides at Wekso, all of whom are local residents, speak only Spanish and Naso. Although you don't have to be fluent in Spanish to arrive here, a basic understanding of the language is recommended.

Note that the Las Nubes entrance to the park is only accessible from Chiriquí Province. For more information, see p215.

### Sights

Before the US invasion of Panama in 1989, Wekso was named Pana-Jungla, and served as a US-run survival school that trained Panamanian and international troops in jungle warfare. Although it was disbanded in 1990 following the ousting of General Noriega, the **dilapidated ruins** of the old structures remain scattered around the Wekso grounds. Highlights include the barracks, mess hall, chapel, armory and the serpentarium.

### Activities

Although most of Parque Internacional La Amistad is inaccessible terrain high up in the Talamanca, the park is home to a recorded 90 mammal species (including six cat species) and more than 400 bird species (including resplendent quetzals and harpy eagles).

There's a 3.5km loop trail at Wekso that cuts through secondary and virgin rainforest, which offers good opportunities for wildlife-watching. You can also take a dip in the river

### LOCAL LORE: INDIOS CONEJOS

The Naso have a rich oral tradition that is rife with lore and mythology, though none of their tales are nearly as evocative as those of the *indios conejos* (rabbit Indians). According to the Naso, these fierce warriors live deep in the jungle, are completely nocturnal, possess super-human attributes and are deadly with a bow and arrow. Physical descriptions vary, but some of the more alluring accounts describe them as being pale white with stripes on their backs and dwarfish in size, like giant rabbits.

Although opinions are divided about whether or not *indios conejos* still exist, most elder Naso are fond of telling stories of battles with these mythical warriors that took place during their youth. According to the Naso elders, *indios conejos* are nearly invincible under cover of night, but they can easily be killed if ambushed while sleeping during the day.

Historians suggest that the lore of the *indios conejos* could stem from real battles that took place with the Miskito tribe. However, when asked where the *indios conejos* are today, most Naso elders will tell you that they're simply too deep in the jungles to be found anymore.

(the current is too fast for crocodiles), though be careful not to wade out very far or you may be carried downstream. There is also a network of trails linking various Naso communities together, though it's best to tackle these with a guide.

From Wekso, it's a five-hour hike into the Parque Internacional La Amistad. If you're planning on entering the park, be advised that the Caribbean side of La Amistad is much less developed than the Pacific side. You will need to hire the services of local boaters and guides, and you must be completely self-sufficient. Also be advised that the terrain is extremely rugged, there are no developed hiking trails and the river can get scary during the rainy season. However, if you're prepared for a serious trek, you're almost certain to have an adventure.

### Sleeping & Eating

The heart of Wekso is the Naso-run **guest lodge** (lodgings per person US\$12, meals US\$3-4), which is staffed by members of the local community and benefits the tribe. Rooms at the lodge are basic and there is a secure water supply, flush toilets and an outdoor shower. Workers can also prepare meals for you, lead you on guided tours through the jungle and answer all your questions about Naso culture and history.

### Getting There & Away

To reach Wekso, you first have to catch a bus from Changuinola to the hamlet of El Silencio (US\$0.50, 30 minutes, every 20 minutes), and then take a 45-minute boat ride up the Río Teribe. In El Silencio, there's often a *colectivo* boat, which will cost about US\$5 per person, though you can always hire a boat yourself for around US\$15 to US\$25. If you tell the ANAM office in Changuinola (p235) that you want to go to Wekso, they can radio ahead and make sure there is someone at the river's edge.

Once on the river you'll pass hills blanketed with rainforest and intermittent waterfalls. The backdrop is the glorious Talamanca range and the jungle comes all the way down to the river water. After about 45 minutes on the river, you'll see a sign on the right bank that announces your arrival at Wekso.

### LAS DELICIAS

Set in a hilly area of lush rainforest, the small indigenous community of Las Delicias lies along the Sixaola River, 20km from the Costa

Rican border crossing at Guabito. These local residents have recently shifted their source of income from harvesting and logging to preservation and ecotourism – visiting them is one way you can make a very positive contribution to the environment. Among the attractions here are waterfalls, abundant wildlife and impressive lookout points over the Sixaola River Valley and the Talamanca Mountains.

On a day trip to the area, you'll get the chance to take a boat tour through the Sixaola and Yorkin Rivers, followed by a hike through rainforest or possibly a horseback ride – the possibilities are endless. The villagers will then prepare a lunch – it's usually fresh fish and amazingly good. Prices for an outing are quite reasonable, at around US\$20 to US\$30 per person. There are also rustic **cabins** (per person US\$16) available for overnight visitors, though hardy travelers can string up a hammock or pitch a tent at one of the ranchos. Remember that this is a relatively undeveloped place (there is no electricity), so bring your own supplies, especially a water purifier, a flashlight, a mosquito net and bug repellent.

You can make arrangements to visit Las Delicias through the Changuinola **ANAM office** (☎ 758 6603) or by phoning **Las Delicias** (☎ 600 4042) directly. To reach the community, take a bus from Changuinola to Las Tablas (US\$1.75, 1½ hours, hourly), followed by a taxi to Las Delicias (US\$1). You can also negotiate a price with one of the 4WD taxis in Changuinola.

### BOSQUE PROTECTOR PALO SECO

Located 29km south of Chiriquí Grande on the road to David (also called 'Fortuna Rd' because the road passes by Lago Fortuna reservoir), the **Bosque Protector Palo Seco** (BPPS; Panamanians/foreigners US\$1/3) is a lush cloud forest, covering more than 160,000 hectares. It's set high in the Talamanca range and the wildlife here includes monkeys, sloths, armadillos and butterflies. The birdlife includes ashy-throated bush-tanagers, and this is the only place you will find them.

An ANAM station lies at the entrance to the Bosque and here you can pay the park admission fee and obtain information about current hiking conditions. ANAM maintains three trails in the park, each about 45 minutes in duration, allowing visitors the chance to get a taste of the region's natural wonders.

ANAM has rustic facilities for those interested in staying the night inside the center (per

## GETTING TO COSTA RICA

The border post at **Guabito-Sixaola** (🕒 8am-noon & 2-6pm), just north of Changuinola, is a straight-forward, less-traveled post and most travelers find it hassle free. Buses from Changuinola depart frequently for the border (US\$0.50, 30 minutes, every half-hour) from 6am to 7pm. On the Costa Rican side of the border, you can catch regular buses on to Puerto Limón and San José, as well as regional destinations.

Note that you can be asked for an onward ticket if you are entering Costa Rica. If you do not possess one, it is acceptable to buy a return bus ticket back to Panama. Also note that Costa Rica is one hour behind Panama – opening and closing times in this box are given in Panama time.

person US\$5), but be sure to bring your own food and bedding. Guests have access to the kitchen as well as bathrooms. To ensure they have room for you, contact the Changuinola **ANAM office** (☎ 758 660).

Just down from the ANAM station is the home of **Isabel & Onel Guerra-Martinez** (bed with/without meals US\$30/10; 📍), who also provide food and lodging for guests. Accommodations are rustic, but clean and well maintained with flush toilets and showers. The friendly family can cook your meals and they also provide tours of the area in Spanish.

Across the road from them is the sign for **Willie Mazu Rancho Ecologico** (☎ 442 1340 in Panama City; panabird@cwpanama.net; mattress with/without meals US\$45/25; 📍), which consists of a large, thatched-roof structure under which four-person tents are pitched. The tents contain mattresses, and guests have access to cooking facilities and a clean bathroom and shower. You can bring your own food or buy your meals here. In the vicinity is a crystal-clear stream that's very refreshing after a long hike. There are several trails on the property, one of which leads to a lovely set of waterfalls and bathing pools. There's also a stand about 100m further up the road that sells fresh fruits and vegetables.

The last place to stay in the area is **Celestine** (☎ 774 4934; hapenagosq@hotmail.com; US\$30; 📍), which is a clutch of cabins owned by a local

doctor and his wife. The complex is located up the road from the other spots and is set in the forest with two trails running behind it. The price of lodging includes three meals as well as guided walks along the trails led by an Ngöbe-Buglé villager.

All of these sights lie less than 17km from Lago Fortuna, a picturesque reservoir that also serves a power plant. All around the reservoir is some of the finest forest in Panama, which is strictly protected because it serves as the watershed for the Lago Fortuna. The bird-watching here is superb – keep an eye out for rarities such as the bat falcon, the wedge-billed woodcreeper and the golden-winged warbler.

To reach the Bosque Protector Palo Seco from David, take any bus in the direction of Changuinola (US\$4, hourly from 5am to 6:30pm). Tell the driver you want to stop just before Altos del Valle, the community just past the places mentioned above, and then disembark at kilometer 68.5, which is right by the ANAM station. – don't try to reach these areas at night because they're set back from the road and easy to miss. Getting a ride out of the area basically requires catching one of the buses heading in the direction you're going. Buses pass every 45 minutes to an hour heading north to Changuinola (US\$5, two hours) and south to David (US\$4, two hours).

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