

Tourism in San Blas, Panama

Two coasts bathed of blue and turquoise waters and thousands of islands between Pacific and Caribbean; give you the perfect scenery for a visit to paradise.

Situated in the Caribbean Sea a few miles off the north coast of Panama, the San Blas de Kuna Islands are the home of the Kuna, a traditional society of Native Americans. Most of these tropical islands are very small. Many are surrounded by coral reefs. The Kuna Indians have governed this autonomous province since the 1920s. They maintain their own economic system, language, customs and culture with their distinctive dress, music, dance and legends. There is a feeling of being in another world - straight out of the pages of National Geographic. The men still fish from canoes and climb for coconuts as they have done for centuries. Stunning golden sands and blue-green waters are edged by the coconut palms, the idyllic islands of your dreams.

When we speak about San Blas, commonly we say that is the place where you can find an island for every day of the year. And this does not escape to the reality. With an estimated 365 islands in the Kuna Yala territories. Near the coasts of the Darién, and bordering the North of the country, the Archipelago of San Blas is inhabited by the Kunas Indians or Tule. Tourism is a force in the Kuna economy. There are several Kuna-run hotels in the archipelago offering ecotours, fishing, snorkeling, and touring of nearby villages. Most tourism in Kuna Yala is centered in the region of Carti, where there is a greater number of uninhabited islands and beautiful beaches. Other popular areas for tourism include Ukupseni and Isla Pino.

Many of the islands, keeps the primitive sense that the Kunas has wanted to preserve their culture. Dedicated to agriculture, the cultivate of the oil palm tree and corn, they have learned that the cultural interchange with tourism is another source to speak to the world about them, generate incomes and simultaneously preserve their traditions. Divided of the rest of the country as a Region with autonomy, the communities divide themselves like small countries with their own independent system directed by the Saila.

The visit to San Blas will be hosted by the kunas. From the hotel property that you choose, the tours taken and all activities related to your visit will be provided by them, since it is one of the conditions to make tourism in this zone. At the moment we handled three properties that maintain the intermediate standard of our system without altering the customs of kunas.

The Kuna Lodge and Yandup Cabins, whose arrival place will be Playón Chico, and Dolphin Lodge whose entry will be Mamitupo. This three properties preserve the native character of the Kunas. Rustic cabins of mahogany that are refreshed with the insular breeze, internal toilets for each room, restaurant with marine food served at the main hours for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and white sand beaches. All visit to San Blas will be accompanied of a visit to the respective community nearest the location of the hotel, the visit to a private island to relax and enjoy of the white sand beach, clear waters palms trees characteristic of the archipelago, the visit to the river or the kuna cemetery, and the traditional transfer from the main land in cayucos or canoes to your location or hotel. The activities are of natural and cultural orientation.

The San Blas beaches are ideal for hitting the surf, especially during the summer months when the waves are much bigger.

Bahia de Matanchen (Matanchen Bay). Located 7 km south of the port of San Blas, off Highway 54. This is an ideal surf spot, as the waves can reach up to six feet.

Los Cocos. Located 14 km southeast of San Blas, off Highway 54. This is a beach with

moderate waves and numerous coconut trees. The beach is known for its constant breaks, making it the perfect surfing destination.

Las Islitas. Lies 15 km southeast of San Blas. Considered one of the area's best surfing locations, particularly in May and June when the waves are much bigger.

El Borrego. Located 2 km south of San Blas. This beach is famous for its big waves, which provide optimal surfing.

San Blas is famous for one of its arts and crafts, the mola. Kuna women make rainbow colored fabrics, emblazoned with fish, birds, jungle animals and geometric designs that would impress Picasso himself. The arts and crafts of the Kunas are famous. The bright tropical scenery and wildlife is reflected in the colorful molas, a rainbow of reverse appliqué embroidery in geometric designs made by the Kuna women that are popular souvenirs for visitors. The men still fish from canoes as they did before Columbus came. They still run up to the corner coconut palm trees for something fresh and cool to drink each morning, just as they have for untold centuries.

Many tourists arrive from Panama City by plane and stay in small lodges run by locals where they have an opportunity to sleep in active fishing villages and during the day are shuttled over to vacant islands in motorized canoe for a day of swimming and lounging in hammocks. The most interesting islands are Achutupu, Kagantupu and Coco Blanco. There are flights to several of the islands from Panama City or you can catch a ride with Kuna merchant ships from Colón, who will find the perfect island for your sunbathing and snorkeling pleasure. Daily Flights serve several of the islands so don't be surprised if you find yourself island hopping. You are advised to make reservations as the small planes tend to get crowded. Aerotaxi, Aviatur and Ansa serve some islands from Albrook Airport. Traffic between islands is by motorized cuyaco. Sailing and snorkeling around these coral islands is superb. Diving conditions are best between April and June.

Most islands require visitors to pay a registration/visitation fee that varies usually from \$3 - \$5 and usually the Kuna require a \$1 for permission to photograph them. While moving about the islands, away from the beach, it is appreciated by the Kunas that no swimsuits or short shorts are worn, men should not go shirtless. Some of the islands get crowded when the cruise ships arrive so it is as well to try to check the schedules. A tour operator should be able to help you plan your trip accordingly and a good guide will also help you get the most out of your once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Tourism is limited to only a few of the islands, and you must get permission from the chief before visiting any of the islands. Electricity and running water are not found in the outer islands. Even with these barriers, some of the Kuna have decided to share their world with outsiders and have set up small lodges for a few visitors at a time.

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