

PANAMA

Special Report



**Strand Yourself On The
Islands Of Panama**

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Special Report

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Strand Yourself On **THE ISLANDS OF PANAMA**

BY MATT CHILLIAK



The San Blas archipelago has 365 islands—one for every day of the year

Panama has over 1,400 islands, and, just like snowflakes, no two are the exact same. Some are rugged rock formations barely jutting out the ocean surface. Crystal-clear blue water surrounds Panama's islands in the Caribbean, while murkier water envelops those closer to the entrance of the Panama Canal.

Around some islands, pristine coral reefs lie at knee level under the water. Most islands are blessed with white-sand beaches, while dense jungle vegetation flourishes on others.

Centuries-old towns and modern tourist amenities coexist as neighbors on some islands, while others are totally barren beyond the wildlife—ideal for a secluded island escape.

Given all the choices, choosing the perfect island in Panama depends on what you seek. Do you want to remove yourself from civilization and avoid the towns and tourists? Perhaps you would like to relax at an island resort, pampered with luxury. If wildlife is what floats your boat, tours and treks are an option, along with fishing, snorkeling, and other water activities.

To help narrow your options, here's a rundown of the top islands to strand yourself on in Panama... be it for the weekend, the winter, or the long haul.



Taboga Island

Isla Taboga: Most Accessible

For newcomers to Panama, especially those living in the capital, Isla Taboga is an opportune place to begin your island-living adventure. It's only 20 kms off coast and is reached by a 45-minute ferry ride.

Also known as the Island of Flowers, Isla Tabgoa is blessed with a rain forest full of orchids, ferns, lianas, and bromeliads. The main town on the island, San Pedro, is blooming with nance, mango, and tamarind trees, as well as many domesticated flowers.



The view from Cerro Vigía

About 2,000 people live on Isla Taboga and major developments have been kept at bay.

The island offers endless activities and diversions. With 8 miles of coastline, beach bumming is first on the list for most visitors. But that's not all. You could hike to Cerro Vigía or Cerro de la Cruz—the two highest points on the island—for breathtaking views, or head out on the water to catch a glimpse of the whales.

Fishing is also a popular pastime with black marlin, blue marlin, pacific sailfish, yellowfin tuna, roosterfish, wahoo, cubera snapper, corvina, and amberjack all caught around the island. Snorkeling draws in treasure hunters, especially after the 1998 discovery of 1,000 pieces of 17th century silver.

History buffs should find interest in San Pedro. Its church is said to be the second oldest in the Americas. Bunkers remain from the U.S. presence on Taboga during World War II and a hotel on the island was used by the United States as an internment camp for Germans during World War I.

Accommodations on Isla Taboga usually cost from US\$50 to US\$100 per night at a hotel, hostel, bed and breakfast, or house rental. B&B Cerrito Tropical, Hotel Vereda, Tropical Residencial Turístico Mundi, and Agua Sol Villa are the most frequented options.



Taboga decorations

Most of the island's restaurants are found in hotels. Ocean Rock Café in Agua Sol Villa serves gourmet international dishes and tropical drinks for reasonable prices.

Living on an island doesn't mean you're removed from modern society. Wi-Fi is available, both in hotels and private residences, as well as in the island's public info plaza.

The only downside on Isla Taboga is the growing trash problem. Western goods and conveniences have become commonplace on the island due to tourism... and so too has littering. Show respect for the island and local community by discarding your trash.

A ferry ticket to Isla Taboga with the Taboga Express Fast Ferry costs US\$14 for a retiree. The boats leave from Isla Flamenco on the Amador Causeway and the trip takes 30 minutes. You can find the weekly schedule on the Taboga Express Website.

Remember to arrive an hour early in case of a sellout, especially on the weekends.

The Pearl Islands: Most Famous

They say that when Hollywood comes to town, stardom follows. The world took notice of the Pearl Islands after the cast and crew of "Survivor" came here in 2003. The location was so successful, the show returned to film two more seasons.

The Pearl Islands are made up of more than 200 islands about 50 kms off Panama City's Pacific coast.

Famous for its resorts, **Isla Contadora** is the main center for tourists in the Pearl Islands. Its 500 inhabitants share the island with several hotels and tourist attractions... Hotel Gerald's, Hotel Hibiscus House, and Perla Real Inn are a few.

Tourism is so frequent that *The Pearl Island Times* newspaper, circulated mainly in Panama City, exists solely to reach out to potential tourists.



Beach in the Pearl Islands archipelago

The word *contadora* in Spanish means “the one who counts.” The archipelago was famous for pearls until a disease reduced the population of pearl oysters here in the early 1900s. During colonial times, both the Spaniards and the indigenous groups living in the Pearl Islands used Isla Contadora to count and trade pearls.

You can reach Isla Contadora via a daily domestic flight that lasts 45 minutes and costs about US\$100 one way. There’s also a ferry takes about two hours and costs US\$90 round trip.

To the west of Isla Contadora, **Isla Saboga** is less touristy but still full of beautiful beaches. The church in the island’s main town is supposedly the oldest in the archipelago. Day trips to Saboga are most common, but a couple places offer rooms for rent. Some ferry companies stop at Isla Saboga before heading on to Isla Contadora.

The 44-square-kilometer **Isla San José** offers the most private experience for visitors. The Hacienda Del Mar

resort may be the most luxurious hotel in the Pearl Islands, with top notch rooms, service, and food. The rooms run from US\$300 to US\$700 per night.

U.S. military chemical testing took place on Isla San José in the 1940s after World War II. The experiments were undertaken to observe differences in reactions between ethnicities. The tests were conducted primarily on soldiers and captives of Japanese, African American, and Puerto Rican decent.

Following a brief quarantine and clean up in the early 2000s, the island is open once again, though unexploded weapons remain a hazard. It’s wise not to stray off any walking paths here.

The largest of the Pearl Islands, **Isla del Rey** covers more than 234 square kms. It’s larger than several nations, including Liechtenstein and San Marino. Its 2,000 inhabitants live in 4 small towns, where little tourism infrastructure exists.



Contadora Island

Isla Coiba: A Fisher's Paradise

With more than 750 species of fish off its shores, Isla Coiba is Panama's top fishing spot... but it's an outdoor enthusiast's paradise, too.

A few miles west of the island lies the world-famous Hannibal Bank, where the continental shelf drops thousands of feet, making it a hot spot for both inland and offshore fish. Home year-round to black marlin, roosterfish, cubera snapper, and yellowfin tuna, fishing season peaks in April and May.

The yellowfin tuna caught here weigh anywhere from 60 to hundreds of pounds, and marlin catches reach up to 1,000 pounds.

Isla Coiba is a national park and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. For conservation purposes, a strict catch-and-release fishing rule is enforced.

Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute scientists have proclaimed the island an unparalleled



Coiba Island beach



destination for discovering new species. Howler monkeys, agoutis, and scarlet macaw are among the wildlife calling the island home.

At 503 square kms, Isla Coiba is Panama's largest island, covering more area than the nation of Andorra. Some 75% of its territory is blanketed by rain forest.

The island is protected and living here is not allowed. The only accommodations consist of a few basic two-room cabins and a ranger station. The nearby mainland village of Santa Catalina is more touristy, with hotels that arrange trips to Isla Coiba.

Isla Coiba is allegedly haunted, which probably helps keep demand down for overnight stays. A prison camp was built here in the early 20th century and housed 3,000 prisoners at its peak... including many political prisoners during Panama's military regime.

Panama And The Duke

Isla Taborcillo, also known as John Wayne Island, lies 40 kms off Panama's Pacific coast near Punta Chame.

Why is this island unofficially named after John Wayne? The answer could be one of the most intriguing tidbits of Panamanian history, at least for fans of old western movies.

In 1933, the young up-and-coming actor John Wayne married Josephine Saenz, daughter of the Consul General of Panama in the United States.

While courting Josephine and during their marriage, Wayne developed an affection for Panama that lasted even after their divorce in 1945. Like many visitors today, he had business in mind and invested in a shrimp importing venture.

He befriended Roberto Arias, an international lawyer, diplomat, and member of Panama's most prominent political family.

In the late 1950s, President Ernesto de la Guardia accused Arias and his wife of smuggling weapons to orchestrate a coup. Entangled in the situation and blamed for funding the operation, Wayne denied the charges and continued spending time in Panama.

In 1977, the Torrijos-Carter Agreement returned control of the Canal to Panama. Wayne supported the treaty, which disappointed future President Ronald Reagan, who wanted to maintain possession of the passageway.

General Omar Torrijos, Panama's president at the time, gave Isla Taborcillo to Wayne. It's uncertain whether Wayne paid for it, but the island was likely a gift for his support of Panama.

Today, the island is home to a hotel with an old western movie theme—the Taborcillo Island Resort. It offers walking tours, a mock jail cell, a post office, a church, a John Wayne museum, and movie screenings. There are also "old west" activities like archery, shooting, and horseback riding. Snorkeling, kayaking, and other watersports are on offer as well.

The facility was closed in 2004, but the spooky stories live on.

Guna Yala (San Blas Islands): Most Natural Beauty

Hands down, the San Blas islands offer the best of the best for island vacationing—not only in Panama, but in the entire Caribbean and maybe even the world.

Don't come expecting a five-star resort with all-inclusive buffets and bars... Modern development is nonexistent. This is for good reason—with massive resorts comes massive damage to ecosystems and wildlife, which would destroy the islands' appeal and local livelihood.

The San Blas islands form part of Guna Yala, a *comarca* (type of province) stretching along Panama's Atlantic coast. The *comarca* is home to the indigenous Guna people and is not the same as a reservation in the States—it would be as if U.S. reservations were granted the powers and sovereignty of a state.



This autonomy is the result of a revolution in 1925, when the Guna people sought separation from Panama. This self-government has created a quality of life and preservation of culture that otherwise likely would have been unachievable.

Due to Guna Yala's *comarca* status, the San Blas islands are strictly a tourist destination. There's no chance of purchasing a piece of land or a condo or



Beach in the San Blas islands

importing a business here. These restrictions even exclude other Panamanian nationals. Some outsiders, especially investors, scoff at this as an affront to free enterprise and market economics. But to the Guna, it is an expression of their freedom. This is Guna territory, and they intend to keep it that way.

Don't let the market restrictions fool you. Guna hospitality runs deep, and they welcome visitors with open arms. No "gringo pricing" here. Instead, a stay in a thatched hut on one of the 49 inhabited islands (out of a total of 365 in the archipelago) brings you up close and personal to Guna life.

The islands range from totally private, with a hut for only one group, to more public and social, with huts for several groups. Most arrangements include three home-cooked meals, with eggs, pancakes, and coffee in the morning, fish with rice and beans for lunch, and fresh-caught lobster for dinner.

A standard rate is US\$140 per person for one night, with additional nights for about US\$60. Secluded islands charge more. Most packages—available

through multiple travel groups throughout Panama—include transportation which is important because the road from the main highway to the water taxi launch is treacherous. Crashed, flipped, and broken-down vehicles scatter the highway.

Planned activities are few to none on most of the San Blas islands—though that's the point. The activities that do exist are supplied by the area's beautiful environment. Popular things to do include snorkeling around the coral reefs, frolicking in the picturesque water, and boating out to the Piscina Natural (Natural Pool), a patch of shallow water littered with starfish.

A shipwreck said to be a Colombian gunboat from about 40 years ago is home to fish and other marine life.

The Guna people show respect for nature. Littering and unnecessarily unsettling nature are frowned upon. Taking anything... a starfish, plant, seashell, etc... could be seen as rude or may even be



prohibited. If you want a souvenir, your best bet is to purchase a hand-sewn *mola*—a colorful traditional cloth adorned with intricate designs.

Isla Grande: Best Bargain

Also in the Caribbean, Isla Grande is a short water taxi ride off Panama's Atlantic coast near the historic town of Portobelo. While not as enchanting as the San Blas islands, Isla Grande makes for a nice escape.

Visitors here are afforded more than thatched huts, with a basic beachside hotel and various private residences available for accommodation. A beach house with a back patio built into the ocean makes for convenient morning swims... Just wake up and dive in.

The Sister Moon Hotel is popular but costs US\$100 per night and tends to disappoint visitors. If you can't find a private house to rent and want to save big, try Macondo Hostel where rooms start at US\$15.



If you don't speak Spanish and don't plan to socialize with the locals, an extended stay on Isla Grande may not be for you. The town is small, with only about 1,000 inhabitants and few diversions.

On the mainland in Portobelo, you'll find a 16th century fort that has been named a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The Islands Of Lake Gatun: A Biologist's Playground



Panama Canal: Gatun Lake by Jasperdo

Lake Gatun owes itself to the construction of the Panama Canal over a century ago... Before the Canal, these islands were just hilltops. At the time of its creation, Gatun was the largest manmade lake in the world.

Panama depends on Lake Gatun. The Canal uses more than 50 million gallons of water from the lake each time a ship passes through its locks. With over 14,000 ships passing through each year, that's a lot of water to move.

Lake Gatun also provides drinking water to Panama City and Colón.

In 1923, the U.S. government established a nature reserve on Lake Gatun's largest island, **Isla Barro Colorado**. The reserve changed hands to the Smithsonian Institute in 1946 and became one of the most-studied tropical forests in the world.

The island attracts hundreds of scientists every year and has seen numerous groundbreaking biological discoveries.

Tours can be reserved online and normally last two or three hours, including lunch and a museum visit. It's common for visitors to see monkeys, anteaters, birds, and insects.

Monkey Island isn't only the name of a long-running video game series but is also an actual island where monkeys rule... sort of. Mated howler, white-faced capuchin, Geoffroy's tamarin, and lemurine owl monkeys all share this island with an indigenous Embera-Wounaan village.

Several companies in Panama City offer tours of Monkey Island, but beware... This isn't a zoo or circus with tame animals. These monkeys are untrained and unruly. They look cute until they've stolen all your food and they're smacking and spitting at you.

If you aren't into the wildlife on land, check out what's in the lake. In 1967, a local businessman

introduced peacock bass to Lake Gatun. Since then, the fish have flourished and are now the main game for the lake's anglers.

You can dive in and go for a swim if you have your own craft. The lake is warmer than the ocean, and the fresh water can be a surprising change to those used to swimming in salt water.

The Islands Of Bocas Del Toro: Most Livable

The Bocas del Toro islands are Panama's top Caribbean tourism destination. While the San Blas islands are immaculate, the islands of Bocas del Toro provide more infrastructure and conveniences.

Unlike the Guna Yala *comarca*, the province of Bocas del Toro doesn't prohibit residency for outsiders. For anyone looking for permanent or part-time residency, the island lifestyle in Bocas del Toro is unmatched.



Bocas del Toro



US\$100 flight from the domestic Albrook Airport in Panama City, which lasts about an hour.

Either way, you'll need to take a water taxi for the final 30-minute stretch to Bocas Town.

The center of activity in Bocas del Toro is Bocas Town, located on **Isla Colón**. The town of about 17,000 sees at least 150,000 tourists per year (and growing).

If you don't mind the tourists and enjoy the social buzz, Bocas Town is the place to be. At least a dozen restaurants, cafés, hostels, hotels, bed and breakfasts, and bars line the main street. Live music from various bars mixes and fades as you walk through the backpackers, expats, and locals congregating outside the many nightlife spots in the evening.

Bocas Bambú Beach is a famous Caribbean restaurant and bar located in the middle of the strip. The live reggae tunes carry from the patio into the street.

Off main street is The Bookstore Bar—nicknamed Loco Dave's—a rock-and-roll bar with an arcade and library that also offers tattoos. Loco Dave's is truly a *loco* place.



Bocas del Toro is Caribbean in its culture... Reggae music and Bob Marley T-shirts proliferate the streets in Bocas Town. The Caribbean influence here is largely attributed to the region's banana boom in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Workers were brought in from Jamaica and other British colonies in the Caribbean, and, as a result, English is widely understood.

The population of Bocas Town reached 25,000 before subsiding in the 1960s, when the banana industry shifted its focus mainland. Bananas are still a big contributor to the province's economy, with some 750,000 tons of banana exports annually. In the past decade, tourism has begun to attract more international visitors, along with more revenue.

If you have time to spare, you can reach Bocas del Toro by bus, which takes at least 10 hours from Panama City. To avoid the hassle, you can purchase a



For something more laid-back, Selina Hostel's bar is a great place to swing in a hammock on the waterfront patio and socialize with the young backpacker clientele.

If bars aren't your thing, relax and enjoy a movie at Cine Café Bocas. For US\$13 for a pair, you get snacks and theater tickets. The two small theaters show second-run Hollywood films and feature bean bag chairs and sofas, with room for about 12 people.

Grocery stores, hairdressers, a Mail Boxes Etc., a health clinic, a fitness center, and various other shops and services are located in or near Bocas Town. Yoga, Spanish, and cooking classes are offered in town by both local and foreign instructors. These classes are a good way to meet your fellow townsfolk.

Living in town doesn't mean outdoor activities aren't readily accessible. Hiking, kayaking, snorkeling, and surfing are all options, with local professionals available for lessons and tours if needed.



Cayo Zapatilla, Bastimentos Island

Words Of Warning

If you buy real estate within the Bocas island chain, avoid rights of possession (ROP). Unlike freehold land titles, ROP titles don't give you outright ownership of the land your house sits on.

You have exclusive use of the land, but should the government decide the land claim is in dispute, you may be in a difficult legal situation. Disputes aren't normal but are a risk. Luckily, the government has begun to act in resolving these rights of possession titles and making them freehold.

Another thing to beware of—not just in Bocas del Toro, but anywhere—is a bargain that seems too good to be true. Many abandoned shacks on the periphery of Bocas Town's tourist area look like what were once bars, hotels, or hostels. North American immigrants often start their own business in a tropical country without doing their homework.

They discover Bocas Town, return a few months later, open shop, and usually go broke in the span of six months. Bocas Town has too many bars and hostels already, so unless you have something new or exciting, you might want to think twice. It's best to leave the business hustle and bustle behind when you come to Bocas del Toro.

Relax on one of Isla Colón's many beaches... The most popular ones are Istmito (also known as La Feria), Big Creek, Bluff, Mimitibi, Bocas del Drago, and Starfish.

Over on **Isla Bastimentos**, a 15-minute water taxi ride from Bocas Town, is the UNESCO World Heritage Site of La Amistad International Park. The 401,000-hectare national park crosses the Panama-Costa Rica border and is managed jointly.

The biggest natural park in Central America, much of the densely forested La Amistad remains unexplored.



Isla Bastimentos La Mochila by Aaron O'Dea

La Mochila, Bastimentos Island

Here, hawksbill and leatherback sea turtles lay their eggs. Pumas, ocelots, margays, and jaguars prowl the jungle, with more than 600 species of birds flying overhead. The Naso, Bribri, and Ngäbe-Bugle indigenous groups also live on the island.

La Amistad was rated one of the most amazing national parks on Earth by *Huffington Post*, but the island isn't only known for the park's biological diversity. It has also been voted one of the world's best secret beaches by The Travel Channel and was named one of the hottest beaches in Central America by *Forbes Traveler*.

Red Frog Beach is the busiest on the island. A couple resorts and rentals are available here, but the prices are steep. At Red Frog Bungalows, rates start at US\$150 per night and go three, four, or even five times that high, depending on room size and time of year. The Red Frog Beach Island Resort goes from US\$220 to US\$1,500.

Other island activities are scuba diving, snorkeling, dolphin-watching, fishing, hiking, and ziplining. The Bastimentos Sky Zipline Tour features seven different lines, which gain speeds of 65 kms per hour, descend from 150 feet high, and stretch for 1,000 feet above the forest. Daily zipline tours begin at 10 a.m., 1 p.m., and 3:30 p.m. and cost US\$55 per person. If you're scared of heights, take comfort in the facility's claim that they've never had an accident with a serious injury or fatality.

Other beaches are Wizard Beach, Turtle Beach, North Beach, and Playa Larga. The strawberry poison dart frog that gave Red Frog Beach its name is found near many beaches on the island. Recent drops in the frog population have caused concern, and wildlife smugglers don't help the matter. In the United States and Europe, the frogs fetch as much as US\$1,000.

You're No Crusoe

Just because you've found yourself living on or traveling to the same island for some time doesn't mean you should stay there for 28 years. You need to experience a little of each to find out which one is for you.

Check out your options, be it in Panama's Caribbean, Pacific, or Lake Gatun waters, as they're all unique, each with their own qualities. And the options aren't limited...

Scuba diving, snorkeling, surfing, ziplining, fishing, bar hopping, hammock swinging, bird, whale, or dolphin watching, boating, hiking, history, and yoga are just some of the activities to choose from for your Panama island getaway.

You should even check out islands that *aren't* on this list. With nearly 1,500 islands in Panama, there's a lot left to explore. Just make sure not to get yourself stranded—unless that's what you want. 🌸



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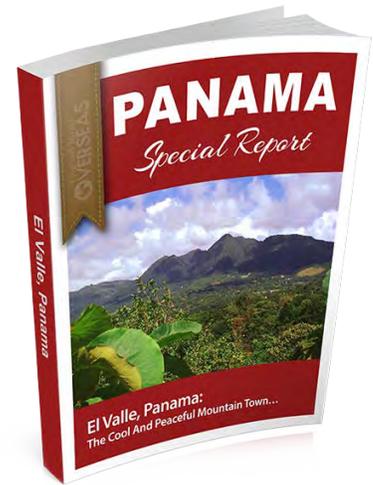
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