

Comarca de Kuna Yala



Imagine a turquoise tropical archipelago with one island for every day of the year. With white sand and waving palms, these Caribbean islands cheat no one's version of paradise. The Comarca de Kuna Yala is home to the Kuna, an autonomous indigenous group who run Archipiélago de San Blás with minimal interference from the national government. The Kuna was the first indigenous group in Latin America to gain such independence and today are a unique example of successful indigenous autonomy.

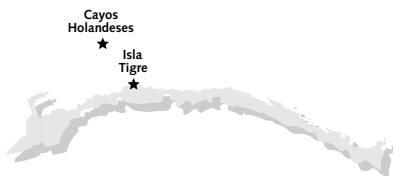
Though remarkably traditional, the Kuna have been in contact with Europeans ever since Columbus sailed these waters in 1502. Clan identity is everything to the Kuna, who make tenacious efforts to preserve a traditional way of life.

The Comarca is a narrow, 226km-long strip on the Caribbean coast that includes the Archipiélago de San Blás, which stretches from the Golfo de San Blás to the edge of the Colombian border. While the majority of the islands are postcard-perfect, only community islands are inhabited. These 'urban' islands are integral to the strong Kuna sense of community, and comprise acre-sized cays packed with bamboo huts, livestock and people. In tourism, the Kuna protectionist states that no foreigner may run a business here (even Panamanian) and visitors are often charged a fee to land.

San Blás is no longer the off-the-beaten-path tourist destination it once was. In 2009 the road to Cartí was completed, making the region far more accessible than it has ever been. However, visitors still have a choice between vibrant community life and complete and total isolation.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Interacting responsibly and sustainably with the **Kuna** (p246), a fiercely independent people who maintain their traditions in a changing world
- Cruising white sand cays and soaking up sunrise on a **sailboat** (p250)
- Shopping the community islands for **molas** (p250), a traditional Kuna textile that is now the national handicraft of Panama
- Paddling your kayak up to the friendly community island of **Isla Tigre** (p256)
- Snorkeling aquamarine waters through the reefs and wrecks in the magical **Cayos Holandeses** (p254)



■ POPULATION: 37,385

■ AREA: 2360 SQ KM

■ ELEVATION: SEA LEVEL TO 748M

THE KUNA History

Although the Kuna have lived in Eastern Panama for at least two centuries, scholars fiercely debate their origins. Language similarities with people who once lived several hundred kilometers to the west would indicate that the Kuna migrated eastward. However, oral tradition has it that the Kuna migrated to San Blás from Colombia after the 16th century, following a series of devastating encounters with other tribes armed with poison-dart blowguns.

Regardless of the Kuna's origins, scholars agree that life on the islands is relatively new for them. Historians at the end of the 18th century wrote that the only people who used the San Blás islands at that time were pirates, Spaniards and the odd explorer. However, the Kuna flourished on the archipelago due to the abundance of fresh fish, lobster, shrimp, crab and octopus. This subsistence diet was also supplemented by food crops, including rice, yams, yucca, bananas and pineapples, grown in plots on the nearby mainland.

Today there are an estimated 70,000 Kuna; 32,000 live on the district's islands, 8000 live

on tribal land along the coast and 30,000 live outside the district. So communal are the island-dwelling Kuna that they inhabit only 49 of the nearly 400 keys; the rest are mostly left to coconut trees, sea turtles and iguanas.

Culture

The traditional Kuna belief structure is based around three principal concepts: god, nature and the cosmos.

According to Kuna religion, the world was created by God, Paba Tummat, and the Great Mother, Nan Tummat, who continue to keep watch over everyone's daily actions. Although Kuna shamans often look into the future and make minor divinations, everything in life is believed to be preordained by God and the Great Mother. In fact, the Kuna make great efforts in their daily lives to ensure that their actions follow the will of Paba and Nan Tummat, even though they do not know their fate.

The Kuna identify strongly with nature, and their rich oral traditions are full of songs, hymns and prayers that recount the beauty and majesty of the wind, the land and the sea. To the Kuna, people and nature are considered parts of the

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