

An Unspoiled Archipelago of Eco-Surprises

BOCAS DEL TORO

Panama

Sixty-eight islands off the northwest coast of Panama comprise a complex and diverse ecosystem where you can experience a wealth of natural wonders both on land and in the water. Trek through wildlife-filled rain

forests, glimpse endangered turtles on white sand beaches, and surf the world-famous waves off Isla Bastimentos and Isla Carenero, where Columbus made landfall in 1502.

Isla Colón is the largest of the islands; its Bocas Town is the region's main hub, though even that is a relative term. The smattering of inns and rustic eco-lodges exude a laid-back vibe and a strong local flavor. One example is Punta Caracol Acqua-Lodge, nine over-the-water bungalows connected by a wooden walkway. Step out of your room to enjoy swimming, kayaking, and snorkeling. Marvel at the sunset from your wraparound terrace, then dine on seafood paella at the open-air restaurant or take a water taxi into Bocas Town to Guari Guari, where the European owners create an inspired six-course menu from local ingredients.

Much of 20-square-mile Isla Bastimentos is home to the National Marine Park (the country's first). It measures more than 30,000 acres that range from dense virgin rain forest to a marine sanctuary, where you'll find clear waters and a barrier reef. Dive or snorkel the coral forests of the two Cayos Zapatillas (Slipper Islands), or sunbathe on Red Frog Beach. Make your base the friendly La Loma Jungle Lodge, a 57-acre working farm at the park's edge, complete with cacao, coconut, and banana groves. The highest of its four open-air thatched "ranchos" are worth the aerobic climb, offering sweeping views of the bay. The young owners make their own chocolate, which shows up in their famous chocolate-coconut cake; candlelight dinners might feature local grilled yellow jack with



A dock extends out from the coast of Isla Bastimentos, one of the larger Panamanian islands and only reachable by boat.

passion fruit *pico de gallo*.

Al Natural provides a beach alternative; its seven round, thatch-roofed bungalows were built using the traditional techniques of the Ngöbe-Buglé Indians and rest perched on stilts at the edge of the Caribbean's crystal blue water. The Belgian owners are known for their excellent food, served in a two-story dining space with an observation tower.

WHERE: Isla Colón is 19 miles/32 km off the coast of Panama's northwest corner, and 341 miles/550 km northwest of Panama City.

VISITOR INFO: www.visitpanama.com. **PUNTA CARACOL:** Tel 507/757-9410; www.punta-caracol.com. *Cost:* from \$344 (off-peak), \$430 (peak), all-inclusive. **GUARI GUARI:** Tel 507/6627-1825. *Cost:* dinner \$25. **LA LOMA:** Tel 507/6619-5364; www.thejunglelodge.com. *Cost:* \$200, all-inclusive. **AL NATURAL RESORT:** Tel 507/757-9004; www.alnaturalresort.com. *Cost:* from \$240, all-inclusive. *When:* closed May–Jul 15. **BEST TIMES:** Dec–Apr for nicest weather; Sep for International Festival of the Sea in Isla Colón.