

panama surprise

Anchored at two secluded lodges on
Jeff Book treks into the jungle,
and samples a bounty



Through binoculars, I gaze at a furry brown blob draped over a high tree branch. Gradually, the sloth reaches for a leaf. It stops halfway, apparently exhausted by the effort, and sinks back into its usual torpor. I move on, knowing I can't win a slow-down showdown with a master of inertia.

Besides, I shouldn't be slothful when there are so many other marvels to see. I've come to Isla Bastimentos, off Panama's Caribbean coast, to experience nature in rare abundance. Panama boasts enormous biodiversity, thanks to millions of years of species-mingling on this narrow land bridge between North and South America.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHELLEY METCALF

Panama's Isla Bastimentos,
goes above and below the waves,
of tropical flavors.



Surprisingly, a country known as an isthmus has 1,500 islands. Much of this one belongs to Isla Bastimentos National Marine Park, 32,700 acres of tropical rain forest, mangrove wetlands, and aquamarine waters rich in coral reefs and other sea life.

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Guests at La Loma Lodge
sit down to seafood
feasts at a shared table.



I put myself within close range of it all, choosing two off-the-grid lodges that blend eco-adventure with creature comforts. Both La Loma Jungle Lodge and Tranquilo Bay Eco Adventure Lodge reflect the ingenuity and zeal of the young expats who built and run them. Both honor the ideals of sustainable tourism, not only preserving the environment but also employing and supporting the local Ngobe people. And both are isolated yet accessible. An hour's flight takes me from the bristling high-rises of Panama City to the sleepy town of Bocas del Toro, where I'm just a scenic boat ride away from the dock of either lodge.

At La Loma, steps lead up from a dining pavilion to three guest cabins perched in the tropical foliage. "We can't imagine not sleeping close to nature here—hearing the creatures, being awakened by the full moon," says Margaret Ann, who created the rustic lodge with her

husband, Henry Escudero. Equipped with propane-heated showers and beds draped with mosquito nets, the thatched, open-sided structures feel breezy and private, like tree houses. The steep climb to mine, the highest, pays off with views of the bay below.

In this remote spot, self-sufficiency is not just a nicety but a necessity, achieved with solar cells, rainwater collection, and septic toilets. The lodge grows papayas, bananas, mangoes, and herbs. It also processes cacao, which ends up in fine European chocolate.

At night, guests—many of them young couples from the United States—gather at a communal table and sample La Loma's bounty in dishes such as fish with yucca in lemon grass sauce; smoked chicken, avocado, and white bean salad; and pineapple-mango crumble. We talk excitedly about the day's discoveries. About the troupe of white-faced capuchin monkeys that swings through

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Tranquilo Bay

natural luxury in panama

La Loma Jungle Lodge:

Rates from \$110 per night per person based on double occupancy, including meals and the "juice of the day," some activities, and transport from Bocas del Toro; thejunglelodge.com.

Tranquilo Bay Eco Adventure Lodge:

Rates start at \$1,000 per person for a three-night package including meals, beverages, basic activities, and ground transportation in Panama City, and transport from Bocas del Toro; tranquilobay.com.

Getting There:

Regional airlines Air Panama and Aeroperlas offer regular flights between Panama City and Bocas del Toro.

the leafy canopy. About the iridescent blue morphos and other butterflies Henry and Margaret raise in a screened shed. About the exotic oropendula, a black bird with a tail dipped in gold and a haunting, burbling cry.

On another day, I join guide Rutilio Milton as he poles his wooden boat down a mangrove-lined channel, pointing out sloths, parrots, saucer-size spiders, and a caiman (alligator) I'd mistaken for a floating log. Later we wade through a rain-flooded cave as bats swirl in our headlamp beams, coming close but never touching us. It's an Indiana Jones adventure without the menace—gloom, but no doom.

It's quite a contrast to the slipper-shape islets I visit a couple of days later. Ringed by sugary sand and swaying palms, they look so dreamy I have to blink to be sure I'm not in a beer commercial. After snorkeling in the off-shore coral gardens, I enjoy a beach picnic and, yes, cold



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cerveza with guests from my next lodge, Tranquilo Bay. We'd already gone swimming and kayaking, toured a cacao plantation, and watched bottlenose dolphins cavort. (The wide-ranging activity menu also includes fishing, scuba diving, hiking, surfing, and visiting a Ngobe village.) In the evenings we chat over drinks on the veranda before going inside to savor shrimp chimichangas with chayote squash or chicken curry with coconut rice.

"Most of the time I'm doing things I'd be doing on vacation," marvels our guide, Jim Kimball, who runs Tranquilo Bay with his wife, Renee, and their friends Jay and Stefanie Viola. Getting to the fun part took years of hard work as novice builders Jim and Jay turned raw jungle into a spacious main lodge; six homey, air-conditioned cabins; and such necessities as electrical, water, and septic systems. They even included a communications tower for Internet access.

A pioneer spirit and a deep respect for the environment define both lodges. In contrast to La Loma's rustic design, Tranquilo Bay's is more high-tech and family-friendly, with expanses of lawn (though most of the 110-acre property remains untouched). Both embody the dreams of their owners to give not only guests but their own families an escape from the stress of urban living. Ultimately, that dream—of discovering a simpler, more natural way of life—may be the best reason of all to journey to Isla Bastimentos. 🌿

