

CARIBBEAN

Panama: Guna Yala Archipelago

Tropical Paddling Adventure

9 day trip



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9 day trip 5 days kayaking

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

We have obtained special permission from the local Sahila (chiefs) to paddle this protected archipelago of over 350 islands. Our paddling journey will take us 95–120 km among Guna Yala's picture perfect islands, sand cays and along primary jungle coastlines. 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.

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 and we'll keep a look out for tropical fish, dolphins, sea turtles and rays.

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 the Guna communities, some of which we'll visit to experience a taste of their way of life. The Guna 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 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.

A Quick Itinerary

B = Breakfast • L = Lunch • D = Dinner

Day 1: Arrive Panama City and transfer to the hotel. Trip briefing with guide. D

Day 2: Road and boat transfer to the island of Tigre. Camping. B • L • D

Days 3-7: Kayak through the island chain. Camping. B • L • D

Day 8: Return to Panama City. Visit canal. Dinner in a traditional restaurant. Overnight hotel. B • L • D

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 the group hotel. Your guide will meet you at the hotel at 6.30pm for the trip briefing and dinner. If possible, please arrange a flight arrival into Panama City by 4pm on Day 1 to ensure you don't miss the briefing and dinner.

Hotel accommodation is based on twin share rooms. 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.

How to Get There

Our trip starts and ends at Panama City. A number of airlines fly from North America to Panama City. Flights to Panama can be booked through a travel agent or through airline websites.

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 *Kayak 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 are 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. We generally paddle around six hours per day with frequent breaks for snorkelling and exploration.

It is important to realise that the group will kayak at the speed of the slowest members and recognise that the weather will influence greatly what we can and can't do. On Day 3 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 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.

A small, motorised boat (*panga*) will accompany the trip to transport water, food and equipment. This ensures the kayaks will be lightly packed and easier to paddle.

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.

Day 1: On arrival into Panama City international airport, clear immigration and customs. Our representative will be waiting in the arrivals hall holding a sign with your name. Transfer to the group hotel and check in. The guide will meet the group at the hotel at 6.30pm for the trip briefing. During the briefing, the guide will supply each participant with two watertight dry bags to carry personal gear during the trip and which you will take with you the next morning. Luggage not required on the kayak trip can be stored at the group hotel. After the briefing the group will enjoy a simple dinner in a restaurant near the hotel.

D / RADISSON PANAMA CANAL (OR SIMILAR)

Day 2: After breakfast, we travel by four-wheel drive vehicle to the port of Barsuggum, (community of Carti), a two to three hour journey. A charter boat then transfers the group to the island of Tigre, a one-hour trip. We meet the local community and present ourselves to the chief (Sahila). In the evening, the group may be treated to some spectacular Guna dancing.

B • L • D / TENT CAMPING

Day 3: After breakfast, we'll have a short, introductory paddle to the mainland rainforest. Then we start the adventure! Our destination today is the island of Ordub, about a six hour paddle. We'll break for lunch and the chance to snorkel among coral reefs along the route. This area has been identified as one of the 'hot spot' areas of marine diversity among the reefs of Guna Yala and we'll be on the lookout for porpoises and rays. A small, motorised boat (*panga*) will accompany the trip to transport water, food and equipment (and tired paddlers if need be). Overnight camping on Ordub.

B • L • D / TENT CAMPING

Day 4: Today we'll paddle to the offshore sand cays and cross the Mangles Channel to the white sand island of Bebsidub. The surrounding reef and deep channel is glorious to explore, along with cruising over shallow sand flats. Two nights are spend camping on Bebsidub.

B • L • D / TENT CAMPING

Day 5: 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. Hiking along the creek bed and among primary rainforest provides us with many opportunities for wildlife viewing. Return to Bebsidub after lunch for some great snorkelling and/or hammock time.

B • L • D / TENT CAMPING



Day 6: Leaving Bebsidub, we head to the island of Estrellita (Salardub) , about a six hour paddle. We'll enjoy lunch and time out on one of the many beautiful beaches along the way. Overnight camping on Estrellita.

B • L • D / TENT CAMPING

Day 7: Our last paddle day is a relaxing two hour paddle to the Island of Bidirdup. There we can swim, snorkel, play beach volleyball or just lie back and enjoy some hammock time. Overnight camp on Bidirdup Island.

B • L • D / TENT CAMPING

Day 8: An early morning boat ride back to the port of Barsuggum and then a transfer by vehicle to the group hotel in Panama City. After lunch and a freshen up, we'll visit the Panama Canal at around 3pm. The group will then transfer to "Casco Viejo" in the Old City for a walk and a farewell dinner in a local restaurant.

B • L • D / RADISSON PANAMA CANAL (OR SIMILAR)

Day 9: Transfer to Panama City airport.

B/ END OF TRIP ARRANGEMENTS

Climate

The islands 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 with wind direction (and speed) changing constantly. In the event of stormy conditions with high winds it may be necessary to alter our itinerary. The rainy season is typically between May and late November.

Trip Organisation

The sun sets quickly in the tropics and 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 tent so that loading for departure can be organised. On a paddling day we'd like to be on the water before 9am and arrive into camp mid afternoon.

On arrival in camp it would be helpful if participants could unload their own kayaks, help unload the motor boat and set up tents. Paddlers are encouraged to then relax in the provided hammocks and enjoy 'happy hour' while our capable local cook prepares dinner.

Food & Water

On the kayaking trip, the food is freshly prepared by our talented camp cook and guides. Breakfast consists of eggs or pancakes, cereals, local fruits (pineapple, watermelon, banana, papaya) and juices plus coffee and all kinds of tea.

Lunch is picnic style with a selection of cheese, fresh vegetables, fruit, bread and/or salads and fresh juice.

Dinners are two to three courses prepared with fresh ingredients and varied daily. Dinner may be pasta, curries, Panamanian style hot soups, chicken or meat, freshly caught fish (if we are lucky, even lobster), lentil soup, Spanish rice plus some sweet treats for dessert.

Tap water in Panama City is safe to drink but **not** in Guna Yala. While kayaking all water will be filtered.

We are happy to cater for vegetarians and other special dietary requirements. Please write your dietary requirements on your medical form.

As with any change in diet, it is wise to accustom yourself slowly to different foods.

Expedition Staff

Your trip will be led by two experienced kayak guides, one will be an English-speaking guide with many years experience and the other an indigenous Guna 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. Also accompanying the group are camp staff and a cook.

Travel Arrangements

Should you voluntarily decide to alter your travel arrangements after commencement of your trip, Southern Sea Ventures, or its partners, are not responsible for any additional charges involved. We will assist you if possible but you are responsible for organising these arrangements yourself. Delays may occur due to weather or transport difficulties. 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 island 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 Guna Yala have telephones. Sometimes, they work.

There is some cell/mobile phone coverage in the islands.



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. **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.

Camping: You will be sleeping in tents during the trip. The 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 sheet/bivy bag.

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 not be any electricity when camping, however, solar powered chargers work well if you would like to bring for your own use.

Cultural Considerations

It is very important to behave in a respectful way towards both the people and their land. While the Guna 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 a sarong for women is appropriate. Your guides will brief you on Guna culture and customs.

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 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 as there is no opportunity to purchase 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 as it's 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 first and last night of the trip.
- Transfers between Panama City and Guna Yala.
- Airport transfers.
- All meals as noted.
- Kayaks, paddles, life jackets and safety equipment.
- Three person tents (with two people sharing).
- Air mattresses.
- Hammocks and camp chairs.
- 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 required).
- Alcoholic beverages.
- Airport taxes.
- Excess baggage charges.
- Cost of medical immunisations.
- Items of a personal nature such as WIFI charges, laundry, 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 the cook, camp staff and 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 for total tips is between US\$70–100 per person.

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, tips and incidental items. This could vary from US\$200 to US\$300 for the whole trip, depending on how much shopping you wish to do. Bring small denominations of cash if you'd like to purchase some molas (a major source of income for the Guna).

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 cities and larger country hotels, lodges, restaurants and shops. ATM cards can be used at participating banks in the major cities. 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 vouchers, valuables and excess cash can be secured in the hotel safe in Panama City 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.

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/Insect borne diseases

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 immunisations currently are: Yellow Fever, Typhoid, Tetanus, Hepatitis A and Polio. We suggest you carry your International Certificate of Vaccinations with your passport as proof.

Precautions to be taken to avoid mosquitos include regularly applying insect repellent (containing DEET) and, where possible, avoiding sheltered areas where mosquitoes are more abundant than in windy areas. Wear long pants, long sleeved shirts and socks in the evenings. Please note, all our tents are screened.

Medication

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. Please note, some anti-malarial medication can increase sunburn risk.

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 and lip protectant (water resistant variety at least SPF30).
- Band-aid strips.
- Insect repellent ****this is important for preventing insect-borne diseases****
- A mild anti-nausea drug if you are concerned about sea sickness.
- A mild antiseptic soap.
- If you are sensitive to a change in diet, then you may like to bring medication to aid digestion.

Dental

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

Equipment & Clothing

We carry everything with us, so it's important to keep personal gear to a minimum. In your kayak all clothing is packed in waterproof bags, which we supply. We recommend you 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.

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

- In Panama City, you will be given two dry bags to pack your gear into for the kayak trip.
- We recommend you bring a small waterproof dry bag for personal items required while paddling.
- Excess luggage and bags not required during the kayak section can be stored at our Panama City hotel where we return to on Day 8.

Gear List: What You Need to Bring

The following checklist is a guideline for your trip. Contact us if you have any questions.

Recommended Items:

- 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 when snorkelling.
- One pair of light weight, quick drying, full length trousers.
- Two pairs of shorts and swimwear.
- 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 generally not 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.
- 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 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 with batteries (batteries can be difficult to obtain in the islands).
- 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.
- Snorkelling mask and snorkel. If you bring fins, bring short fins as they are easier to pack and are less likely to destroy the reef compared to longer fins.
- Lightweight gloves may prevent blisters if you are not used to paddling and importantly, give protection from the sun.
- Pillow case or very small pillow (eg. airline pillow) if it will fit into your dry bag. You can stuff a pillow case with clothes and make your own pillow.

Optional items:

- Camera with waterproof container (if the camera is not waterproof).
- A good book for hammock time.
- Binoculars.
- 10 metres of lightweight clothesline and clothes pegs.
- Talcum powder to prevent salt water rash.
- Solar powered charger.

Contacts in case of delays/complications

Our Panama partner's phone contact will be provided on your final trip itinerary. Otherwise, please contact our Australian office.

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