

# SOUTHERN SEA VENTURES

## PANAMA - SAN BLAS ARCHIPELAGO

### NINE DAY TRIP WITH SIX DAYS SEA KAYAKING AND JUNGLE DAY HIKES

The isthmus of Panama is a prolific biological corridor between North and South America. The Kuna Yala Nation (also known as San Blas) is one of Panama's five indigenous territories and encompasses an island archipelago located along the northeast Caribbean coast. The 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 95 to 120 km among Kuna 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 fresh water rivers flowing through primary forest and snorkel above stunning coral reefs that are among the best preserved in the central Caribbean. A small, motorised *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 Kuna 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 Kuna communities, some of which we'll have the good fortune to visit and to experience a taste of their way of life. The Kuna women still wear nose rings and traditional vibrant rainbow-coloured dresses emblazoned with the world famous *mola* patterns of fishes, birds, jungle animals or geometric designs. The Kuna 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 Kuna Yala Nation, we'll be picked up by a small airplane and flown back to Panama City. It's fitting that we finish our Panama stay with a visit to the Panama canal and traditional evening meal.

Join us on this amazing tropical adventure.

#### A QUICK ITINERARY

Day 1	Arrive Panama City. Transfer to hotel. Trip briefing and dinner.	D
Day 2	Flight to Corazon de Jesus in Kuna. Begin sea kayaking. Cabins.	BLD
Days 3-7	Kayak through island chain. Camping.	BLD
Day 8	Flight to Panama City. Visit canal. Afternoon free. Dinner in a traditional restaurant. Overnight hotel.	BD
Day 9	Transfer to airport. Trip concludes.	B



## MEETING PLACE AND TIME

If arriving on Day 1, we will meet you at Panama City airport and transfer you to your city hotel. Hotel accommodation is on a twin share basis.

Singles will not be charged a single supplement if you are prepared to share a room with another client of the same sex. However, if you specifically request a single room, or there is no one suitable to share with, there will be an additional charge. This only applies for the Panama City hotel and not to camping or the cabins.

## HOW TO GET THERE

Our trip starts and ends at Panama City. Flights to Panama City via Los Angeles, Miami or Mexico City can be booked through your travel agent or airline website. COPA airlines has regular specials between Los Angeles and Panama City.

## PADDLING EXPERIENCE

This trip is a kayak expedition designed for people with some previous paddling experience. 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. We require all participants to complete and return our "Experience Form" shortly after booking. All 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, easy to paddle and control. The degree of difficulty will depend on the weather we encounter. 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 realise 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 familiarise 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. If you would like some kayak tuition before your trip we may be able to suggest a local operator near your home.

## PROPOSED ITINERARY

The following 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 opportunity for exploratory hikes so bring some good walking shoes.

Day 1: Arrive at Panama City airport. Meet driver and transfer to our group hotel. Your guide will meet you in the lobby of the hotel (time to be confirmed.) The guide will conduct a trip briefing over dinner at 6:30pm during which you will be given two watertight dry bags to carry your personal gear during the trip and which you will take on the plane in the morning.

D...Accommodation: Country Inn and Suites or similar.

Day 2: Our journey begins with an early morning one hour flight by 20-seat STOL Twin Otter prop plane, over the Panama Canal and across the Continental Divide to Corazon de Jesus in Kuna Yala. We meet the local Digir community, present ourselves to the chief and then head out for a rainforest hike. After lunch we will have a kayak orientation and a short paddle to the mainland rainforest. In the evening we may be treated to some spectacular Kuna dancing!

B, L, D... Accommodation: Cabins.

Day 3: We bid farewell to the villagers and paddle through mangrove habitat and small islands before reaching our island campsite on Ogopsidup (about six hours of paddling). We will have the chance to snorkel amongst coral reefs along the way.

B,L,D... Accommodation: Tent camping.

Day 4: A three to four hour paddle to the uninhabited island of Diadup. The paddling includes two channel crossings. This area has been identified as one of the 'hot spot' areas of marine diversity among the reefs of Kuna Yala so we will be on the lookout for porpoises and rays along the way.

B,L,D...Accommodation: Tent camping.

Day 5: On this day we'll paddle back to the offshore sand cays and cross the Mangles Channel to the magical white sand island of Sichirdup. The surrounding reef and deep channel is glorious to explore along with cruising over shallow sand flats.

B,L,D. Accommodation: Tent camping.

Day 6: Rio Paloma. We will have an easy paddle to an uninhabited section of the mainland for a memorable walk along the pristine banks of the crystal-clear Rio Paloma. This is a great opportunity to wash in the fresh clean river water. Creek bed hiking through the primary rainforest provides us with many opportunities for wildlife viewing, including crocodiles, giant river otters, toucans, birds of prey, monkeys, and possibly tapirs!

B,L,D. . .Accommodation: Tent camping.

Day 7: Bidirdup Island. Our last and longest day of paddling, about eight hours in total. We enjoy rest stops at different reefs and exploring mangrove habitat. Weather permitting, we have paddling opportunities in the open ocean before ending up at the tiny Island of Bidirdup for our last camping night.

B,L,D. . .Accommodation: Tent camping.

Day 8: Early morning transfer to Porvenir and a flight with STOL plane to Panama City. We visit the Panama Canal before returning to our hotel. Afternoon free, (own arrangements for lunch). In the evening we dine at Las Tinajas, savouring the flavours of Panama cuisine.

B,D. . .Accommodation: Country Inn and Suites or similar.

Day 9: Transfer to Panama City airport. Trip concludes.

B.

## **CLIMATE**

Days in the islands of Kuna Yala are generally sunny and hot, with temperatures ranging between 24° and 35° celsius with occasional high humidity. Nights are pleasantly cool, with temperatures in the low to mid 20s celsius. It can be windy in the Caribbean, 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 ORGANISATION

The sun sets 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 organised. On a paddling day we'd like to be on the water before nine am and arrive into camp mid afternoon. It is important to realise that the group will kayak at the speed of the slowest members.

On the kayaking trip the food is mainly fresh. 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 at the time of booking.

On arrival in camp you will be expected to unload your own boats, 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 a western guide with many years 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 ARRANGEMENTS

Should you voluntarily decide to alter your travel arrangements after commencement of your trip, Southern Sea Ventures is not responsible for any additional charges involved. Our staff will assist you if possible but you are responsible for organising these arrangements yourself. Delays may occur due to weather or transport difficulties and Southern Sea Ventures will do its best to rectify the situation. Please understand that in this part of the world, delays and waiting are commonplace and while we do our best to keep to schedule it is not always possible. We are sure you will appreciate this and accept it as part of the whole Panama experience.

## TRAVEL INSURANCE

It is necessary to take out a personal insurance policy to cover yourself against sickness, accident, loss of baggage, trip cancellation due to weather or other reasons and in the unlikely event that you need emergency evacuation by plane or helicopter due to illness or accident. Ensure you have read the policy thoroughly and are familiar with the claim process in case it becomes necessary to make an emergency claim. We will require proof of your insurance prior to departure.

## TIME & COMMUNICATION

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

Some of the villages in Kuna Yala have telephones. Sometimes, they work.

## ACCOMMODATION AND CAMPING

Please pack as lightly as possible and take only the essentials. **There are limits on how much your luggage can weigh (11.3 kg for checked baggage and 4.5 kg for carry on baggage - a daypack is recommended) on the flights between Panama City and the community of Digir, where we start our kayaking.** All your clothing will have to fit into the two dry bags supplied.

**\*Note: you will need to carry your passport on the trip.**

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.

Cabins: Traditional Cabanas with sand floors, or in tents nearby.

Camping: You will be sleeping in tents during the trip. Our tents are mosquito proof, but you should bring a supply of insect repellent and consider the purchase of mosquito coils for when you are outside your tent. You will need to bring your own sleeping mat or thermarest.

### **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 won't be electricity when we're camping.

### **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.

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.
- restrict wearing bathing suits to remote beaches.
- 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 follows 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.
- Flights between Panama City and the Kuna Yala.
- Group airport transfers and ground transportation.
- All meals as noted.
- Kayaks, paddles, life jackets and safety equipment.



- Three person tents (with two people sharing).
- 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.
- 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 such as postage, laundry, clothing, soft drinks, snack foods, etc.
- 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. A rough guideline would be between US \$7-10 per day.

### **MONEY TO BRING WITH YOU**

You won't need a great deal of money on the trip, but you should take enough, in US currency, for souvenirs, drinks and incidental items. This could vary from US\$100 to \$300 for the whole trip, depending on how much shopping you wish to do.

Take some money in small denominations of traveler's cheques and cash. Traveler's cheques such as American Express, Citibank and Thomas Cook (in US dollars) are widely accepted in Panama. The currency is the Balboa. Panama mints only coins and circulates US dollars as the official currency.

### Credit Cards & ATM Cards

All major credit cards can be used in major cities and larger country hotels, lodges, restaurants and shops. ATM cards can be used at participating banks in the major cities. BUT there are no banking facilities while out kayaking.

### **SECURITY**

Before leaving home, photocopy your passport, airline voucher and make a note of your credit card and ATM card numbers in case you lose or misplace them. All airline tickets, valuables, excess cash and travelers cheques can be secured in the hotel safe during the kayaking but you 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. Do not carry large amounts of cash with you and always be aware of what you are carrying, especially personal valuables like cameras, jewellery 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.

Airline security into the US is such that if you put locks on your bags, they may be removed. A good alternative is to use plastic electrical ties which you can replace and carry a small lock after flights.

### **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 centre for current information including advice on avoiding insect born 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 noting this on your medical form. You will be isolated from modern medical facilities, so attention to medical matters is vital.

## Medical 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:

- Sun screen (water resistant variety at least SP15).
- Lip protectant.
- Band-aid strips.
- **Insect repellent \*this is important for preventing insect-born diseases\*.**
- A mild anti-nausea drug if you are concerned about sea sickness.
- A mild antiseptic soap.

## Dental

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 the weight 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 litre 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. Fresh water 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.

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 duffel or kit bag is recommended for your gear when flying to Panama and we suggest a size no larger than 38 by 90 cm.
- Day pack. 20 to 30 litres is a good size for your carry on baggage.
- Small waterproof dry bag is optional for personal items. 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 to on day eight.

## GEAR LIST

- 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.
- Sun-glasses 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 sun-glasses by slipping them onto the arms.
- Light weight rain jacket or spray jacket.
- One long sleeve lightweight synthetic shirt. 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 snorkelling.
- One pair of light weight, quick drying, full length trousers.
- Two pairs of shorts and swimwear.
- Skirt for women or sulu or sarong.
- Very light weight fleece jacket (not a heavy jacket) i.e. Polartec 100 is sufficient, or a sweatshirt.
- Sleeping sheet. A sleeping bag is not generally required with 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.
- Sleeping pad (we recommend the  $\frac{3}{4}$  or full length Therm-A-Rest) with repair kit.
- One pair of sport shoes or lightweight hiking shoes that can get wet for our creek hike on the mainland (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.
- Reef shoes for paddling or a good fitting pair of sandals that attach solidly.
- 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.
- A headlamp or small torch and batteries (batteries can be expensive and difficult to obtain in Panama).
- One or two, 1 litre water bottles. The type used by cyclists are fine and inexpensive.
- A small dry bag is good for holding things like sun screen, glasses, water bottle, etc.
- Snorkeling mask and snorkel. Please don't bring fins – they are not necessary, they destroy the reef and take up valuable space in your kayak.
- Lightweight cycle gloves may prevent blisters if you are not used to paddling and protect from sun.
- Pillow case or very small pillow (eg. airline pillow) if it will fit into your dry bag. A pillow case can give you the flexibility to make for a comfortable sleep

### Optional items.

- Earplugs for noisy roosters.
- Camera and film, with waterproof container if the camera is not waterproof.
- Book.
- Binoculars.
- 10 metres of lightweight clothesline.
- 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.

*Biodiversity and Tourism: The Case for the Sustainable Use of the Marine Resources of Kuna Yala, Panama.*

<http://www.biodiv.org/programmes/socio-eco/tourism/gd-cs.asp>

*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. Detailed descriptions of habitat and behavior, excellent book.

*The Biodiversity of Life*, Wilson, E.O. An amazing introduction to biodiversity.

*Lonely Planet Guide to Panama*, fifth edition, 2010.

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