

Frommer's®

Panama



The Jungle Lodge (see “Where to Stay and Dine,” below), which can plan a trip. Spanish-speaking **Rutilio Milton** (☎ 6669-6269) offers tours, or try **Oscar’s Bat Cave Tours** (☎ 6515-9276). Tours cost about \$25 per person, and you’ll need to make a reservation at least a day or more in advance for lunch at the community.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

If you’re the kind of traveler who’d rather get away from it all, consider basing yourself out of Isla Bastimentos. The region’s best lodges are concentrated here, and a few (Casa Cayuco, El Limbo on the Beach, and Au Natural) front the tranquil waters of the island’s eastern shores, providing good swimming conditions year-round and a safe place for families with kids. Because of the distance from Bocas Town, meals are included as part of a package. It can take from 45 minutes to an hour by boat to reach lodges here on Bastimentos. There are no stores here, so bring any necessities with you.

Al Natural ✨ This laid-back resort lives up to its name with open-air, thatched-roof bungalows that blend into the surrounding jungle, while providing beach-level views of the sparkling Caribbean Sea. The setting is lovely and remote, and the concept is well-conceived; however, the price is a little steep for a such rustic accommodations, all of which could use a new coat of shellac. This is not to say that the rooms are uncomfortable—on the contrary, there are hot showers, comfortable mattresses on platforms, and mosquito nets, as well as custom-made furniture and woodwork. Showers are inside each room, and flush toilets are just outside. The owners, who hail from Belgium, are also the hosts, and are very amicable and really charming. But service can be a little lackadaisical. The resort fronts a beach with a tranquil sea year-round, and there is a short trail leading through the jungle and to another beach. There is a dock, game room, and probably the only Ping-Pong table on Isla Bastimentos. The food is mostly seafood, and usually the owners receive kudos for their innovative cuisine. Honeymooners, young adults who are just past their backpacking prime, and easygoing travelers will be happiest here. The difference between the Natural House and the Natural House Deluxe is an additional bed and a ceiling fan; the deluxe is by far the nicest of the bungalows here. Note that Al Natural is closed from May until July 15.

The Al Natural Package includes three meals per day (and wine with dinner), lodging, round-trip transportation, and use of sports equipment; or book their “All Inclusive” package that includes one full-day excursion per day to Zapatilla Cay, fishing, snorkeling, and more. If you stay 7 nights, the final night is free. High-season rates (Dec 1–Apr 30) are shown below; for low-season rates subtract \$10 per person for the Deluxe bungalow, and \$5 for the Al Natural. Bring beach towels and a flashlight, and any other goodies you can’t live without.

Isla Bastimentos. ☎ 757-9004 or 6576-8605. www.bocas.com/alnatural.htm. 5 units. Packages are per person, based on double occupancy: Al Natural Package \$95–\$120 first night, \$70–\$95 thereafter; All-Inclusive Package \$120 Al Natural, and \$145 Deluxe. No credit cards. Amenities: Meals; sports equipment; tours; Ping-Pong; games. In room: Ceiling fan (deluxe only), no phone.

Casa Cayuco ✨ ✨ Kids This is the newest lodge on Isla Bastimentos, and it is the most kid-friendly due to its tranquil beach, its fun jungle-style lodge, and other features such as a forest trail that meanders past a small lagoon with a “pet” caiman. The lodge is geared toward groups and retreats, but they’ll accept independent travelers booking on their own. Their two-story lodge feels very “Swiss Family Robinson,” with high ceilings supported by log beams and not much else. The entire lodge is open-air,