

Blogette on Bocas del Toro, Panama

Aug-Oct, 2011

Bocas del Toro is an archipelago on the Caribbean coast of Panama, near the Costa Rica border, stretching about 45 mi N-S, 20-30 mi E-W. It has become one of the two most popular Panama destinations for cruisers and it is home to many many American ex-pats who are buying property on the various islands and “livin’ the dream” in a spacious house with a gorgeous view. The demographics are: (1) 300-400 young and not-so-young European, Israeli, and American travelers at any one time, looking for cheap digs and an alcohol and/or drug-fueled “good time”, (2) 200-400 American and a few Panamanian entrepreneurs running hostels, hotels, restaurants and discos or just being retired, (3) 20-40 Chinese who run ALL the “supermarkets” and hardware stores in town and with a few exceptions treat all their customers with bored robot-like indifference, and (4) 2000-3000 local folks, mostly members of the regional Ngobe (nyobay) tribe mixed with some Afro-Carib people many of whose ancestors arrived from Jamaica to work on the French attempt at a Panama canal and remained. The indigenous folks provide water-taxi service, fix motors, and follow their own lifestyle quite separately, watching the foreigners with amused reserve,.

Bocas has pluses and minuses. Some pluses: it is a good place to spend some of hurricane season because the absence of much wind, the calm waters and extensive coastline make it easy to pull anchor and move around, towing your dinghy and acting like a motorboat; Bocas Town has a grubby lazy charm with everyone in the mood to be in a good mood and very few security issues; and the weather changes little so the flora and fauna are wonderful. For me the minuses were: contrary to the pictures below, it was mostly always cloudy (shades of Ithaca, only MUCH warmer); away from the open ocean, the waters tended to be cloudy green with many jellyfish; there were no Panamanian newspapers available and the only music heard at night was American and American pop-style Latin; and as a short-term visitor there wasn’t much opportunity to connect with actual Bocatorenos. I should add that Fred, who spends his days seeking amusement, loved being there.

A few images:



One truly nice thing about Bocas were the mountains on the mainland, a lovely background at all times. They reach 7,000' or more. The trees on the right half of the shoreline are bare except for a thin canopy and they are 150'-200' high.

Most of the shoreline is empty except for occasional small, inconspicuous Ngobe homes or large bright expat McMansions.



It's not Panama Red*-- it's Panama Green.

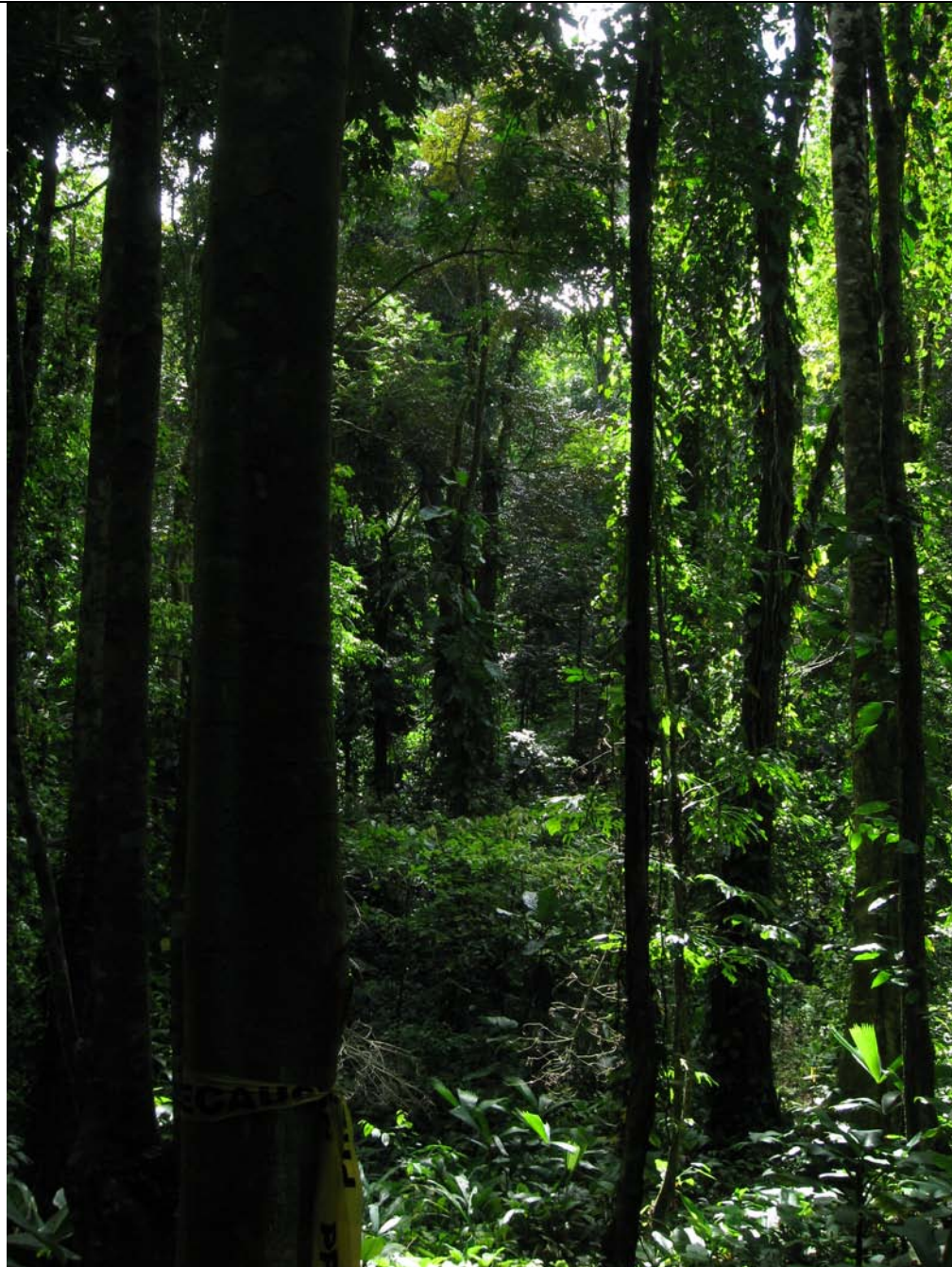
It is hard to convey the lushness of the vegetation here. This is a shoreline cliff with leaves starting about 6' above the sand. The tree-trunks on the left are about 120' tall. How many different kinds of leaves can you count?

*My local expert tells me Panama Red was top weed back in the day.



Check out the sticky toes!

Bocas has red frogs on one island, blue frogs on the mainland and green frogs somewhere else. It took a strenuous (and gorgeous) hike on Isla Bastimentos to find these red frogs. They have cute tiny blue dots on them. Mercifully I got out of the jungle before dark (just!)



My hike to find red frogs was

a) unwise: I was alone, had no idea where the trail ended up or how long it was. And except for some zip-line guides, no one knew I was up there.

b) absolutely stunning. Apparently this part of the island has never been logged and this has to be original forest. The trees felt like redwoods as far as height went. The bases of the trees are about 30' below my camera and you are only seeing about 60% of the height of the foreground trees. There were very few mosquitoes and no snakes while the sun shone. I had no wish to learn what the forest was like after dark.



A Ngobe house on Palos Lagoon. Blue barrel is probably a rain barrel. Pretty idyllic. You can see why ex-pats are building here. The residents of this house travel by dugout canoe. Nearest small cluster of houses was 1-2 miles away. Most Ngobe homes have thatch roofs. The Ngobe lands extend 150 mi along the Caribbean coast from Colon to Bocas, from the sea to the continental divide. There is only one road, going from the mainland town nearest Bocas over the mountains to David, on the Pacific coast.



Ngobe house near Bocas Town (Carenero I.) with outhouse over the bay. If there is a pipe running out to it, the outhouse is also a fresh water shower. When this family's son needed a house, he just built his own further out in the water. Never got inside a Bocas house but looking from the outside almost every household seemed to have a TV, many had a clotheswasher, and hammocks were used for sleeping. No screens. Toddlers learn early not to fall in the water. Clusters of youngsters would sit in a family dugout tied to a pier and play quietly for hours. The Ngobe are quiet. Our American voices sounded like donkeys braying. Children attend the local school and all speak Ngobe and Spanish.



- L: Ngobe woman in traditional dress in David. Enough Ngobe women were dressed like this that they didn't draw much attention. In Bocas, the Ngobe women just dressed in standard Panamanian campesino attire: tight pants and a tee shirt. The Ngobe are fairly stocky, strong-looking and handsome. Rather like brown-skinned Japanese.
- R: This little charmer is 10-yr-old Lauriano, who paddled me in his VERY TIPPY dugout (it's a log, no keel) to deliver a book to another sailboat. Lauriano was going boat-to-boat selling johnny-cakes made by his aunt. We chattered in Spanish and he was smart as a whip. Having now been in one of these dugouts I am in awe of the family groups I saw placidly paddling somewhere in a canoe or fishing, with children sitting quietly. I have no idea whether the women and very young children can swim but they are superb paddlers and I never saw anyone capsize. (White in foreground is lifeline).



L: Bocas Town was mostly beach shacks but this new mini-hotel on I. Carenero was kind of cute. And probably pricey.

R: Central plaza in David, the big little city (1/2 M) on the Pacific coast near the Costa Rica border. I made a quick trip there and liked it very much. Tallest building was 5 stories, the people were helpful and friendly, there was a healthy-economy, regional-hub bustle, and there were NO gringos or visible tourists. On very short acquaintance it might be my favorite town in Panama. The ex-pat real estate bubble in Boquetes is about a 40 min drive up into the mountains from here.