

## **SAN BLAS ARCHIPELAGO - PANAMA**

The Unexplored Caribbean

Sailing in Paradise

By Marcia Pavarini

**Imagine an archipelago, almost deserted, with an island for every day of the year, all surrounded by a turquoise blue sea, white sands and dotted with coconut palms.**

You do not have to die to get to know paradise, it is within reach of those who are willing to visit it here on Earth. This little piece of heaven, inhabiting the imagination of those who seek to know paradisiac scenery, is in the Caribbean, but it is not that Caribbean invaded by hordes of tourists with luxury resorts, it is the pure, primitive Caribbean with pristine beaches and atolls surrounded by transparent water in various shades of blue, white sand, dotted with green coconut trees. A postcard scenario, which perpetuates the memory of the visit. Such is San Blas, a most incredible place of dreams in Panama, little explored by the rest of the world.

The archipelago of San Blas is composed of 365 islands, one for each day of the year, but only 49 islands are inhabited, a perfect place for those who want to find peace, enjoy the idleness and be surrounded by the unspoiled nature.

The San Blas Islands, officially the GUNA YALA archipelago, are part of the autonomous territory of the Kuna ethnic group, which extends approximately 320 km in the north coastal strip, on the Caribbean coast of Panama. San Blas is home to the KUNA who lead their territory with minimal interference from the government of Panama. The Kuna control all the islands, lodging, transportation and, of course, conscious tourism.

Thanks to the incessant effort of the Kuna tribe, the place remains untouched, safe from pollution, tourist chaos and major developments, where nature can remain authentic.

### **SAN BLAS ON BOARD OF A CATAMARAN - SAILING IN PARADISE**

There are several ways to visit San Blas. The most interesting and exciting experience of cruising around the islands is aboard a catamaran. The great advantage of staying on a catamaran, rather than cabins or a sailboat, is that besides stability, comfort and internal and external space, it is possible to reach the most deserted and paradisiac islands, with the chance to meet several in one day, and still meet the captivating Kuna community to appreciate its culture and its intricate and colorful handicrafts.

My dream of sailing on this blue piece of the planet became reality when I discovered Frederick L Ebers through the link [www.cruisesanblas.com](http://www.cruisesanblas.com). Fred, of American origin and Panamanian heart, has a background in the Merchant Maritime Academy, with a vast curriculum of

experience in all oceans, and owns the luxurious Zenith Catamaran, 48 feet (14.64 m) long and 25 feet (6m) wide, which makes the tour of the islands of San Blas.

It is through the link that the tour is booked. And look at the travel tip, if you say you heard about him through my blog, you get a 20% discount. Fred's email is [cruisesanblas@gmail.com](mailto:cruisesanblas@gmail.com)

Fred also provides transportation from Panama City to the Port of Carti (from where the boats that take passengers and their luggage to the catamaran depart)

The Zenith comfortably accommodates eight people (or four couples) in their four suites, plus the captain (Fred) and his assistant. This season it is Marina, an Argentine "girl", nice, gentle, with hands of a fairy in the kitchen, and also plays guitar and sings beautifully.

The catamaran is anchored near the pier of the small port Carti, Niga Kantule. The port is made up of a pair of official buildings, a spacious parking lot and numerous wooden boats anchored on the beach (owned by the Kuna) that transport passengers and luggage to the tour boats.

To experience this unforgettable journey, it was us (my husband and I) and three more couples-friends. Fred and Marina were already waiting for us aboard the Zenith, with their captivating smiles.

As soon as I boarded, wow, I realized how big the catamaran was. From that moment, we would live a great and unforgettable coexistence not only with the preserved nature, but with the ship's hosts.

The first contact with the boat is the outside deck (cockpit lounge), a covered space where meals are served and where the daily gatherings take place with happy hours with aperitifs, wines, juices (appetizers) and snacks, after the leisurely day of beach and sunshine.

All, I said, all meals and drinks are included in the package, from the moment we step on the boat until the time of departure, including dinner at the Kaiber Nega restaurant on Banidup Island.

Before even going down to the cabins, I noticed that on the huge deck, the Zenith is equipped with stand-up boards, paddles, three kayaks, snorkel equipment, fishing rods, a veritable arsenal of aquatic fun for those who want more adventure, and even has yoga mats and a huge hammock.

On the way to the cabins on the lower floor are the kitchen and the spacious living room, but everyone prefers to take their meals at the table outside to enjoy the scenery and the sunset. The cabins are very comfortable, have a fan, a plug for charging cell phones, cabinets and drawers. All of the bathrooms have fresh, hot or cold water. As a courtesy, Fred supplies the bathrooms with shampoo, conditioner, four towels per passenger, plus outside the beach towels.

### **Island Perro Chico (Achudub)**

Our first "pit stop" was Isla Chico Island. This magnificent island offers an attraction beyond turquoise water and white sand: near the beach a few meters deep, rests an old sunken ship. Its recesses hosts a nursery of rich marine fauna and flora, with colorful fish and corals, one of the most interesting places to practice snorkeling. As part of the hull is out of the water at low tide, it is possible to stand on it. It is a full palate of color for those who like to photograph from below or above water.

From there we continued to the island Nuinudup.

This wonderful island is in front of the other island of BANIDUP, as spectacular as it is. Nuinudup is the kind of island that made me feel like Eve (in bikinis) in paradise. It does not take more than a few minutes to go around this island. White sand, deep blue sea and coconut trees. These are the ornaments of this and all the islands of San Blas ... and who would need more? We stayed there on the beach, enjoying the infinite peace and the deep blue of the waters, enjoying a unique experience, as if nature were ours alone.

But it is ISLA ESTRELLAS that attracts the most visitors, and as the name of the beach already says, it is a meeting point with the stars of the sea, which can be seen even from the water.

### **Meals on board**

Each meal prepared by Marina was a pleasant surprise. The day always starts with a hearty and varied breakfast, with juices, jellies, fruit, eggs, granola, yogurt, pancakes, etc, etc, in short, a multitude of options for all tastes. The meals, based on fish and seafood, are sumptuous and very well balanced. Marina prepares elaborate desserts such as pies, brownies and mousses.

We even had a barbecue at one of the dinners. Fred cooked a steak on the grill on the stern of the catamaran, and hey, it was delicious!

So, the advice is: forget the diet if you're on one because eating and drinking are always at your disposal, and to tell you the truth, it's irresistible.

### **ISLA SOLIDAD MIRIA - Visit to the KUNA Community - Indigenous Culture in a Tropical Paradise SAN BLAS**

The most remarkable experience of the trip was the visit to the Kuna community on Solidad Miria Island, the largest island in the archipelago. Fred landed the catamaran on the tiny jetty of the community for the supply of water on board. That was when we could experience some of the culture of the Kuna Indians. Solidad Miria is home to the Kuna, whose language is the Tule. Only 10% speak Spanish fluently

It is hard to imagine that in the middle of the 21st century, the Kuna will keep their customs so ingrained and a tribal lifestyle. There is no mass tourism because the Kuna do not allow it. They own their land and take their livelihood from it. They have set boundaries for visitors and boats that arrive daily to the islands and do not alter their small world.

The huts of the Kuna Indians are rudimentary and very primitive, made with wood and bamboo, natural materials that they find on the island and surroundings.

Kuna children and adults reach the moored sailboats, paddling their kayaks, to offer their crafts, fish or lobsters.

"MOLAS" are one of the most admirable traditional handicrafts woven by the women of the tribe. This is a meticulous technique in which they superimpose two to five layers of fabrics of different colors, cutting the contour of the drawings and sewing them on the canvas with almost invisible stitches. The motifs represent scenes of everyday life, elements of nature (animals and flowers) or geometric figures. The job can take up to two months. They also make earrings, bracelets, necklaces and other adornments made from pebbles called Shakira. Their culture is matriarchal, the woman is the boss. To them belong the movable and immovable, and to them falls any family decision.

### **ATOL GORGI DUP**

On the third day of navigation between the islands, we continue to the ATOL GORGI DUP, an absolute whim of nature. The atoll consists of a strip of blinding white sand surrounded by a blue sea of dreams.

From there, it was another hop to other islands MIRIADUP, TIADUP, NAGUARCHIRDUP and WAILIDUP. In the latter are the "Cabañas" on the sea and a restaurant owned by a Kuna family.

San Blas is the number one destination for responsible and ecological tourism in Panama and probably in Central America. Authentic, almost deserted, unique in beauty and full of options, the blue archipelago of San Blas is a (almost) hidden destination that keeps nature intact for the future of the planet.

And, remember, when leaving San Blas, take nothing but photos, leave nothing but footprints, take nothing but longing to return.

### **HOW TO GET THERE**

The city of Panama, the capital of the country, is the first destination, before traveling to the archipelago of San Blas. Several airlines serve the country, have Copa Airlines, Avianca, United, with scheduled flights.

Panama has the privilege of being bathed, by the Pacific Ocean, on the south coast, and by the Caribbean on the northern coastal strip.

Panama City lies on the Pacific coast and the San Blas archipelago is on the north coast in the Caribbean, so to get from one ocean to another, you need to cross the country on the oblique cross, but this is not a problem, because Panama is a narrow country. The trip from the capital to the Cartí terminal (in the Caribbean Sea) from where the boats leave for the islands of the San Blas archipelago are about 120 km. The first 80 km are made on an express highway heading east, and the other 40 km crosses a mountain range to reach the other side, through a narrow and winding road through the heart of the mountains with a beautiful view of the lush forest. In this last section, there are two checkpoints, the first one is controlled by Panamanian military, and the second controlled by the Kuna. Both require identity documents. The Kuna check to see if the car is 4x4 or, at least, capable to continue travel. In total, from the capital to the boat terminal it is a two and half hours to three hours journey.

### **ACCESS OPTIONS**

1) By car 4x4 departing from the city of Panama, to the boat terminal Cartí. As I have already mentioned, San Blas or Guna Yala belongs to the autonomous territory of the Kuna and they are regulating access to the site not only as to the type of vehicle, as well as the time of entry and exit, so at the Kuna check point, if you do not have a 4x4 car, passport or ID at hand and at the right time, entry is barred.

#### 2) Kunas Transportation

Those who do not have a 4x4 can hire the transport service that the Kunas offer. It is not worth renting a 4x4 to leave parked in the harbor while you wander the islands. The collectives are comfortable, with capacity for five people, air conditioning, and the best, they catch the passenger at any address in the capital and lead to the boat terminal. The price per person is \$ 50.00 dollars.

FOR KUNA TRANSPORTATION contact Fred on the phone and WhatsApp  
+ 507 63997251 can arrange the transport

3) By plane (airplane) - From Albrook airport in the capital, small airplanes depart very early, to the cities of El Porvenir, capital of the Comarca Guna Yala, or Corazón de Jesus. Zenith can anchor near any of the two airports and pick up passengers. The flight does not last more than 30 minutes.

#### RATES FOR ENTERING THE GUNA YALA TERRITORY

At the Kuna checkpoint, an entrance fee per person is paid: \$ 20 for non-residents and \$ 5 for Panamanians or residents.

Schedule (restricted) of passage through the Kuna check point for entry into the territory: 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

#### BEST TIME TO VISIT SAN BLAS

In fact, in Panama there is no winter, any time of year is good to enjoy the beauties of San Blas. From December to March is the high season: dry with wind and the sun shines radiant, practically cloudless in the sky.

From April to November there are sporadic rains during the day, but there is no wind, which leaves the sea a calm lake.

#### WHAT TO TAKE ON THE SAILBOAT

- Many bikinis or swimsuits because you are on the beach all day
- Light and simple clothes, such as shorts, t-shirts, bath exits, etc. the luxury can be left on land just as the shoes gets dropped off at the entrance of the boat.
- Photographic camera, if possible GoPro waterproof, to take pictures of the beautiful starfish that are inches deep, and also the sunken ship, a nursery of colorful fish and corals.
- Sun block, hat or cap
- Bring nausea medicine (if very sensitive)
- Carry cash in dollars (preferably small denominations) to pay the Kuna collective and entrance fees in the Park (beach fees are included in the package) in the territory does not have credit card service.

#### OTHER JOURNEYS WITH THE ZENITH CATAMARAN WHEN HE IS NOT A TOUR IN SAN BLAS

### Sailing from PUERTO LINDO TO PLAYA BLANCA

In addition to sailing in San Blas, Zenith also makes the day trip from Puerto Lindo to Playa Blanca, for a dip in the amazing reef and also to enjoy the immaculately white sand beach, where you do not have access by car

### Sailing in PORTOBELO

Another beautiful day trip is sailing with the Zenith to the historic port of Portobelo, discovered by Christopher Columbus, on his third voyage to the mainland, following the route of the pirates, with access, by boat to the fortress.

On both tours (Puerto Lindo and Portobelo) lunch is included. to

See more information and video at [www.cruisesanblas.com](http://www.cruisesanblas.com)

Fred's telephone number for more information in Portuguese at WhatsApp: 507 6399 7251.

### PHOTO GALLERY

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