

## From Darien to the Panama Canal



Sapzurro Colombia is on border with Panama; the area is part of the fabled Darien gap. Truly lush jungle here. The town must be listed in Lonely Planet because a steady stream of blonde backpackers drifted through. A lively real estate market as Colombians from Medellin and Cali buy up ocean-front and ocean-view property here and in neighboring Capurgana. Local folks are almost all Afro-Caribbean and resent what is happening.

Tashtego cheesecake.



Typical one-room store found in every little community along Caribbean coast of Colombia and Panama. Onion, fresh eggs and potatoes on floor to keep cool, tomatoes, carrots, cabbage and limes also available. Fresh bread and an amazing variety of other items. Tinned meats are important food source and local people knew when to get fresh fish but we weren't there long enough to figure it out. Anyway, local fried fresh fish was divine, impossible to get except at small restaurants (fondas) along the coast.



Sapzurro: on Mother's Day the whole town (maybe 800) hung out near the beach front and enjoyed the day. This is the second to last round in a game of musical chairs that mothers participated in. There was also story-telling and one woman who was an amazing pantomimist. Watching the activities I reflected how this community size was characteristic most human communities in pre-history. These people, who know each other from childhood, are tightly connected. It would be interesting to know how they also preserve privacy or their own sense of separateness. Or maybe they don't.

The San Blas islands are an archipelago along the coast of Panama from Colombia northward for 200 miles. They are part of Kuna Yala, the homeland of the indigenous Kuna. In addition to, or because of, an intact and remote homeland, the Kuna retain their own language and culture. Watching the mix of what modern technology is appropriated and what is ignored is quite interesting. Kuna society is matrilineal – property is passed from mother to daughter and at marriage, men move into the wife's family compound. NONE of Kuna Yala can be sold to non-Kuna. Yay. A 3-part essay on the Kuna is posted separately, so I will only offer one picture here.



Elegiria (left) and I hit it off when she said that by choice she had never married by and I high-fived her. She and her sister Elisinda are wearing traditional women's clothing: sarong-wrapped skirt, usually a dark blue print, puffy sleeve chiffon blouse with an elaborately applied wrap around the torso – the *mola* for which the Kuna are famous. Notice the gorgeous arm wraps on Eligiria – see Kuna Yala Part III for more information about *mol*as and *chakira*.



The Kuna live in paradise. The San Blas islands, especially the outer ones, have become a cruiser's mecca because there are so many of them, the water is clear, and the weather is almost uniformly good. This is Fred on his "one-tree desert island" that he has been searching for when he isn't searching for a waterfall. He is wearing a bathing suit. Some of these islands may seem deserted but there are always Kuna fishing or lobstering nearby and they are very offended by nudity, especially on big white-skinned people.



Portobelo, Panama. Columbus (aka Colon) sailed into Portobelo Bay about 1502 and then kept going. 100 years later it became a big trading center for the Spanish fleet arriving to collect the year's gold production. Spain built 7 forts around the bay, juicy targets for 2 centuries of English pirates and privateers. Apparently the Americans used most of the stones from these forts to build the breakwater at the Atlantic mouth of the Panama Canal in Colon. Oops. The Customs House in background dates to the early 18<sup>th</sup> C but floors underneath go back to the 16th C. It was restored by Spain about 20 years ago.



Portobelo is a primarily Afro-Caribbean town of 1000, very poor, which is a tourist destination only because of the forts, the Customs House, and the Cathedral.

I used to think I responded to Spanish Colonial architecture so intensely because it reminded me of childhood in Mexico. But I have decided that the architecture, like the best of the ancient world, has a sense of rhythm and proportion that is deeply satisfying. This is under the colonnade on the Customs House away from the seafront.



This statue of Christ carrying a cross is made of ebony and is known as “The Black Christ of Portobelo”. Wealthy sinners donate rich robes to clothe the statue – this year’s robe is velvet and lace and silver applique. The statue is believed to possess miraculous powers and is an object of genuine reverence among religious Panamians and is culturally significant to black Portobelans.

This is one church whose doors are open 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, and it is never empty.



#### Colon, Panama

Because of its desperate poverty and accompanying high crime rate, Colon has a terrible reputation. But we liked anchoring near the private fishing club, Club Nautico, for the convenience to stores and bus to Panama City. The best part is watching the operations of the container port, which must be one of the world’s largest. The ships are huge, the cranes are huge, and they whip these containers on and off the ships 24/7 – fascinating to watch.



One of the several national costumes of Panama is the *pollera*, a ruffle-y frilly concoction that the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> daughters and wives of wealthy land owners wore. This charming one is worn by a pretty little girl in Colon, at one of the national holiday parades, definitely NOT the daughter of a wealthy landowner.



Panama is a nation of 3.5 million people, of whom 2 million live in Panama City (aka and very accurately called simply Panama.) This is its skyline. Almost all of these high-rises are 90% empty. Can you spell “L-A-U-N-D-R-Y” ? And the president of Panama was outraged, just outraged, when Sarkosy recently described Panama as a “money paradise.”

These huge buildings are built with very little infrastructure. When “The Donald” came to Panama to open the new Trump building (ugly!), it rained very hard and His Trumpship was trapped in his own building for 4 hours by water 6’ deep in the streets.



Panama’s newest building is seen between 2 foreground skyscrapers. It is known locally as El Tornillo (the Screw).

detail of its construction





Although we never got a chance to be line-handlers for a sailboat transiting the Canal, we did spend bits of time at both sets of Canal locks. The day we carried our injectors from Colon to Panama to be cleaned and checked, we spent a day at the Miraflores locks on Pacific side, splurged on an excellent buffet and waited for a ship to come through. Here is Fred with the perfect ship coming toward him.