



PURE
Panama



Pure Panama

An expedition-style, small-ship cruise along the Pacific and Caribbean coasts of this Central American gem delivers indigenous immersion, fascinating rainforest, idyllic deserted islands and plenty of smooth sailing

BY DOUG WALLACE

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attooed and barefoot, two small children

took my hands and led me down a path to their rainforest village. "Bia-Bua," they said, using an all-encompassing word, like *aloha*, that means hello and goodbye in the Emberá language. I felt like I was in my own documentary film.

This indigenous Emberá village in Panama's Darién Jungle was the first stop of a week-long UnCruise adventure aboard the Safari Voyager that had me hiking in the Punta Patina Forest Reserve, kayaking among coastal islands, learning about colonial history and

traversing the Panama Canal.

I wandered through the Emberá community seeing how simply they have lived in the jungle for centuries, holding onto their roots in a way very few cultures have. My village visit was not only fascinating, it was a solid reminder that tourism of this sort doesn't have to water down a secluded culture like the Emberá—it can actually help prop it up. Tourism not only puts dollars in the villagers' pockets, it empowers them and gives them sway with their government, elevating their voice, allowing them to be connected to the world, but not be pressured to modernize. Tourism instills the community with a sense of pride.

We watched ceremonial dances and tasted sugar cane and listened to music. And got tattoos! My young guides' tattoos weren't permanent, but merely a dark vegetable dye that acts as an insect repellent, eventually fading away in a few weeks. Sporting them is just another custom they keep and share.

A different attitude faced us when we landed on the shores of nearby Punta Patina Forest Reserve: Hundreds of red crabs popped out of the black sand and ran for their lives, skittering along before burrowing themselves further up the beach. An incredible hike here netted sights of many intriguing trees and quite a few amazing birds, including a red-capped woodpecker. This is where I also ate a termite, apparently a good source of protein if you're starving. "Do I have to kill it first?" I asked. Blank stares all around; not everyone gets my humour sometimes. Just to show the tenacity of the termites, our guide popped a little hole in one of the termite nests we were walking by. I've seen dozens of these nests over the years, and always thought they were rock-hard. Not so. A flurry of activity ensued as the insects raced to see what was the matter with their home. We wandered off for 20 minutes down the trail, returning to find that half the hole had already been repaired. Apparently, ants aren't



Guna Yala Island



Shopping in Guna Yala Island

the only industrious bunch in the forest.

A beautiful, two-hour kayak among the thick mangrove trees followed, the forest almost eerily calm and sunny, pelicans dive-bombing for fish all around us as the tide went out. This was the kind of moment you wished would last as long as possible.

The next morning, I was up early and hopping into a skiff to cruise around Pacheca and Little Pacheca islands, part of the Pearl Islands. This protected archipelago of more than 200 islets and islands, about 50 kilometres from the Panama shore in the Gulf of Panama, is mostly uninhabited, getting its name from the once-abundant pearls found in its waters, wiped out in the 1930s by a harmful algae bloom or “red tide.” The largest-ever white pearl was found here, the pear-shaped La Peregrina, which eventually made its way into the jewellery box of Elizabeth Taylor, set in a Cartier necklace. It sold in 2011 for \$15 million.

Nearby Contadors Island is the

touristy one, with a few hotels and resorts, known for its scuba diving, and for whale- and dolphin-watching in the early fall. It's also famous for being one of the hiding places of the Shah of Iran at one point during his exile.

Pacheca showed distinct signs of life: a tennis court, a dog barking at us, palatial buildings, lookout points, more than a few boats. Somebody has some money certainly, I thought, as we cruised the shoreline. But it was Little Pacheca Island that delivered the type of rare wildlife sighting the region is famous for: blue-footed boobies. The island is a birder's paradise, chockablock with cormorants, pelicans and boobies, all in their respective birds-of-a-feather groups.

After breakfast, I had a snorkel along the shoreline of Bartolome Island, where I cooed at the brightly coloured parrotfish and angel fish, caught a suspicious-looking eel ducking under a rock and waved at a ray the size of a dinner plate. I also marvelled at some of my older travel mates snorkelling alongside me. Guests, whom I thought would have spent the morning reading a book, were instead out swimming around in the partial rain, all with well-worn rasher suits and gear, digging in and having fun. I made a mental note to try to age as gracefully as them.

Small-ship trips like the Safari Voyager tend to lure people that have experienced adventure travel before in their lives; maybe in their teens or before they started a family. “A lot of guests I talk with were doing the \$10 a day thing in Europe in the seventies during college,” said UnCruise owner Dan Blanchard, who happened to be on this particular sailing. “They maybe did ski vacations with their family because it was easy, but now that they've gotten older they want to return to the adventure.” My fellow passengers attested to liking the smaller crowd and the relaxed sense of adventure, and didn't care about the sometimes loose itineraries. “We use the term ‘ish’ behind a lot of things,” said Blanchard. “The night before, when we talk about what we're

going to do the next day, we say we're going to get underway about nine-ish. We can predict the tides, but not the weather. Nature isn't on our clock, so we need to adapt to hers.”

Blanchard loves the freedom that goes with smaller vessels, which can reach places the larger ships can't manage.

Nature certainly wasn't on our clock the night we entered the Panama Canal. After we watched the goings-on from the top deck—all the linemen, tugs and trams guiding us through the proceedings—a thick fog descended, halting all movement. We had to “pull over” and moor, the show over for the night. All the Panama-based people went home to enjoy an early night off and the passengers just went to bed.

The next day, I got up for a 6 a.m. yoga class to the most arresting scene: a shimmering sunrise with Centennial Bridge towering over us, already busy with traffic, massive tankers whizzing past, cleared to carry on through and given priority, leaving us pipsqueaks to wait our turn. Those aboard the fancy yacht tied up next



PHOTO BY ERIC LINDBERG

to us all slept in and had to be honked awake by canal officials.

The upside of being stranded overnight was the fact that we were able to sail through Gatun Lake in the daylight, something this particular cruise never gets to do. The expanse of this man-made lake, dotted with lush islands and awash in bright sunshine, was dazzling. We stared out, mesmerized for the entire time it took to reach the other side, and slid on back to ship-lane reality at the Colon end of the canal.

When we eventually did reach the Caribbean Sea, we headed northeast to the historic port of Portobelo. Super laid-back, this little fishing village is now known as a mini artist enclave, where historic churches and centuries-old Spanish colonial buildings await propping up with government spending; tourism and a cultural revival is slowly kicking in. The old customs house, which has seen its fair share of gold and silver pass through its doors over the years, is now a museum. Kids play softball among the ruins of San Jeronimo Fort, its eroding cannons forever trained on the bay, which is, interestingly, the final resting place of Sir Frances Drake, who was buried at sea here in a lead coffin in 1596.

My last two days of exploring were spent cruising the Guna Yala Islands, formerly called the San Blas Islands. This archipelago of 378 islands is scattered over 160 square kilometres, most of them uninhabited, and the

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PHOTO BY ERIC LINDBERG

Skiff Shore

epitome of the deserted island. It was the ideal way to end the cruise, out in the middle of nowhere, no one else around for miles. We kayaked, snorkelled, played volleyball, picnicked and bought beautiful *molas* from the indigenous tradespeople: colourful, hand-embroidered fabric panels that would pack perfectly for the trip home. This was another great example of people maintaining and sharing their cultures, doing their own thing, keeping their traditions alive.

When I returned to Canada, a couple of my friends oohed and aahed over the intricately woven crafts I brought back from the Emberá rainforest. I think my young guides would have been very pleased.

PREPPING FOR Panama

- **While getting** things ready, be conscious of the stifling temperatures in Panama year-round. (And don’t worry; you’ll get used to it.)
- **Pack clothes** made of quick-drying fabrics only. Absolutely no cotton and especially no cotton pique, which will weigh you down like a lead balloon and is guaranteed to never dry. Pack an inexpensive, portable clothesline to facilitate drying things, and don’t forget a tiny bottle of biodegradable soap.
- **Leave** any denim at home.
- **All shoes** must be waterproof, even sneakers.
- **Protect all** camera equipment and electronics with dry bags and bring microfibre cloths to deal with lens fogging.
- **Make sure** backpacks have rain covers or are waterproof to begin with.
- **Eco-smart** sunscreen and insect repellent are imperative.
- **Although Panama** has its own currency, U.S. dollars are the legal tender of choice everywhere.
- **Don’t expect** shopkeepers or cab drivers to speak English, so brush up on key phrases that will see you through everyday experiences.

For more info, visit:
uncruise.com and **visitpanama.com**