

Bocas del Toro - Sea, Nature and Fun

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Where have 12 countries filmed their Survivor series including France, Spain, Italy and Russia? The answer is the exotic Bocas del Toro Archipelago de Bocas in the Caribbean of West Panama near the border with Costa Rica. Classic Caribbean aqua blue water fringed beaches washing up against nature dense rainforest and a low key friendly town- these are some of the unique attractions of the islands of Panama's Bocas del Toro archipelago. .



Bocas is one of Panama's top tourist attractions and with good reason. Where else can you enjoy beautiful beaches with scarcely a soul in sight and rainforests so fine Lonely Planet Guide calls them "a biologist's fantasy". Bocas town itself has a rich history, a lively nightlife and a friendly, mostly English speaking population. Like the rest of Panama Bocas is even blessed by nature- no hurricanes ever touch these shores, as they do the Central American neighbors. Add to that relatively low prices and you've got the "Boca's

Boom".

The first person to anchor in these peaceful waters was Christopher Columbus in 1502. He repaired his boats on Carinero Island, named by him. Later, English pirates found Bocas the perfect safe haven and later in the 1800's it became a dynamic commercial center for trade in cacao and bananas. Immigrants, mainly from Jamaica, made Bocas an English speaking province in a Spanish speaking nation. Even today, most adults speak English.



At the turn of the century, the town of Bocas del Toro was the first headquarters of the United Fruit Company. Boasting of 25,000 inhabitants, it had six consuls and five newspapers. A banana blight in the 1920's put an end to this vibrant commercial center, but historical buildings and a stately park still stand.

In the last few years, Bocas has been experiencing a real estate boom. Prices of land have skyrocketed. Still, they represent some of the best buys in the Caribbean. Who is buying in Bocas? Mostly American "baby boomers" who are snapping up beach front lots with an eye to building a vacation/retirement home in the near future. Even on a retirement income, in Bocas you can enjoy "the good life" in safe and beautiful surroundings.

Hotels are economical and range from \$5 a night for the pack backer crowd, lots of attractive middle range hotels in the \$25-60 range and a few fine upscale island resorts over \$90.

To get there: [Aeroperlas](#) (507-315-7500) has daily flights from Panama City and David in West Panama near the border with Costa Rica.

Or you can take a bus or car to Almirante and take a ferry to Bocas, on the main island, Isla Colon. In Almirante, there is a safe place to leave your vehicle for the duration of your stay in

Bocas. The drive between David and Almirante is very scenic.

Highlights: beaching, island tours, snorkeling, diving, surfing, dolphin observation, sea kayaking, wind surfing, laid back nightlife, ecotourism/rainforest tours, birdwatching, vacation/retirement homes and communities

Best beaches:

Bluff Beach: on Isla Colon where most of the hotels are. You can take a taxi or bicycle a few miles to Bluff Beach, the easiest one to reach and the first really pretty beach. Just before Bluff Beach is Punch Beach, a less scenic beach but one with a reputation for great surfing. Neither of these beaches are safe for swimmers- just for getting wet.

Bocas del Drago: Another beautiful beach on the main island and a bit farther away. When the seas are calm, the snorkeling is good.

Red Frog Beach: On Isla Bastimentos, this is Boca's most beautiful beach. And you won't miss the red frog with black polka dots who calls out to you as you walk through the rainforest. Isla Bastimento is the only place in the world where this scarlet creature lives.

Playa Larga: Another lovely beach on Isla Bastimentos and if you camp out you may see the famous sea turtles.

Cayos Zapatillos Beautiful white sand beaches lined with palms and away from it all.

Beach Warning: Many Bocas beaches have strong undertows at times and can be dangerous for swimming. Before you swim out into the waves consult your tour operator and/or the locals regarding the safety of swimming at a particular beach.

Things to do:

Diving and Snorkeling: The best places for diving are Hospital Point, Coral Key, Dark Wood Reef and Punta Juan buoy. For snorkeling, the Garden near Cayo Nancy, Hospital Point and Punta Juan buoy are excellent. Go with a diving tour operator or hire a water taxi and go on your own.

When diving in Bocas you will be able to see some of the best preserved hard and soft coral in the world. You will also have the opportunity to see sting rays, lobsters, many species of crabs and a countless variety of tropical reef fish.

Get certified: Bocas Water Sports offers PADI scuba courses from Discover Scuba, open water including certification in Advanced, Rescue, First Aid or Dive Master courses that cost a lot less than similar courses in the United States.

Boat Rentals : Careening Cay Marina has 15 and 20 foot boat launches for rent. Tel: 757-9242

Rainforests: Flora is everywhere- mangroves and jungles line the coast. Exotic Bird Island has birds seen only on that island. You need a nature guide to enjoy more than just exotic scenery and so we recommend you take a tour with a tour operator.

Nightlife: Bocas is a low-key and friendly town where it is easy to meet with fellow travelers and the local people. In some places, every night it's a party. Start with the Barco Hundido bar

and the Buena Vista Deli & Bar, known for good times and good food.

Shopping: Near the end of Bocas' Main St. as you walk towards the sea on the right is Bribri, a marvelous handicrafts store. Friendly owner Manuel has a wide selection of fine local Indian crafts and is happy to explain about the work and culture of the Indian artisans.

On the opposite end of the main street, on the right just before the end, walking away from the sea, is a streetside display of molas attended by the Kuna Indians. Panama is famous for its molas-colorful reverse applique cloth designs. This humble stand has the best selection of molas we have seen anywhere. You have the added satisfaction of purchasing directly from the Indians and knowing your dollar will go a long way to helping these worthy people.

Another fun souvenir for the folks back home is a handmade chocolate bar available at The Chocolate Shop at La Veranda Hotel. Cacao is a Bocas native crop. Owner Heather Guidi makes her bars from organically grown cacao beans and uses an artisan age-old method and local recipe. She is happy to show and explain to customers about the process.

Restaurants: Bocas restaurants are easy on the budget and have a surprising variety of offerings. For seafood we recommend El Pecado on main street for dishes that will satisfy the sophisticated palate but reasonably priced. The lobster is especially good. Across the street from El Pecado, La Laguna Hotel offers mostly Italian dishes including a yummy pizza, has street side seating making it the best place in town for people watching. It also offers a fun all-you-can eat Sunday brunch for \$5. Bahia Hotel has a good Italian restaurant with some of the best pizza in town. For gringo food, we recommend the Buena Vista Deli. Two other popular and good restaurants are Om for East Indian food and Mondo Taitu for vegetarian fare.

Outside the town of Bocas: For seafood in incomparable surroundings take a water taxi to Restaurant Coral Cay, perched on stilts over the sea. Your lobster will be picked live from a sea cage and you will enjoy gorgeous seaviews all around as you wait for your dish to be prepared.

Special Treats Not to Be Missed: Some of the best cinnamon rolls in the Americas are baked in a Bocas bakery. You can buy them at the Laguna Hotel restaurant and in The Gourmet Shop near the main plaza.

Learn Spanish: The best way to learn a language is to be in a place where the language is spoken. Take advantage of your Bocas stay by taking a Spanish course at Spanish-By-The-Sea, an excellent place to learn Spanish. See their listing below.

Spa Services: Spa Flora Bella at the La Posada Los Delfines offers a variety of refreshing and natural spa services including massages and facials. See their listing below for more info.

Panama Tourism Board (IPAT) Information Center: Panama's Board of Tourism offers a handsome visitors center right downtown. Designed in wood in a lovely Caribbean style, typical of Bocas, it has an excellent exhibition in both English and Spanish of the natural history and the rich human history of the Archipelago