

# ISLANDS

The Leading Guide to Island Travel



## Bocas del Toro

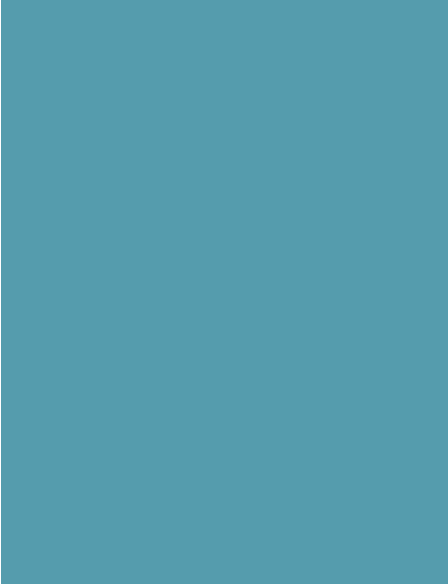
There may be no more "undiscovered," off-the-beaten-path places left in the Caribbean, but Panama's Bocas del Toro archipelago comes close. This collection of 10 or so islands near the border with Costa Rica is one of the favorite stops for Panamanian tourists, but has been mostly ignored by the rest of the travel world.

Yet it has a lot going for it: warm, aqua-turquoise water (this is the Caribbean after all), some nice beaches (Bluff Beach on Colon is a favorite with both sunbathers and surfers) and reefs (in Admiral Bay) for snorkeling, and even some tropical rainforest with rewarding hikes and more than 300 bird species. (One islet, Swan Key, is a bird sanctuary, and a nesting ground for boobies and tropical birds.) There are only about 10,000 residents in the chain. And curiously, in this Spanish-speaking nation, older islanders speak English, thanks to longtime immigration from Jamaica.

Columbus was here in 1502 (he had some boat repair to do) and the main town of Bocas del Toro, on Colon island, was a banana boomtown a century ago. That heyday ended in the 1920s, but some of the stately colonial buildings and parks from that time still remain, part of a landscape that, for the Caribbean, seems stuck in time.

### Field Notes

**DIVING** Hospital Point, at the tip of Solarte Key, is just opposite Bocas town and a few minutes away by boat. So rent a kayak instead and pack your snorkeling gear to explore some of the archipelago's nicest shallow water diving. The reef here is in good shape, a hangout for familiar faces (parrotfish, angelfish amidst colorful corals and sponges). Serious snorkelers can explore a wall dive here near the cliff to about 45 feet and then relax on the small beach near the point.



**SURFING** Reports indicate that a big reef break called Silverbacks on Bastimentos island can hold a Hawaiian-like 25 foot right (mostly a big drop and short tube ride). Locals also like a left on tiny Carenero island just off Bocas town; it's a long (200 yards) zippy ride over a shallow (and sea urchin-lined) reef. Note: So far, no surf shop in these islands; bring your repair kit.

**SIGHTSEEING** Getting to the Zapatillas Keys can be a dicey proposition when a strong north wind is blowing, but if the weather is cooperating, these two islands are gems. Part of the Bastimentos Island National Marine Park, they have beautiful, white-sand beaches and clear, shallow, snorkel-perfect water. (If you want to escape the heat, the adjacent forest offers shade.) Just don't expect a crowd; the only residents are park rangers.

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