



# Exotic Islands of Panama, Central America

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DC\_Aperture / Shutterstock.com

The Republic of Panama has a privileged geographic position bordered on the north by the Atlantic Ocean and the south by the Pacific. It therefore has a plethora of islands varying in sizes and includes uninhabited pristine islets, national marine parks, as well as up-and-coming hipster and backpacker islands with a great nightlife. The most popular islands in Panama are Bocas del Toro, San Blas (Guna Yala), Taboga and the Pearl Islands. The Pearl Islands is an archipelago that is comprised of 90 islands and 100 islets.



Seaphotoart / Shutterstock.com



Seaphotoart / Shutterstock.com

## QUIZ

*What Type of Traveller  
Are You Based on  
Your Travel IQ?*

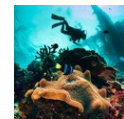
**TAKE THE QUIZ**

### Top 5



#### Island Tours

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#### Diving

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#### Surfing

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#### Spot Dolphins

Visit Dolphin Bay and spot dolphins in their natural habitat.



#### Visit a Chocolate Farm

Bocas Del Toro is home to some of the best cacao farms in the world and choc...



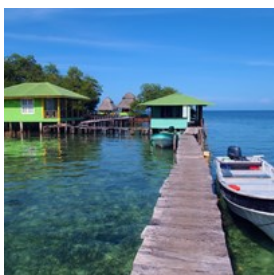
## BOCAS DEL TORO



leelook / Shutterstock.com

Of all the tourist destinations in Panama, Bocas del Toro is the place where you can really have it all. During the day you can take a tour to any of the amazing islands of the archipelago, sail, sunbathe, swim, surf, snorkel, hike, ride a bicycle around town, and visit an indigenous village or a botanical garden. At night you can literally go bar hopping, participate in a talent night, go to a costume party, and dance by a shipwreck, find excellent live music, and best of all, no need to drive. Bocas is constantly changing and transforming itself. There's always something new and by walking in the streets, you can feel the energy of people coming and going who are happy and feel lucky to be there.

### Island Tours



All activities can be organized through the various tour operators on the islands. Water taxis are less expensive and make exploring the islands on your own a more affordable option. If you plan on a more leisurely exploration of the islands, sailing may be the best option for you.

Photo: Seaphotoart / Shutterstock.com

### Diving



The Bocas del Toro region is part of the larger La Amistad area, which holds Biosphere Reserve and UNESCO World Heritage Site statuses for its rich ecosystems, including the reefs of Panama's Bastimentos National Marine Park. The waters are inhabited by a wonderful variety of tropical reef creatures including starfish, sting rays, nurse sharks, lobster, angel fish, parrot fish, damsel fish - the list is endless. Dive schools regularly visit up to 15 locations with depth ranges from 2 to 18 meters inside the bay area. Many centers offer try-dives, open water courses and education right through to dive master. Some dive sites include Crawl Cay, The Wreck, Hospital Point, Buoy Line, Playground and many more. The best time of year for diving is April-May and Sept-October but there is good visibility year round.

Photo: paul cowell / Shutterstock.com

### Surfing



Bocas is one of the very few Caribbean surf spots with good sized waves. There may be better and bigger waves in the Pacific, but here, when you surf, you do it in turquoise waters, while you ride above colorful coral reefs or white sand. There are beach breaks, point breaks and reef breaks, lefts, and rights for all tastes and preferences. You can find breaks three minutes away from Isla Colon.

The preferred surf spots are Wizard, Bluff, Punch, The Point at Carenero and Tiger Tail. It is important to visit these spots with somebody



who knows the area, especially if you will be surfing over a reef break.

Photo: tatsmis / Shutterstock.com

### Spot Dolphins



Visit Dolphin Bay and spot dolphins in their natural habitat.

Photo: Paulphin Photography / Shutterstock.com

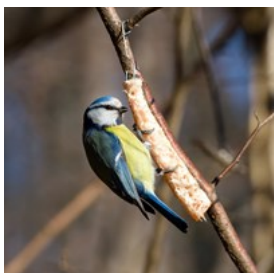
### Visit a Chocolate Farm



Bocas Del Toro is home to some of the best cacao farms in the world and chocolate artisans are flocking to the region to grow, harvest and create chocolate libations to satisfy any sweet tooth. Tours are readily available to learn about the process of farming and producing cocoa.

Photo: Yai / Shutterstock.com

### Birding



Bocas del Toro is one of Panama's best places for birding. According to the Audubon Society, one can spot 300+ species of birds in a day. Bird Island is named for its glorious abundance of birds and can be accessed easily by boat when the water is calm. Bocas in general is a paradise for birdwatchers and nature enthusiasts. Planned birding tours include a preparatory talk about the geography and bird life in the area of Red Frog National Park. During the tour you'll have

the opportunity to see and hear trogons, ant birds, forest wrens, puff birds, tanagers, parrots, mot-mots and many other bird species. You can also visit other hot spots in the region on some of the other islands.

- Carenero
- Bastimentos (Red Frog)
- Bird Island

Photo: EvgenySHCH / Shutterstock.com

### Visit Nivida Bat Cave



Hire a boat captain at the Bastimentos boat dock on Main Street or arrange a tour with a tour operator and they will navigate you up the Bahia Honda River. You will then hike for about 20 minutes before reaching Bocas' most spectacular cave located in the Bastimentos National Marine Park. There's a guide from the Bahia Honda community who will take you through the cave. The water comes up pretty high so expect to get wet. There are other bat caves in the area but not as impressive as Nivida.

Photo: Ethan Daniels / Shutterstock.com

### Visit an indigenous tribe



If you're looking for a different side of Bocas, you'll find it hidden in the indigenous villages tucked away in the forests on every island. The indigenous Ngöbe-Buglé and Naso continue to live without modern luxuries such as running water, electricity and medicine. They know how to get around the forests of the islands and speak their own language, make their own clothing and crafts, and cure illnesses with local plants

prepared by medicine men known as curanderos. To learn more about living in the wild in these unspoiled communities, book a tour with an operator or if you're staying in a remote hotel, ask the owners, there may be a village nearby.

Photo: Jarno Gonzalez Zarraonandia / Shutterstock.com

### Kayaking/ Stand Up Paddle Board (SUP)



Some hotels have their own kayaks including Lula's and Cocomo but if you want to see the islands and surrounding reefs up-close in a boat, you can rent one at BiBi's on the beach in Carenero. Ask any boat driver to take you there from Isla Colon. Kayak rentals are based on hourly rates. BiBi's also rents Stand Up Paddle Boards and offers lessons hourly.

Photo: EpicStockMedia / Shutterstock.com

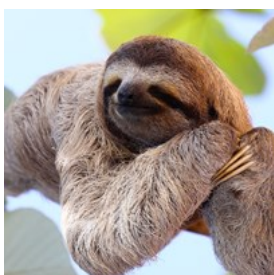
### Bicycling



Explore Isla Colon on a scenic ride all the way to Bluff Beach. The bicycle is the most popular means of transportation after water taxis.

Photo: Dudarev Mikhail / Shutterstock.com

### Finca Los Monos



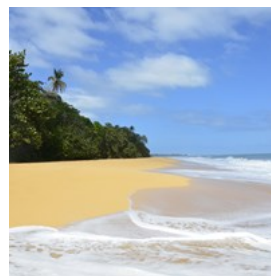
This beautiful farm located on Isla Colon has large collections of heleconias, gingers, palms, flowering trees, fruits, spices and ornamentals. While hiking through the finca you may see howler monkeys, sloths, iguanas, and

tiny colorful frogs. There is a wide variety of fruits such as cacao, guava, mamee also known as mamey, nutmeg, passion fruit, pineapple, papaya, tamarind, and nine varieties of bananas, among others. A wide variety of birds call the farm home drawn by its abundance of fruit and flowers.

Photo: Janossy Gergely / Shutterstock.com

Internet: [www.bocasdelatorobotanicalgarden.com](http://www.bocasdelatorobotanicalgarden.com)

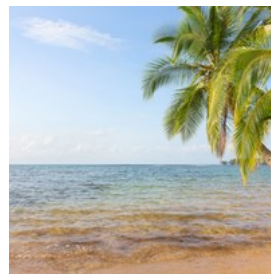
### Bluff Beach



Bluff Beach, located on Isla Colon, is becoming a hot destination for beach lounge chilling and has a reputation for great surfing.

Photo: Simon Dannhauer/Shutterstock.com

### Boca del Drago



This beautiful palm-fringed white sand beach is a 45 minute drive from town on the other side of Isla Colon. It is a prime location for swimming, snorkeling, and relaxing.

Photo: Dmitry Burlakov / Shutterstock.com

### Starfish Beach



This popular beach is located on Isla Colon and is a great place for swimming. Many starfish hang out in the shallow water near the shore. It can only be reached by water taxi.

Photo: ian woolcock / Shutterstock.com

### Isla Carenero



Isla Carenero is a one minute boat ride from Isla Colon. The beach is on the back-side of the island with shallow clear waters welcoming swimmers. Near Bibi's beach, there is a large shallow area called "the kiddie pool" by locals which is a great place to hang out in the water and wade in shallow pools. Ask the boat driver to drop you off at Bibi's or Peter Kent's for dock access. All beaches are public.

Photo: John Crux / Shutterstock.com

### Wizard Beach



Wizard Beach on Bastimentos Island offers swimming in certain areas, diving at Dolphin Rock, snorkeling and surfing. This beach is good for learning to surf as there are no rocks, and the waves aren't high.

Photo: Seaphotoart / Shutterstock.com

### Red Frog Beach



This beach is located on Bastimentos Island and is one of Panama's most beautiful surf and swimming beaches. This is the only place in the world where the red poison dart frog lives in its natural habitat. Food and drinks are sold in the recently refurbished bar. There are high-end rentals available as well as a hostel for budget travelers, a deep water marina, and soon to open zip lines.

Photo: Dirk Ercken / Shutterstock.com

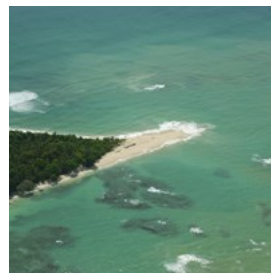
### Coral Cay (Crawl Cay)



This small island near Bastimentos is a perfect snorkeling destination where you can spot all kinds of coral and fish. This is one of the few places where you can grab a meal while out on a day tour and therefore is almost always a regular pit stop for most boat tours.

Photo: Seaphotoart / Shutterstock.com

### Cayos Zapatillas



Cayos Zapatillas offer some of the best skin diving in the marine park, windward from Crawl Cay. The variety of underwater ecosystems includes fan gardens and coral reefs. Choose from a variety of depths and currents to suit your skills. More intrepid and experienced divers can explore a series of nearby caves at a depth of 40 feet and require underwater lights.

Photo: Alfredo Maiquez / Shutterstock.com

### Ziplining



The sky canopy tour on Bastimentos Island is a great rush for adventure seekers. You can spend the morning relaxing at Red Frog beach and hike over to the canopy tour for the ropes course and tons of treetop ziplining. There are seven zip lines and excellent tour guides that are knowledgeable and friendly. Kids are welcome but will have to meet weight and height



restrictions.

Photo: Brocreative / Shutterstock.com

## Dining



As in any coastal destination, seafood is the star in Bocas del Toro. From high-end to popular local street vendors, Bocas del Toro offers a little bit of everything. Popular dishes are “pulpo” (octopus) and “patacones” (fried plantains) among other Caribbean specialties. Many restaurants are on the water making the experience a scenic and entertaining one.

Photo: Matyas Rehak / Shutterstock.com

## Cosmic Crab Cafe



The Cosmic Crab Cafe located on Carenero features fish and seafood appetizers and entrees, as well as an extensive menu featuring dishes like Mango Chutney Barbecue Ribs, and Jerusalem style Hummus. Crab cakes with a spicy remoulade is a Cosmic Crab Signature dish. It certainly has the most extensive and original cocktail menu in Bocas. Joan Crabtree, Cosmic Crab owner and top mixologist, serves up fabulous tasting cocktails such as Hot & Dirty Martini or Sex in the Mud. The Margarita family at the Cosmic Crab is worth trying: Razzarita, Minty Maggie, Mango Margo, Passionate Rita, and the Hot Passionate Rita - a jalapeño infused tequila with fresh passion fruit.

Photo: tusharkoley / Shutterstock.com

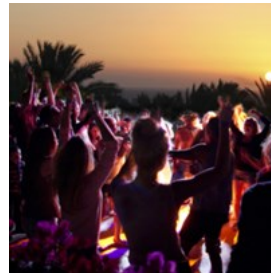
## Nightlife



When the sun goes down, the music pumps up and Bocas del Toro becomes a party town. There are many night clubs and bars on the water, cozy lounges, taverns and the streets are packed with people going places until the wee hours. The atmosphere is beach casual and people from all over the world mingle with the friendly locals.

Photo: Rawpixel.com / Shutterstock.com

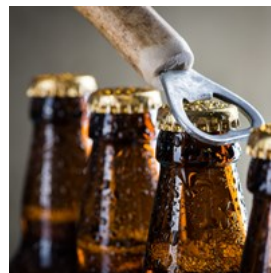
## Barco Hundido



This is the most popular nightclub in Bocas del Toro, where the music blasts on the dock's dance floor, surrounding a shipwreck lit by spotlights, until the early hours of the morning.

Photo: vlad09 / Shutterstock.com

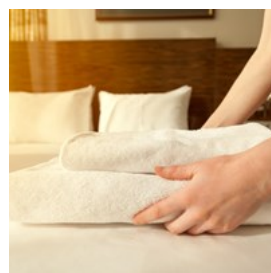
## Toro Loco



Good old rock and roll, a cold beer, great food, a dartboard, live music, and your favorite sports game on the TV... what else do you need?

Photo: Room 76 / Shutterstock.com

## Gran Hotel Bahia



Built in 1905, it is one of Isla Colon's oldest historic buildings and was constructed to accommodate the main offices of the United Fruit

Company, today known as Chiquita Brands International.

Conveniently located close to all the main attractions on Isla Colon, Bocas del Toro, Gran Hotel Bahia offers 18 spacious and comfortable rooms, all of them with air conditioning, cable TV and private bathrooms with hot water. Its relaxing and friendly atmosphere makes you feel at home.

After the latest renovation, the new Deluxe Plus rooms are available on the upper floor, each with a king size bed, full sofa bed, mini-fridge and flat panel TV. There also is a remodeled room on the lower floor to meet the needs of guests with impaired mobility, with two double beds and all the facilities required for their convenience.

Photo: fizkes / Shutterstock.com

Address: 3rd St. & Ave. A, Isla Colon, Bocas del Toro, Panama

Phone: +507 7579626

Internet: www.ghbahia.com

Email: reservations@ghbahia.com

## Airport



Bocas del Toro "Isla Colón" International Airport (BOC) is located on Isla Colón, about 1.5 km from downtown Bocas del Toro. Air Panama -

Panama's only domestic airline flies to Bocas del Toro with three scheduled flights 6:30 am, 3:30 pm and 4pm.

Photo: Juan Garces

Phone: +507 3169000

Internet: www.airpanama.com

## Bus



The bus station in Panama City is located at Albrook Mall - tickets to Almirante, Bocas del Toro can be purchased at wickets in the terminal or

by phone. Once you have reached the Almirante port, take a water taxi to Isla Colon also known as Bocas. Boats depart every 30 minutes to Bocas starting at 6:00 a.m. and finishing at 6:00 p.m. If you arrive at the port after 6 p.m., you will have to stay overnight in a nearby hotel which is not ideal. The boat ride from Almirante to Isla Colon takes about 25 to 30 minutes.

Photo: Pierre-Luc Auclair

## Water Taxis

To reach the nearby islands and beaches, you can hire taxis operating motorized boats. As a general rule, you should always sort out the rate beforehand, and clarify whether it is for one way or round trip. From Isla Colon to most destinations on Carenero, rates range between \$1.00 and \$2.00. For longer trips, the rates will be higher. Try to negotiate nicely and remember the drivers are not trying to rip you off, they are providing a service and trying to support their families.

## Bicycle

Bicycle daily rentals are available at Island Bicycles. Take them for a test drive before heading on any long ride to ensure everything is working.

## ATV rentals



Renting ATV vehicles requires a valid driver's license.

Photo: Salim Nasirov

## Money

There are 2 ATMs on Isla Colon, both located in Banco Nacional on the way to the airport.

Currency related: Although credit cards are accepted in some businesses, many restaurants and tour operators have a cash only policy. Make sure to use small denomination bills, especially when dealing with water taxis.

## PEARL ISLANDS



Anton Gvozdikov / Shutterstock.com

One of the country's best kept secrets is only 15 minutes by plane from Panama City and just over an hour and a half by ferry through the Bay of Panama. The Pearl Islands is an archipelago of hundreds of islands and islets, many uninhabited. Although located off Panama's Pacific Coast, the islands have a distinctly Caribbean feel with white sand beaches and turquoise waters. Offshore, however, waters are teeming with rich Pacific marine life, perfect for diving, snorkeling, sailing, sports fishing and spotting dolphins and whales. Named by Spanish

explorer Vasco Nuñez de Balboa for the abundance of pearls he encountered upon discovering the archipelago in 1513, the islands are also known for producing the largest recorded pearl in the world, "La Peregrina", which once belonged to Elizabeth Taylor.

## Contadora Island

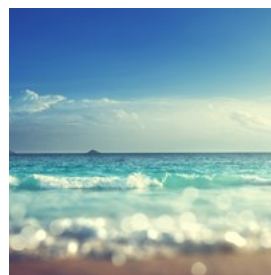


The most developed island is Contadora with its luxurious villas and a handful of hotels and restaurants. In the days of the Spanish

conquistadors, the island was used to store and count gold (hence the name which means bookkeeper in Spanish). It remained relatively undisturbed until the 1960s, when construction began on a large resort, and Contadora became the choice getaway spot for wealthy Panamanians and foreigners, including Jimmy Carter, Julio Iglesias and Iran's exiled Shah Reza Pahlavi.

Photo: Alfredo Maiquez / Shutterstock.com

## San Jose Island



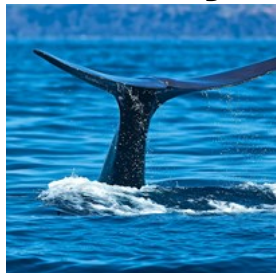
South of Contadora is Isla San Jose, the second largest island of the archipelago and home to one of Panama's most exclusive island resorts,

Hacienda del Mar.

Photo: Iakov Kalinin / Shutterstock.com



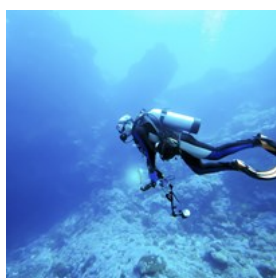
### Whale Watching



Humpback whales pass through Panamanian waters between June and October during their migration and specialized companies offer amazing tours catering to all budgets and interest levels.

Photo: Pommeyrol Vincent / Shutterstock.com

### Snorkeling & Diving



Whether you are an experienced scuba diver or just a beginner, the Pearl Islands offer a great underwater experience and SCUBA professionals can help you explore the abundance of marine life in the Pearl Islands.

Photo: CK Ma / Shutterstock.com

### Traveling by Airplane

Air Panama is the domestic airline traveling daily to Isla Contadora. San Jose is a private island so before you book your flight with Air Panama, you have to make your hotel reservation at Hacienda del Mar.

### Traveling by Sea



There are two ferry services traveling to Isla Contadora, Ferry Las Perlas leaves from Trump Ocean Club with a round trip rate of \$95.00 per

person, while Sea Las Perlas departs from the Balboa Yacht Club on the Amador Causeway and charges \$90.00 per person round trip fee.

Photo: ArrivalGuides

## SAN BLAS



Simon Dannhauer / Shutterstock.com

The beautiful archipelago of San Blas straddles the Caribbean coast of Panama, dotting the water with white sandy beaches and lush greenery. Though most islands are uninhabited, the indigenous Kuna people call the archipelago home, keeping to their traditional way of life. Sail boats carrying travelers to and from Colombia start and finish their journeys at San Blas, and many linger among the islands for a week or so, soaking up the sea, the sun and the breathtaking scenery.

### Snorkeling

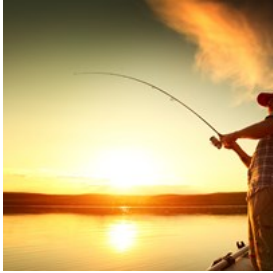


The best snorkeling in the Comarca is found around Isla del Perro, also known as Achutupo. A ship was wrecked here in the 1940s and it is now

covered with amazing coral and is home to a vast array of tropical marine life.

Photo: salajeon / Shutterstock.com

## Fishing



The best fishing is found around Cayos Holandeses, one of the most northern of the islands, about 1.5 hours from Porvenir by a small boat. Since the water here is deeper, there are some larger fish and some sharks, making this a great place for snorkeling as well as fishing.

Photo: Dudarev Mikhail / Shutterstock.com

## Beachcombing



For beach lovers, Kuna Yala is a true paradise. With so many pristine beaches, it is hard to say which is the best, but among the most popular are Isla Pelicano and Isla del Perro (Achutupo).

Photo: haveseen / Shutterstock.com

## Sailing



Sailing has long been popular in the area, although there have been some problems between the charter companies and the Kuna congress, so charters are less common now than they were previously. Private yachts, however, are still common in the area. These are mainly seen around Chicheme, Cayos Holandeses and Green Island, where there are good anchorage points.

Photo: Subbotina Anna / Shutterstock.com

## Jungle Trails



Isla Pino is the only island in the Comarca which has mountains, so this is a great place to find wild animals, including deer, wildcats and snakes. This is also a good spot for birdwatching.

Photo: Gerrardkop / Shutterstock.com

## Museums



There are 2 museums in the region, one in Carti and one in Porvenir. The better of the two is the museum at El Porvenir, which features information about the Kuna Congress, an exhibition of molas, tinajas (bowls for carrying water-plant pot), and more. There is also an interesting video about the Kuna culture made in 1980 but since it lasts 1.5 hours, most tourists don't get a chance to see it.

Photo: Vilant / Shutterstock.com

## Food in the area



One of the highlights of a visit to the Kuna Yala is the food. Lobster, conch, octopus and fish are the staples here, usually served with arroz con coco (coconut rice).

Photo: lorenzo\_graph / Shutterstock.com

## Shopping



Since the Kuna economy is based largely on tourism, the islanders urge visitors to purchase their handicrafts, whether it is a mola,

woodcarving or palm-woven basket.

Opportunities to purchase molas and other handicrafts are in no short supply. You will find Kunas selling their wares almost everywhere.

Photo: rj lerich / Shutterstock.com

## Travel by Airplane



Air Panama has daily flights from Panama City to Achutupo, Carti, Corazon de Jesus, El Porvenir, Rio Sider and Playon Chico. Be aware

that the airplane service to this area operates like a bus service, and flights are rarely direct, usually landing and taking off on various islands before reaching your destination.

Photo: Juan Garces

## Travel by Land



The best way to travel is by car and it is only a 2½ drive from Panama City to the port. There are 3 ports, Carti, Yandup and Tupile and depending on

your destination, the boat ride will take between 15 minutes and 1 hour.

Photo: Jonathan Li

## Respect



photo.

Photo: AlexTanya / Shutterstock.com

## Passport or ID



Always bring your passport and if you are Panamanian be sure to have your ID with you. San Blas is close to the Colombian border and

there are many sailboats coming from the Caribbean islands so there is a chance that government authorities may ask for your ID and if you don't have it, you will be asked to go and get it and that can be highly inconvenient.

Photo: Hsynff / Shutterstock.com

## Photography



Note that you will also be asked to pay for every photo you take of the Kuna people.

Photo: brandstock / Shutterstock.com



## TABOGA ISLAND



Mónica Mora (image cropped)

The island of flowers, as it is known, is just one hour by ferry from the Amador Causeway in Panama City. This popular haunt for pirates from days of yore is now a sleepy little island perfect for enjoying a day in the sun, swimming or practicing watersports. There are a few hotels and restaurants available and, for the energetic, there is a good hike up to a viewing point on a hill. This island is a favorite well to do Panamanian weekend getaway, especially for its proximity to Panama city, although it may take 1 hour for the ferry ride but faster boats can reach Isla Taboga in 20 to 30 minutes.

### Getting to know the island



Either hiking to the top of the island or walking around town is a good way to explore Taboga and to learn about its history and interesting facts, as well as visiting the oldest church on the Western hemisphere.

Photo: Ayaita (image cropped)

### Boat Touring



It is possible to hire a boat for a tour around the island, to get a view of the beautiful island from a very different perspective.

Photo: Jose Leis (image cropped)

### Snorkeling

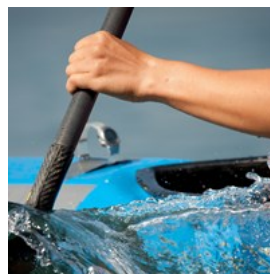


Taboga has good spots for snorkeling; make sure to ask your hotel or tour guide about the best spots for snorkeling.

Beware, there is a strong undertow at the tip of the main beach so inquire about safety when going in the water.

Photo: haveseen / Shutterstock.com

### The Ocean Fair “Feria del Mar”



This is an annual celebration featuring the local traditions including live music, dance and cuisine. They also hold motor boat and rowing competitions and even a fishing tournament.

September 15th to 21st.

Photo: Petr Salinger / Shutterstock.com

### Taboga Transportation



There are two ferries traveling daily to Isla Taboga; Calypso which takes an hour to reach Taboga, and National Tours Ferry which has smaller and faster boats that take around 30

minutes to reach the island.

Photo: ArrivalGuides

## TOURIST INFORMATION



TravnikovStudio

### Traveling by Airplane



Air Panama is the domestic airline traveling daily from Panama City to Bocas del Toro, Isla Contadora, Isla San Jose and San Blas (Guna Yala).

Photo: Juan Garces

Phone: +507 3169000

Internet: [www.airpanama.com](http://www.airpanama.com)

Email: [reservaciones@airpanama.com](mailto:reservaciones@airpanama.com)

### Traveling by Sea



Ferry services travel daily to Isla Taboga and the most popular islands in the Pearl Islands archipelago. For more information about ferries,

go to the transportation section of your island of choice.

Photo: ArrivalGuides

### Cash or credit card?



Most of the islands do not have banks or ATMs so it is important to bring enough cash for your trip. There are just a few hotels and restaurants

that do accept credit cards so it is important that you are prepared for cash transactions.

Photo: browndogstudios

### Drinking water



Do not drink tap water. Remember to bring bottled water when touring the islands.

Photo: Vladvm

### Safety



Panama is considered a safe country in which to travel, however we advise to exercise caution as you would in any foreign land. Avoid flashing money or

jewelry. Avoid going alone into the jungle and any unknown territory.

Photo: Victor Z

### Population

Bocas del Toro: 125,461

San Blas: 15,541

Taboga Island: 1,629

### Currency

United States Dollar and Panamanian Balboa

### Newspapers

La Prensa

Panama America

La Estrella de Panama

### Emergency numbers

