

What the trip is about:

The trip from Panama to Colombia (or vice versa) is typically a 5 day journey aboard a boat (monohull sailboat, catamaran, motor yacht or speed boat) that consists of 3 days of touring around the San Blas islands and 2 days of open water navigation to Cartagena, Colombia. In all cases, excepting the speed boat, you sleep aboard the vessel on a single or double berth assigned to you. If you travel by speed boat you sleep on a hammock or bed in a cabin on the islands.

The San Blas islands belong to Kuna Yala, an autonomous indigenous reservation. The Kuna Indians are very nice and friendly people. They have preserved their culture from outside influence for a really long time, so you'll see a very primitive and beautiful way of living that's rarely seen anywhere else these days. These coconut palm islands are the epitome of paradise with their white sand beaches, crystal clear waters, and super colorful reefs and sea life. The Kuna charge a \$10 entrance fee and a \$2 port fee.

This trip will most likely become one of your finest travel memories from your backpacking days!

Cost and what it includes:

Prices range between \$500 and \$550 with some exceptions (\$350 for a speed boat or \$600 for a luxury catamaran). The price difference is sometimes due to comfort and luxury of the boat, but also due to popularity of the vessel. Popular vessels fill up fast and tend to charge more. All of your meals are included with lodging. Water and juice will be provided, but you need to bring your own soda, alcohol and snacks. Most boats have snorkel and fishing gear, too!

IMPORTANT: There are no ATMs in San Blas and you have to pay for the trip in cash, so make sure you have enough money for the boat, transportation to get there, and a little extra for beers and souvenirs on the islands. The first ATM you'll see is in Cartagena. There are NO ATMs in La Miel, Capurganá, or Sapzurro, so if you plan on finishing there, you must have enough cash for food and lodging for a few days in these places. You can exchange your dollars for Colombian pesos easily in Capurganá.

Departure ports & cost to get there:

The trip can start in Portobelo, Puerto Lindo, El Porvenir or Carti. The first 2 are port towns 30 miles west of San Blas, so there is an 8 hour navigation from there to San Blas to start off the trip. These ports have the advantage of being reachable by public transportation for a minimum cost (\$5-\$7). El Porvenir and Carti are in San Blas itself, so you start the journey already on the islands, which is nice, but getting there is more expensive (-\$40).

Portobelo & Puerto Lindo:

To get to these coastal towns you have to take the Express bus to Colon at the Albrook Bus Terminal in Panama City. You can get off at Sabanitas where you'll find a Rey Supermarket. You can shop for

your booze and snacks here. Outside of the supermarket you'll see local buses that take you to Portobelo. To get to Puerto Lindo take the bus that says Costa Arriba.

Carti and El Porvenir:

To get to Carti you have to take a 4x4 SUV from Panama City on the Pacific ocean, to the port of Carti on the Atlantic ocean for \$25. It's a 2.5 hour ride through beautiful, but windy mountain roads. If your departure start point is El Porvenir you have to take a water taxi in Carti that'll cost you \$10 and will take about 25 minutes. It's a good idea to waterproof your backpack. We take care of the booking of the 4x4 and water taxi for you, but you have to pay for each at the time of service.

Arrival ports:

The arrival town is normally Cartagena, but there are some boats that prefer to travel to the border town of La Miel (Panama) or Sapzurro and Capurgana (Colombia). Boats that travel to the border do so inside the archipelago and you get to see the most preserved Kuna villages as well as enjoy the Darien jungle once you reach the Sapzurro-Capurganá area.

Cartagena:

Huge, fun city. You'll be dropped off at the Yacht club and can easily hail a cab to the hostel of your choice. There's an ATM about 100m from the yacht club, too.

La Miel, Sapzurro, Capurganá (highly recommended!):

Beautiful and small beach towns. No ATMs so you have to have money for food and lodging for a few days. From here to mainland Colombia you have to take a \$25 speed boat that takes 3 hours and drops you off in Turbo, where you can catch a bus to Cartagena, Medellin, or anywhere else in Colombia. You can take cash out in Turbo.

A NOTE ABOUT DEPARTURE & ARRIVAL DATES: Departure dates are not set in stone. Boats do not leave on the date set unless they have reached their full passenger capacity and weather conditions are good. During high season (Dec-Mar & July-Aug) you're probably leaving on the date announced because there's enough people to fill up the boats. During low season (Apr-Jun & Sep-Nov), expect to have a 1 or 2 day delay. Please be flexible with dates. Do not book a flight for 2 or 3 days after your expected arrival to Cartagena. Your arrival may be delayed due to weather, or other unforeseen circumstances. Drop off times can range between the morning of the 5th day to the evening of a possible 6th day. Again, be flexible.

How to pack:

Try to pack a small bag with the stuff you'll actually need on the boat so you can stow your big backpack away, to allow for more room for everybody inside the boat. You'll need a couple pairs of shorts, a couple t-shirts, bathing suits, a hat, sun glasses, sunscreen, bug spray, a camera, toiletries,

sea sickness pills, a light rain jacket and one pair of sandals. That's it. Pack the rest in your big bag and forget about it until you get to Colombia.

Sample itinerary and cost:

The actual islands and activities will be different depending on the boat, captain, weather conditions, etc. but this is just to show you an example of what to expect:

Trip aboard Victory sailboat starting at El Porvenir

You'll arrive on the boat at El Porvenir island and you'll sail to Chichime island where you'll get to lounge on the beach and snorkel all day. You'll have your meals on the boat. The next day you'll sail to West Holandes Cays. You'll see a beautiful new island, snorkel, read, hang out with your crew mates. The 3rd day you'll sail to Coco Bandero, another beautiful group of islands where you'll get to swim from island to island, visit a Kuna family and check out the beautiful hand woven molas. On the evening of the 3rd day or early on the 4th morning, you'll start sailing to Cartagena. Prepare for 36 hours of open ocean navigation! There are few experiences as beautiful and peaceful as sailing the big blue. But you might get a little sea sick, so do bring some motion sickness pills along, just in case!

\$500 sailboat

\$25 4x4 SUV

\$10 Kuna Yala entrance fee

\$2 Kuna Yala port fee

\$10 water taxi to El Porvenir

TOTAL TRIP COST: \$547

How to reserve your spot on a boat:

You can reserve a spot on the boat of your choice online here. You have to make a \$50 reservation deposit and pay the balance in cash upon boarding the vessel. Ex: \$500 sailboat. Pay \$50 reservation online, pay \$450 remainder on the boat.

What is expected of you during the trip:

Captains that have a deck hand/hostess usually do not require any help from passengers (though I'm sure no one would deny an extra hand), but single handling captains will absolutely need your help with the sailing, cooking and cleaning up. These are perhaps the most valuable trips, as the team work required for a successful journey brings people together in bonding experiences that lead

to longer lasting friendships after the trip! Have a good attitude, be open to new people and experiences and have fun!

P.S. Bury the Lonely Planet in the bottom of your big backpack. Too many people miss experiencing the islands and the sailing fully, due to reading about what's coming up next. You'll have time to read up on Colombia once you disembark. Enjoy living in the present moment during the journey!