

Barefoot in Bocas del Toro, Panama

The minivan slid to a halt on the crude hard surface road in Almirante, Panama. It had been a long 10 hours from San Jose, Costa Rica, enduring tropical rain, winding two lane roads, and typical central American driving that often included the shoulder, wrong side of the road, tractors, and occasional farm animals. We were packed into a van with 11 other international travelers, each filled with excitement for their individual upcoming travels. We began our adventure sailing around the islands of Bocas del Toro, Panama.

The Journey to Bocas del Toro, Panama Begins

A water taxi ride takes us through mangrove-lined waterways to Bocas Town, the main town in the archipelago. My travel companion, Dave, and I packed shoulder to shoulder in the 25 foot water taxi.

At the Bocas Town ferry terminal, boat captains of 12-15 foot *pangas* shouted in Spanish to communicate with their passengers, other captains, and those on the dock awaiting a hitch to their next destination. Most were locals, many with children, headed home after a day at work. Our plan: find an adult beverage and text our captains, Stephan and Chloe, to pick us up with the dinghy.

Bocas Town

The street of Bocas town seemed empty despite the blaring sounds of Caribbean and Hispanic music. We stopped at Ohm Cafe for their \$1 happy hour specials, Indian fare, and waterfront tables. We met Chloe just down the street from Hotel Olas de las Madrugada, a rustic hotel overlooking the west side of the providence. Our dinghy launched just in time to see the sun slip below the horizon and the sky fill with tropical twilight hues of yellow, orange, and red. We left our shoes in the dinghy for the next three days, only to be worn when we ventured shore side.

Aboard the *Sea Rah*

Our home for the next three days would be aboard the *Sea Rah*, a 34 foot Tanzer sailboat. I had stumbled upon this unique Airbnb and couldn't imagine what could make a bucket list trip more exciting.

While settling into our aft cabin, Stephan prepared pasta Bolognese and shared a bottle of wine under the grandeur of a December full moon. Chloe and Stephan had sailed together for 10 years after meeting in Bali. Stephan, an engineer from Berlin Germany, and Chloe, a yoga instructor and ESL teacher from England, had found *la vida dulce*, a way to earn a living doing what they love; sailing and meeting new friends. Chloe's motto to life on the *Sea Rah* is, "Everything in

moderation, including excess.”

Visiting a Cocoa Farm

The morning greeted us with island views to the east and vast mountain views to the west, minimally cloaked with fluffy white clouds, a rarity during the raining season in Panama. We set sail for Isla Cristobal to visit the indigenous Ngäbe-Buglé, or *camarcas indigenas*. Our first stop, a cocoa farm owned by Chloe’s friend, Lilly.

Lilly lives in a 300 square foot elevated home with her husband, daughter and three grandchildren at the edge of a lagoon. She warmly welcomed us into her home. Hens roosted in cardboard boxes next to us. She described the task of picking, drying, roasting and grinding the cocoa beans. There is no power or telephone, and the only transportation is by *cayuco*, a hand-carved canoe from a single tree, often handed down through generations. We toured the farm, which included pineapples, coconuts, medicinal plants, chickens and pigs.

Floating Doctors

Chloe occasionally works with Floating Doctors, a local medical clinic, where Chloe works as a yoga instructor and translator. We got a behind the scenes tour of the facility. This mission-based organization, run mostly by volunteers, provides acute and preventative medical care to the isolated Ngäbe-Buglé. Their camp consists of a main building, a dormitory, a bath facility with a rainwater collection system, and a handful of huts and sailboats for their semi-permanent workers. All power is solar generated.

Bahia Escondido

After lunch, we head to Bahia Escondido, a small Ngäbe-Buglé pueblo tucked into the jungle down a narrow canal guarded by large mangrove trees with tethered Cayucos. Unexpectedly, there is a concrete walkway that leads us to the town center, a modern treat in this isolated village. Children play with homemade slingshots. Laundry is strung on long clotheslines to dry. Adults nap in hammocks strung between the porch posts, often peering over the edges as they hear our soft chatter.

This pueblo is where one of Lilly’s daughters lives with her husband and brother, sharing a small hut similar to her mother’s. Luzbia (“path of light”) works for Floating Doctors weekdays but

travels an hour each way by boat every Sunday to attend classes to become a local teacher. Her husband is attending the same school full-time and they see each other only when she travels to her classes on Sunday. Luzbia is pregnant with her first pregnancy. The closest hospital is 15 minutes away by boat, then a 20 minute walk from the marina. Her eyes dance with happiness as we talk about her future and her husband.

In the late afternoon, we returned to the *Sea Rah* to sail her to a secluded harborage on Solera. We enjoy another gourmet dinner, accompanied with a “dessert” of full moon, candied-sky hues and sprinkles. With our bellies full of wine and laughter, we were rocked to sleep by the gentle waves of the Caribbean Sea.

Bastimentos

We woke to an overcast morning and a refreshing swim, cut short by a pod of jellyfish. As the day progressed, so did the clouds and it rained most of our second day. We sailed to Bastimentos late morning and after a sputtering dinghy ride to shore, we were once again on a large paved walkway through the center of town.

The vibe was a stark contrast to the villages of Bahia Escondida; loud reggae bellowed from homes along the sidewalk, groups of rasta locals glanced over the rails of second floor porches while drinking local beers, and the smell of salt, bacon and fresh pastries drifted through the air. We were greeted with inquisitive gazes and hellos. Children looked up from their games of marbles with curiosity, and the mothers tending to chores greeted us with smiles. The rain increased to a tropical deluge, so we sought shelter in a waterfront café. One local shared his philosophy on life in Bastimentos, donning sunglasses and a toothless grin, “Enjoying life until the good Lord takes me.”

After a few hours ashore, we returned to the *Sea Rah* and discovered a small pod of dolphins in the cove were enjoying the rain. Careening through the flat water, circling the vessel with only the sound of rain pattering and a splash as they jumped completely out of the water. Their slapping tails seemed to say, “Watch me, watch me.”

We anchored for the night on the south side of the island. By dinghy, we motored to Red Frog Marina and hiked through the rain to the posh Red Frog Resort. Bar conversations lingered well past sunset with travel tales and bucket lists, and after dinner, with full bellies, we played guitars and sang well past midnight.

Our Last Day

The clouds parted briefly for our last day afloat. Dave and Chloe headed out early for an early morning yoga class. We met back up with Chloe and Dave at the Punta Lava for a fresh fruit smoothie overlooking our destination. The hike would take us along the beach and the edge of the jungle. The men took the lead to get a head start on spearfishing while Chloe and I took our time, enjoying the stunning vistas out over the water and the sounds of tropical birds singing. Chloe found a heart-shaped sea bean, my most treasured memento of our trip.

At Playa Red Frog, the skies grayed and the ocean began to roar as the surf swelled and the current ripped around the reef. The men braved the current in an attempt to spearfish. Rain poured from the sky. It was a soft, warm island rain. The hike back to the boat had the fresh scent of rain and fauna and the sound of the rain in the canopy. Our bare feet squished in the mud as we slid up and down the hills through the tree roots of the jungle. Drenched from the rain, muddy from the path, and euphoric from the adventures of the past three days, Dave and I laughed until tears flowed but you couldn't tell for all the raindrops on our face.

The damp, chilly motor back to Bocas Town was solemn. No Shoes Nation satellite radio played in the background, just as it had for the entire time we were aboard the *Sea Rah*. I stared out over the water and imagined a life like Chloe and Stephan's. How much I envied their freedom. The friendship we found was pure and I was so sad to leave their company, this beautiful place and its

genuine people.

Saying Good-bye For Now

As we anchored the *Sea Rah*, the sky opened up again. The four of us huddled in the dinghy clutching our ponchos as the wind-blown rain howled in the small harborage. We bid goodbye in the same place we had set off on our adventure three days earlier. We came into this trip expecting adventure and opportunities to learn about the people of Bocas. But we never imagined we would create relationships that would make us reevaluate our life and reorganize goals.

For More:

Getting There:

- From Costa Rica, Nature Air flies directly into to Isla Colon. natureair.com
- By ground: Caribe Shuttle or public bus to Almirante Panama. Caribe Shuttle has a mid-day stop at a beachfront hotel and includes lunch for approx. \$75 each way and delivers you directly to the water taxi dock. Take a water taxi from Almirante to Bocas Town on Isla Colon, caribeshuttle.com
- Note: All ground crossings from Costa Rica require you to disembark, visit customs and immigration to depart Costa Rica with your luggage, walk across a bridge, and visit customs and immigration for Panama. You will board your mode of transportation in Panama on the other side. This can be tricky if using public transportation however Caribe Shuttle helps navigate the border.
- From Panama, Air Panama flies into to Isla Colon airpanama.com
- By ground: Buses from Albrook Terminal, Panama City to Almirante, public taxi to the water

taxi dock and a water taxi to Bocas Town on Isla Colon.

<http://horariodebuses.com/EN/pa/index.php>

Getting Around:

While on the islands, walking and public taxis are your best bet. If you are adventurous, renting a bike is an option in Bocas Town. The public water taxi system is cheap and efficient to get from island to island.

Stay in Bocas del Toro, Panama:

There are several hotels on Isla Colon. Just to mention a few:

- Red Frog Beach Island Resort and Spa, <http://redfrogbeach.com/>
- Selina Red Frog <https://www.selina.com>
- My favorite will always be [airbnb.com](https://www.airbnb.com). Our last night in town we had a wonderful host who lived in a waterfront home with sea view, who provided us with an authentic Panamanian dinner for a very reasonable cost.

Eat and Drink:

- Om Café <http://omcafebocas.com>
- Selina Red Frog <https://www.selina.com>

-All photos by Dana Clayton, except as credited. Header photo of the Sea Rah by Chloe Chand.