



Bocas del Toro Province

POP 125,500 / ELEV SEA LEVEL TO 3300M / AREA 8,745 SQ KM

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Best Places to Eat

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Best Places to Stay

- ➔ La Loma Jungle Lodge (p198)
- ➔ Casa Cayuko (p198)
- ➔ Gran Kahuna Hostel (p193)

Why Go?

With Caribbean islands dotting a shock of blue waters, Bocas is all that's tropical. Panama's principal tourist draw, the archipelago consists of six densely forested islands, scores of uninhabited islets and Parque Nacional Marino Isla Bastimentos, Panama's oldest marine park.

The longtime roost of Chiquita Banana, the mainland boasts the binational gem of Parque Internacional La Amistad, shared with Costa Rica. It's also home to diverse wildlife including the elusive jaguar, traditional Ngöbe-Buglé settlements, and the Naso, one of few remaining American tribes with a traditional monarchy.

Most visitors come for a hefty dose of sun and surf. Few are disappointed with the Bocas cocktail of water fun and thatched luxury. Those bent on a Caribbean getaway should get here soon, as unspoiled beauty rarely stays that way.

When to Go

➔ **Dec–Mar & Jun–Aug** The biggest swells for surfers to ride; green turtles can be found nesting on Isla Bastimentos in July and August.

➔ **Feb–Apr & Aug–Oct** Dry conditions and calm seas mean the best visibility for snorkeling and diving with better access to ocean caves. From February, turtle nestings are monitored for six months in Humedal de San-San Pond Sak.

➔ **Mid-Nov** Bocas breaks into mayhem for its anniversary celebration, along with myriad celebrations of Días Patrias. A booming month for national tourism.

History

Christopher Columbus visited Bocas del Toro in 1502, during his fourth and final New World voyage. Taken by its beauty, he affixed his name to many sites.

During the 17th century, the archipelago became a haven for pirates repairing and building ships, felling the forests and feeding upon nesting sea turtles. Despite rumors of buried treasure, none of their loot has been found (or reported).

After French Huguenots settled the coast in the 17th and 18th centuries, a Spanish militia was sent to Bocas to dislodge them. Their diseases and destruction virtually wiped out the indigenous populations.

In the early 19th century wealthy aristocrat settlers arrived in Bocas with many black slaves from the USA and Colombian islands. When slavery was abolished in 1850, the blacks became fishers and subsistence farmers. Towards the end of the 19th century Jamaican blacks joined them to work in the burgeoning banana industry.

In 1899, however, United Fruit Company overtook a small American-owned banana company. As United Fruit established vast plantations across the entire peninsula it also constructed elaborate networks of roads, bridges and canals. Entire towns and cities popped up to house workers.

Now Chiquita Brands International, the company grows and exports three-quarters of a million tons of bananas annually. The largest workforce in the province, they are also the most diverse nationwide, with West Indian, Latino, Chinese and indigenous workers.

ARCHIPIÉLAGO DE BOCAS DEL TORO

For most travelers, the archipelago *is* Bocas – Caribbean clichés aside, there's no shortage of postcard beaches, emerald waters and swaying palms.

Isla Colón

The archipelago's largest and most developed island is home to the provincial capital of Bocas del Toro. Starting in the mid-1990s, foreign investors flooded the island, creating new hotels, restaurants and condos while infrastructure for water, trash and sewage lagged far behind. Today, the island, which

runs on diesel, struggles to find a balance between satiating development and serving community needs.

Note that the town, the archipelago and the province all share the name Bocas del Toro or simply Bocas. Isla Colón and Bocas del Toro town are also referred to as Bocas Isla.



Activities

Cycling

Whether you're heading to Boca del Drago on the paved road, or taking the dirt path to Playa Bluff, a bicycle can seriously increase your mobility. Note that the cycle to Boca del Drago from Boca town is taxing, especially when the sun is beaming. If you're unsure of your fitness level, it's advised that you head to Punta Bluff instead, even though the road can flood after heavy rains. Bikes are available from some hostels and from Ixa's Bike World (p183) in Boca town.

Bird-Watching

While the bird-watching on the islands isn't as good as that on the mainland, it can still be rewarding. Particularly rare birds, or at least those poorly known to Panama, have been recorded on the islands in recent years, and include the semiplumbeous hawk, white-tailed kite, zone-tailed hawk, uniform crane, olive-throated parakeet, red-fronted parrotlet, lesser nighthawk, green-breasted mango, chestnut-colored woodpecker, snowy cotinga, brown-capped tyrannulet, yellow-bellied elaenia, stub-tailed spadebill, purple martin, tree swallow and black-cowled oriole.

Fishing

The best budget option for aspiring anglers is to go surf casting with the local water-taxi drivers. The hand lines are a bit tricky at first, though you'll get the hang of it. It's best to go early in the morning when the fish are biting.

Hiking

If you're looking to seriously get off the beaten path, there is a network of undeveloped hiking trails that fan out across the island. One of the more popular hikes starts at the end of the coastal road in Mimbi Timbi and carries on along the coast to Boca del Drago. You will need about six hours of daylight to complete the hike and you must carry in all your fresh water. The trail winds past caves, caverns and plenty of vine-entangled