



San Blas Panama: Travel Tips & Useful Information

(Including suggest packing list)

The isthmus of Panama is a prolific biological corridor between North and South America. The Guna Yala Nation (also known as San Blas) is one of Panama's five indigenous territories and encompasses an archipelago located along the northeast Caribbean coast. The Guna (or Kuna) have succeeded in keeping their islands undisturbed by western tourism development and therefore retaining a strong culture.

We have obtained special permission from the local Sailas (chiefs) to paddle this protected archipelago of over 350 islands. Our paddling journey is a real kayak expedition and will take us approximately 90 km among Guna Yala's picture-perfect islands, sand cays, and along primary jungle coastlines that beg for closer inspection. We'll camp on isolated beaches, explore clear freshwater rivers flowing through primary forests, and snorkel above stunning coral reefs that are among the best preserved in the central Caribbean. A small, motorized panga will transport much of our water and food as the outlying islands are quite remote.

With its astonishing biological diversity, the region has been the subject of numerous scientific studies, many of which suggest that Guna Yala has the highest diversity of coral species as well as the best reef development in Panama. Consequently, the marine life throughout is superb, with tropical fish, dolphins, sea turtles, rays, and possibly dugongs.

Vast undisturbed forests cover much of the Panamanian isthmus and 100 land mammal species (including the 200 kg endangered spectacled bear), 30 reptile species, and 440 bird species inhabit the area. It's a privilege to be a guest of these Guna communities, some of which we'll have the good fortune to visit and to experience a taste of their way of life. The Guna women still wear nose rings and traditional vibrant rainbow-colored dresses emblazoned with the world-famous mola patterns of fishes, birds, jungle animals, or geometric designs. The Guna still use cayucos, curved wooden dugout canoes (keel-less and rudder-less) with sails, to navigate their island territory. After our week as guests in the Guna Yala Nation, we'll return to Panama City to finish our adventure with a visit to the Panama Canal and a traditional evening meal.

PADDLING EXPERIENCE



This trip is a kayak expedition designed for people with some previous experience paddling sea kayaks. You do not have to be an expert or know how to roll. However, you should have practiced a wet exit and assisted re-entry before the trip. This can easily be practiced in waist-deep water at home, with a friend's help, or under tuition. We are always happy to discuss your experience and can often suggest how beginner paddlers might gain the necessary experience at home to prepare for the trip.

Participants should feel confident in swimming. We predominantly use single kayaks on this trip (Current Designs "Storms" and "Squalls"). A few doubles may be available (Current Designs "Crosswinds"). The kayaks are stable, efficient, and easy to paddle and control. The degree of difficulty will depend on the weather we encounter. Our paddles are straight shaft Werner Tybee FG or Skagit FG paddles; they are light yet strong and well designed, allowing smooth and stable paddling. Additionally, paddles can be adjusted for different feather angles, without compromising their one-piece feel.]Life jackets are NRS Vista or similar, they are medium profile and allow for comfort, keeping cool, and a wide range of motion, and have two large front pockets for stowing essentials.

Most days, our paddling will take place in the morning, taking advantage of calmer seas and allowing time for exploration around the camps in the afternoons. We generally paddle between three to six hours per day.

It is important to realize that the group will kayak at the speed of the slowest members and recognize that the weather will influence greatly what we can and can't do. On day two you will be given a thorough briefing on sea kayaking techniques with ample time to practice and familiarize yourself with your kayak. As with most activities, the fitter you are, the more you will enjoy the paddling. It's a good idea to take some regular exercise like walking, jogging, cycling, aerobics or swimming ahead of the trip.

You should also include physical exercises that concentrate on the abdomen, lower and upper back muscles, and shoulder muscles.

The itinerary should be seen as an approximate guide only. We are on an expedition and the weather conditions, currents and tides can cause alterations and delays to our itinerary. The occasional non-paddling day may provide an opportunity for exploratory hikes so bring some good walking shoes.

CLIMATE



Days in the islands of Kuna Yala are generally sunny and hot, with temperatures ranging between 24° and 35° Celsius (75°-95° Fahrenheit) with occasional high humidity. Nights are pleasantly cool, with temperatures in the low to mid-20s Celsius (high 60° s and low 70s ° Fahrenheit). It can be windy in the Caribbean, and wind direction (and speed) changes constantly. In the event of stormy conditions with high winds, it may be necessary to alter our itinerary. The rainy season is between May and late November when intense storms with deluges of rain can occur.

TRIP ORGANIZATION

The sunsets quickly in the tropics, so paddling days will start early to take advantage of cooler temperatures and lighter winds. It's a good idea to pack your dry bags before breakfast, prepare your personal items for the day and take down your tents so that loading for departure can be organized. On a paddling day, we'd like to be on the water before nine am and arrive at camp mid-afternoon. It is important to realize that the group will kayak at the speed of the slowest members.

On the kayaking trip, the food is mainly fresh. If at all possible, we will try to supplement our menu with freshly caught fish. We are happy to make appropriate arrangements for vegetarians and those who have special dietary requirements – **if you have special dietary needs, please make sure you let us know before the trip starts!!**

On arrival at camp, you will be expected to unload your own boat and set up tents, and perhaps each night a few people can help with preparing the evening meal. The guides will also appreciate your assistance in other camp duties. We find that people joining our trips alone soon make friends.

EXPEDITION STAFF

Your trip will be led by two experienced kayak guides, one will be an English- speaking guide with many years of experience and the other an indigenous Kuna with local expertise. The guides' role is to coordinate the expedition and ensure the safety of the group. They will decide on safety matters, administer the medical kit and liaise with local villagers on your behalf. Should you have any inquiries during the trip, feel free to ask your guides.

TRAVEL INSURANCE

We highly recommend taking out a personal insurance policy to cover yourself against sickness, accident, loss of baggage, trip cancellation due to weather, or other reasons. Ensure you have



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read the policy thoroughly and are familiar with the claim process in case it becomes necessary to make an emergency claim.

TIME & COMMUNICATION

Panama is Greenwich Mean Time minus five hours. That means Panama City is at the same time as New York and three hours ahead of California. With daylight saving, Panama is equivalent to the central time in the US.

Some of the villages in Kuna Yala have telephones. Sometimes, they work. Cell phone coverage is spotty, cell phones work about half of the time under the local carrier DIGICEL.

ACCOMMODATION & CAMPING

Please pack as lightly as possible and take only the essentials. All your clothing will have to fit into the two dry bags supplied.

Panama City: We stay at a convenient city hotel before and after the trip and excess baggage can be stored at the hotel while on the kayak trip.

Camping: You will be sleeping in tents during the trip. Tents are mosquito-proof, but you should bring a supply of insect repellent. You will need to bring your own sleeping pad and a light sleeping bag or liner.

ELECTRICITY

Panama is on the 120V, 60 Hz system. Sockets are usually the flat two-pin variety similar to the US but they can vary. There will be very little electricity if any, in the locations when we're camping so we recommend you bring your power bank for charging your devices.

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is very important to behave in a respectful way towards both the people and their land. While the Kuna people will never rebuke you for unknowingly offending them it is desirable to try to respect as many of their customs and beliefs as you can. It is disrespectful for women to wear bikinis, tank tops, or skimpy shorts in a village.

Long pants, skirts, or sarong for women are appropriate. Your guides will brief you on Kuna culture and customs.



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Simple courtesy and a bit of sensitivity will satisfy most of the customs of village life. Although English is fast becoming the international language, it should not be assumed that everyone understands or speaks it, particularly in smaller hotels and restaurants and in villages.

Some basic practices you should observe are:

- Ask the locals if they mind being photographed, on most occasions they accept but will expect a Dollar for a portrait. If multiple people are in the picture they each will expect a dollar
- Restrict wearing minimalist swimwear
- Accept that time flows at a different pace and that patience is often rewarded

CONSERVATION

It has always been our motto that "we take only photographs and leave only footprints". We are keenly aware of the ecology of the areas we visit and try to limit our impact on them. We ask that each person follow a policy of taking out everything they bring in including sweet wrappers, batteries, etc. Your guides will further advise you.

PHOTOGRAPHY

The humidity is always high in Panama and as we are paddling in a salt-water environment the delicate electronics in digital or film cameras can be damaged. You might consider a waterproof camera or a small plastic waterproof case or dry bag with a supply of Silicon Packs. Ensure you have sufficient memory storage and batteries for a digital camera as there is no opportunity to purchase batteries or access electricity during our island stay. One variable lens will reduce your load and the amount of your equipment that can be damaged! If you are buying a new camera, consider a waterproof one and get it well before departure so you can practice with it. It is inconvenient to find fault with a camera during a trip.

MONEY MATTERS

Your tour cost includes:

- Expert leadership and support personnel.
- Hotel accommodation on a twin share basis for the nights listed on the itinerary
- Transfers between Panama City and Guna Yala (San Blas).
- Group airport transfers and ground transportation.
- All meals as noted.



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- Kayaks, paddles, life jackets, and safety equipment.
- Three-person tents (with two people sharing). Or solo when a single supplement applies.
- Watertight bags for your personal clothing.
- Group first aid kit.
- Sightseeing as noted in the itinerary.

Your tour cost does not include:

- International air travel to Panama City.
- Insurance of any kind
- Visas (if applicable)
- Lunches in Panama City as outlined in the itinerary above.
- Alcoholic beverages.
- Airport taxes.
- Excess baggage charges.
- Cost of medical immunizations.
- Items of a personal nature (e.g. postage, laundry, clothing, soft drinks, snack foods)
- Tips – it is customary to tip the staff who have assisted you on the trip. Trip members can contribute toward a group tip to be shared among cooks, camp staff, and local guides. Your trip leader will give you more guidelines on tipping the staff and all tipping is, of course, at your own discretion and you are under no obligation to tip (see next item).

MONEY MATTERS

Credit Cards & ATM Cards

All major credit cards are accepted in Panama's larger cities and ATM cards can be used at participating banks in the major cities. But there are no banking facilities while out kayaking

Cash

The official currency of Panama is the Balboa, which is equivalent to the US dollar. Although Panama mints only coins it does not print its bills, therefore US dollar bills are the only bills used in Panama.

In Guna Yala there are no ATMs nor are cards accepted, therefore you will need to bring cash on the trip for souvenirs, drinks (particularly cold beer), incidental items, and possible tips. This amount could vary from \$200 to \$400 per person for the whole trip, depending on how much shopping you wish to do and if you wish to leave a gratuity for the staff. Side note: guests have



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regretted to not having taken enough cash to the islands for souvenirs and gratuities. Molas are beautiful Kuna handicrafts to bring home and make a nice and exotic gift. One Mola goes for about \$20-\$40. Lastly, bring bills in small denominations.

SECURITY

Before leaving home, photocopy your passport, and airline voucher and make a note of your credit card and ATM card numbers in case you lose or misplace them. **All airline vouchers, valuables, excess cash, documents, and valuables can be secured in the hotel safe, however, you will need to carry your passport on the trip.** Theft is a consideration in Panama (like at home) so it is always a good idea not to leave things unattended when in the towns or villages. Always be aware of what you are carrying, especially personal valuables like cameras, jewelry, and watches. Do not display valuable items or leave them lying around in such a way that might tempt a thief. It is a good idea to use a money belt or neck wallet. Having said this, to date we have not had an incident of theft during the trips as the Kuna are people of high integrity.

MEDICAL MATTERS

Any passenger undertaking this trip is required to provide us with a medical questionnaire filled out completely and accurately.

Hygiene

Be conscious of hygiene. Regularly wash your hands, be wary of uncooked food and wash fruit or preferably peel it (with clean hands!).

Vaccinations

For entry into Panama, there are no statutory vaccinations at the time of writing. However, you should check with your doctor or medical center for current information including advice on avoiding insect-borne diseases such as malaria. Standard recommended immunizations currently are: Yellow Fever, Typhoid, Tetanus, Hepatitis A, and Polio. We suggest you carry your International Certificate of Vaccinations with your passport as proof.

Please advise us of any side effects of any medication you take and of any dietary requirements related to the medication. Be sure to let your guide know of any drugs to which you are allergic as well as note this on your survey form. You will be isolated from modern medical facilities, so attention to medical matters is vital.



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Medical & Self Care Supplies

On our trips into more isolated areas, we carry a comprehensive medical kit. However, it is your responsibility to bring sufficient quantities of any specific medications you require. In addition, we suggest that each passenger bring:

- Sunscreen (water-resistant variety at least SP60, preferably coral reef-friendly).
- Lip protectant
- Band-aid strips.
- Anti-acid tablets/upset stomach medication
- Ibuprofen, acetaminophen, or your preferred medication for headaches and minor pains
- A mild anti-nausea drug if you are concerned about seasickness.

Insect repellent

- Hand sanitizer

Due to the remoteness of the trip, it is advisable to have a checkup before departure.

EQUIPMENT & CLOTHING - WHAT YOU NEED TO BRING

We carry everything with us, so it's important to keep personal gear to a minimum and be mindful of packing restrictions between Panama City and the islands. In your kayak, all clothing is packed in waterproof bags, which we supply. However, you may choose to bring your own small 5-10 liter dry bag for items you may need during the day while kayaking. You may like to bring a couple of garbage bags for wet or damp clothing. Freshwater is scarce on some of the islands and there are no shops. It may be several days before we can wash with fresh water instead of salt.

When not paddling, we recommend casual clothes suitable for warm weather, preferably with a high content of cotton (which is cooler and breaths well). Light clothing is really all that is needed. Long sleeves are recommended for sun protection during kayaking and insect protection in the evenings.

The list below should be used as a guide when packing.

Luggage

- A sturdy duffle or kit bag is recommended for your gear when flying to Panama and we suggest a size no larger than 38 by 90 cm.



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- Day pack. 20 to 30 liters is a good size for your carry-on baggage.
- Small waterproof dry bag for personal use is optional yet strongly recommend! You will be given two dry bags for clothes.

Excess luggage not required during the kayak section can be stored at our Panama City hotel where we return after the kayaking expedition. If you arrive directly at Tigre Island we can store the excess luggage in the support boat which will be transporting our support crew, food, and camping gear. Please note this dunnage will be taken care of with the best intentions but can be potentially exposed to salt water splashes, sand, dirt, etc...

SUGGESTED PACKING LIST

- Passport (necessary to enter Guna Yala)
- A wide-brimmed hat for protection from the sun is essential. Visors are inadequate. A hat with a stiff brim that will hold rigid in a breeze, eg. straw, with a strap to put under your chin, is necessary. A scarf made from a light material like silk to protect your neck can be useful too. We recommend Buff® headwear.
- Sunglasses with a cord to prevent them from falling into the water. Side flaps are a good idea, in particular the type that can be added to conventional sunglasses by slipping them onto the arms.
- Lightweight rain jacket
- One or two long-sleeve lightweight synthetic shirt(s). This is highly recommended for sun protection while paddling. Cotton is not as comfortable for paddling as it gets stiff with salt and can irritate the skin. A lightweight Capilene or polypropylene top may be suitable.
- Two to three t-shirts and a long-sleeved shirt for camp.
- A lycra sun top is useful for snorkeling.
- One pair of lightweight, quick-drying, full-length trousers.
- Two pairs of shorts and swimwear. Skirt for women or sulu or sarong.
- Very lightweight fleece jacket (not a heavy jacket) i.e. Polartec 100 is sufficient, or a sweatshirt.
- Sleeping pad (we no longer provide these and require you must to bring your own, we recommend Thermarest or a similar.
- Sheet to lay over your sleeping pad and sheet (or very thin blanket) to cover yourself at night. to sleeping bag is not generally required on fairly warm nights but you might like to bring a small airline-size blanket or an extra sheet. A sleeping bag is optional and if you choose to bring one, ensure it is lightweight, very compact, and zips open. A cotton sleeping liner, such as cocoon brand) will also work well



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- Camping pillow, travel pillow, or very small pillow (eg. airline pillow) if it will fit into your dry bag. A pillowcase can give you the flexibility to make for a comfortable sleep
- One pair of sports shoes or lightweight hiking shoes that can get wet for potential hikes (also to get away from wet thongs and sand in the evenings) Teva style sandals are fine if you are used to wearing them in wet conditions.
- water shoes or a well-fitting pair of sandals that attach solidly (can be the same as above)
- Lightweight socks to wear with your running shoes and perhaps your sandals if the sand is irritating your feet. Long enough that your pants can be tucked in if you encounter sand fleas.
- Small towel (a chamois towel is ideal, or a medium-sized hand towel)
- Minimal toiletries. A bio-degradable soap that will lather in salt water is very useful.
- Headlamp or small torch with extra batteries (batteries can be difficult to obtain on the islands).
- One or two, 1-liter water bottles (32 ounces). Metallic vacuum-sealed bottles, Nalgene 1 Liter, or the type used by cyclists are fine and inexpensive.
- A small dry bag is good for holding things like sunscreen, glasses, water bottles, etc.
- Snorkeling mask, snorkel, and fins.
- Paddling gloves or Lightweight cycle gloves may prevent blisters if you are not used to paddling and give protection from the sun.
- 10 meters (30ft.) of cord (i.e. paracord) to use as a clothesline
- 10 clothes pins

Optional items

- Power bank for charging devices
- Earplugs for potentially noisy location
- Camera with waterproof container if the camera is not waterproof
- Kindle, digital reader, or good book for hammock time
- A deck of cards or other camp game
- Binoculars
- Talcum powder to prevent salt-water rash

RECOMMENDED READING

- A People who would not Kneel, James Howe. Panama, the United States, and the San Blas Kuna.
- An excellent history of the Kuna during the colonial years.



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- Biodiversity and Tourism: The Case for the Sustainable Use of the Marine Resources of Kuna Yala, Panama.
- Plants & Animals in the Life of the Kuna, Jorge Ventocilla, Heracilio Herrera, and Valerio Nunez (focuses on aspects of Kuna plant and animal life, social life, and social change as a means of saving traditional ecological knowledge and “returning” it to the community).
- A Path Between the Seas, David McCullough. Not much to do with San Blas, but an excellent history of Panama and the mind-boggling construction of the canal.
- The Birds of Panama. A complete, comprehensive guide to the multitude of birds in Panama
- The Biodiversity of Life, Wilson, E.O. An amazing introduction to biodiversity Lonely Planet Guide to Panama.

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