



Bocas del Toro Province

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Best Places to Eat

- El Último Refugio (p192)
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- Om Café (p192)
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- Bibi's on the Beach (p198)

Best Places to Sleep

- Tranquilo Bay (p203)
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Why Go?

With its Caribbean islands dotting a shock of blue waters, Bocas del Toro is all that's tropical. This is Panama's principal tourist draw and it will no doubt provide some of your most memorable experiences. The archipelago consists of six densely forested islands, scores of uninhabited islets and the Parque Nacional Marino Isla Bastimentos, Panama's oldest marine park.

The longtime base of Chiquita Banana, the mainland boasts the Parque Internacional La Amistad, shared with Costa Rica. It's also home to diverse wildlife such as the elusive jaguar, traditional Ngöbe-Buglé settlements, and the Naso, one of few remaining American tribes with its own monarch.

Most visitors come for a hefty dose of sun and surf. Few are disappointed with the Bocas cocktail of water fun and thatched luxury, but there's a lot, lot more to what might be Panama's most beautiful corner.

When to Go

- **Dec–Mar, Jul & Aug** The biggest swells for surfers to ride are from December to March, while green turtles can be found nesting on Isla Bastimentos in July and August.
- **Feb–Apr, Aug** Dry conditions and calm seas mean the best visibility for snorkeling and diving, with better access to ocean caves from February to April and then again in August.
- **Feb–Jul** Turtle nesting is monitored for six months starting in February at Humedal San San Pond Sak.
- **Nov** Bocas breaks into mayhem for its anniversary celebration in mid-November, along with a plethora of feast days and public holidays. It's also a boom month for national tourism.

HISTORY

Christopher Columbus visited Bocas del Toro in 1502, during his fourth and final voyage to the New World. 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; they felled the forests and fed upon nesting sea turtles. Despite rumors of buried treasure, their loot has ever been found (or at least reported).

When Huguenots (Protestants) fleeing the religious wars in France settled along the coast in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, a Spanish militia was sent to Bocas to dislodge them. The arrival of diseases and destruction virtually wiped out the indigenous populations.

In the early 19th century, wealthy aristocrat settlers arrived in Bocas, bringing with them many black slaves from the USA and Colombia. When slavery was abolished in 1850, the former slaves 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 the small American-owned banana company. As it established vast plantations across the entire peninsula it also constructed elaborate networks of roads, bridges and canals. Entire towns and cities rose up around where its workers settled.

Now called Chiquita Brands International, the multinational company grows and exports 750,000 tons of bananas annually. The largest workforce in the province, Chiquita is also the most diverse nationwide, with West Indians, Latinos, Chinese and indigenous people in its employ.

Getting There & Away

Bocas del Toro is linked with neighboring provinces and the capital by bus, but to reach the archipelago you must board a ferry in Almirante. An international airport at Bocas town links the archipelago with Panama City, David and Changuinola, as well as San José in Costa Rica.

ARCHIPIÉLAGO DE BOCAS DEL TORO

For most travelers, the archipelago *is* Bocas del Toro. Caribbean clichés aside, there's no shortage of postcard-pretty beaches, emer-

ald waters and swaying palms, and scads of things to see and do.

Isla Colón

POP 9000

The archipelago's most developed island is home to the provincial capital of Bocas del Toro. From the mid-1990s, foreign investors flooded the island, creating 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 satisfying development and serving community needs.

Note that the town, the archipelago and the province all share the name Bocas del Toro. To avoid confusion, we refer to the provincial capital as 'Bocas town' or simply 'Bocas.'

Activities

Cycling

Whether you're heading along the paved road to Boca del Drago or taking a dirt track to Playa Bluff, a bike can seriously increase your mobility. Note that the bike ride to Boca del Drago from Boca town is taxing; if you're unsure of your fitness level, head for Punta Bluff instead. Bikes are available from some hostels as well as from Ixa's Bike World (p187) and Bocas Bicis (p187) in Boca town. Flying Pirates (p186) rents ATVs/quad bikes.

Fishing

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

Hiking

If you're looking to seriously get off the beaten path, there is a network of undeveloped hiking trails that fan out across Isla Colón. One of the more popular hikes starts at the end of the coastal road in Mimbi Timbi to the northeast and carries on west 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 water. The trail winds past caves, caverns and plenty of vine-entangled jungle. A bike will help speed things up a bit, though you'll be carrying it part of the way, especially if it's been raining recently.