

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

