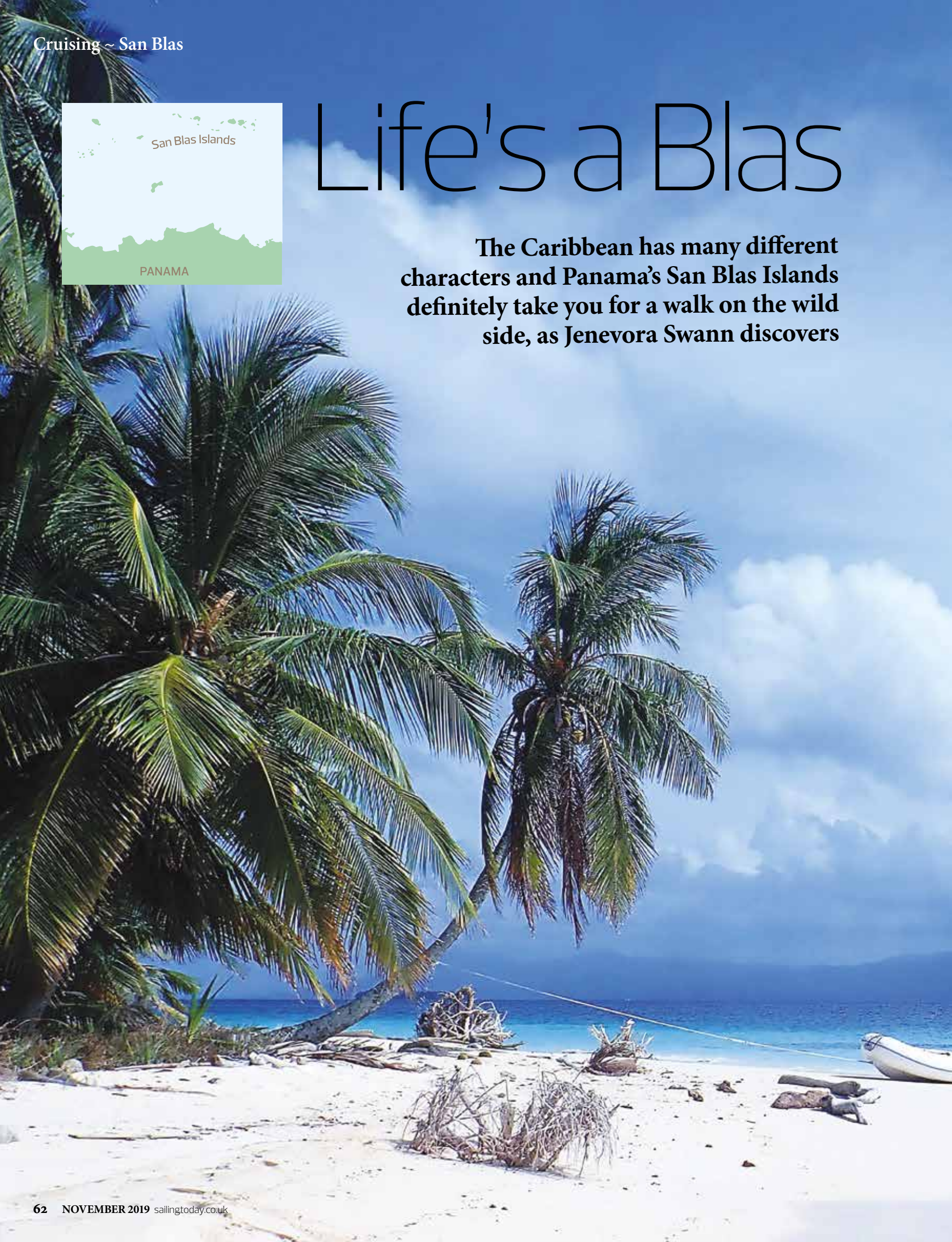




# Life's a Blas

**The Caribbean has many different characters and Panama's San Blas Islands definitely take you for a walk on the wild side, as Jenevora Swann discovers**



The aquamarine water glistened like a jewel. Stepping off the dinghy on to the powder white sand and looking across at a row of perfect palm trees, I was in paradise. This tiny, remote desert island, part of the San Blas archipelago, was reminiscent of an Athena poster that had once adorned my walls. Now I was part of that dream.

Sailing around the San Blas islands, off the Atlantic side of Panama, was nothing short of picture-postcard stunning. There are over 365 small islands and cays to explore and, while officially only 49 are inhabited, there are settlements and caretakers to be found on many more. With a different island for every day of the year, I wondered if the six weeks we'd set aside to explore would be enough.

Lying off the north coast of the Isthmus of Panama, San Blas makes a good stop-off for yachts transiting the Panama Canal. It's also on a well-sailed route for those heading further north to the Bay Islands of Honduras and onto Belize and Mexico or to Guatemala for hurricane season.

We sailed from Colombia and headed to the eastern side of Panama to Puerto Obaldia to check in. Here, we could easily do customs, immigration, port police and get our cruising permit for Panama. It also enabled us to explore the lesser-visited eastern islands with the wind in our favour.

San Blas is their more popular Western name – given by Spanish invaders – but locally the islands and associated mainland territory are called Guna Yala by the autonomous Guna Indians (also known as Gunas) who reside in this section of Panama.

There have been many political issues between Panama and the Guna Yala. In 1925, the Gunas agreed to be part of the Republic of Panama, under the condition the Panamanian government respect their tribal laws, traditions and culture. Since

then there have been movements towards independence, marked by partial autonomy in 1930 and then in 1953, when the Gunas were granted full administrative and juridical powers.

Understanding that there is a political situation certainly helps when it comes to paying to sail through the area. It costs US\$185 for a cruising permit for Panama; the Guna Yalas request an additional US\$20 per person and US\$20 per boat to cruise their islands.

Currently, this fee is charged monthly and can be paid on a voluntary basis at the island of El Porvenir or to an official boat



that cruises through the more popular anchorages each month.

There are also charges for anchoring off some islands, averaging US\$10 for a 30-day anchor permit, which is collected by the chief at the nearest village. So, as we were exploring the archipelago and moving anchorages every few days, the costs soon mounted up. In six weeks, we paid a further US\$100 in fees.

### **Scenery, shopping & shortcomings**

As we explored the chain from east to west, and spanning roughly 120 miles, the distinction between the two areas was noticeable. The beauty of the eastern San Blas islands lies in their proximity to the mainland, which is completely isolated by mountains, thick jungle and virgin tropical

rain forests. Meanwhile, the western islands are flatter, more photogenic and much busier.

At almost every anchorage, we were approached by a Guna in an ulu (dug-out canoe), selling fish, fruit or bread and their traditional rectangular molas (layered embroidery, mainly used as a focal point in shirts). Showcasing their sewing skills and trying to appeal more to the masses, some Gunas were creative with these cotton works of art, turning them into flags, wine and beer can coolers and laptop cases.

Prior to arriving in the San Blas, extensive provisioning is essential as there are no supermarkets on the islands, just the occasional village shop.

In the western San Blas, we were delighted to discover that 'veggie boats' visit the popular anchorages every week.

Carrying more than just fresh fruit and vegetables, they were well-stocked with rum, beer, milk, eggs, meat, flour, soap and even dog food.

The Gunas running the veggie boats are very enterprising and use

WhatsApp, so if you have an

internet connection, you can order ahead for bulk purchases or anything of a more specialist nature. More Robinsons Barley Water than Robinson Crusoe, but perhaps just one of the many changes the islanders are seeing as satellite dishes and mobile phones rise in popularity, providing greater access and insight to the outside world.

As we sailed the islands, we noticed a distinct lack of hotels. Aside from visiting yachts, tourism is restricted to organised backpacker trips or kayak excursions.

Accommodation is available at a few eco-resorts, such as pretty Gunboat Island, where for US\$85 a night, a stay includes →





transport from the mainland, three meals a day and sleeping for up to six people in a cabana.

We adored our time exploring the islands, but among the beauty and perfect palm-fronded trees were a few downsides. Diving, windsurfing and kite-surfing are all forbidden, a shame considering the perfect conditions.

Sailing around San Blas can only be done on your own boat, as they don't allow unauthorised charters. A year ago, when some boats repeatedly ignored this rule, the Gunas closed the road from the main airport on the popular island of Carti to anyone going to or returning from a yacht. The collateral damage was to people like us on non-chartering boats who would have loved family and friends to visit for a week or two, while cruising such a beautiful area.

A few boats we know got around this issue by arranging for their family to fly into smaller airports near to Achutupu or Nargana, which both connect to Panama City. However, as the situation is ever-changing, it's advisable to check whether this route is still viable prior to booking flights.



It could be a difference in cultures, or because we were travelling with a small dog, but the Gunas we met often came across as unfriendly. A smile or kind word of welcome would have gone a long way; instead we felt as if visiting yachts and tourism are only just tolerated in these stunning islands.

That said, sailing around San Blas was a huge tick off our bucket list and we have some incredible memories and photographs of a paradise found.

### ***Where to visit***

With so much choice, it can be a lottery working out where to visit, so here are our tips and suggestions for the must-see islands.

### ***Eastern San Blas***

The peak months for exploring San Blas are December to April, when the northeasterly trade winds prevail, and the first three months of the year are the driest. We quickly got used to strong winds and overcast skies, which made moving anchorages difficult at times as eyeball navigation is essential travelling between the islands due to the number of reefs and limited digital charts.

We had the fifth edition of *The Panama Cruising Guide* by Eric Bauhaus and would not want to sail the islands without it. It is worth noting, however, that in the eastern San Blas, which is much less travelled, there are many reefs and shoals that are still uncharted.

We sailed mainly in the company of three other Ocean Cruising Club boats, with whom we are good friends. Between the four boats, we used satellite photographs downloaded from the internet and viewed through Open CPN (free chart-plotter software) to double-check reefs and waypoints and carefully plotted our trips accordingly. We left an anchorage together around 9am, when the sun was strong enough to show the



### **Two Drifters**

Lagoon 440 Catamaran  
Owners Version 2008  
**LOA:** 13.61m (44.65ft)  
**Beam:** 7.70m (25.26ft)  
**Draught:** 1.30m (4.27ft)

## San Blas Fact Box

The US dollar is legal tender for visitors. Keeping a stack of small dollar bills to hand is advisable to pay for anchorage fees (\$10), lobster (\$5), Guna bread (\$2 for a bag of rolls) and freshly caught fish and crabs (\$5 – \$10).

Disposal of rubbish in San Blas is a major problem as there are no bins and the Gunas way of dealing with their waste is to burn it. We strongly recommend storing all plastic on board until you can safely dispose of it at a recycling centre in one of the Panamanian marinas. Cans are worth money to the Gunas, who exchange them for cash with the Colombian trading boats.

Useful website: [facebook.com/SanBlasCruisers](https://www.facebook.com/SanBlasCruisers).



colour changes in the water, and ensured we dropped anchor by early afternoon. This prudence avoided running aground.

There's virtually no mobile phone signal in the eastern San Blas, even putting a local internet SIM card into a MiFi device and hoisting it up the mast would seldom yield success. So, for our first few weeks, we sat back and enjoyed exploring without the constant ping of messages, which was rather refreshing.

### Suledup & Caledonia

Our first anchorage, off the deserted island of Suledup, was blissfully quiet. We were a mile from the small village of Caledonia and a guide from the village paddled out in his ulu and asked if we could visit and help translate their village rules for Western visitors.

It was a pleasure and privilege to do this and, as six of us plus two dogs pulled up to their dinghy dock, we had such a warm reception from the children, who were delighted to see us and very curious, too!

The simple rules we translated for them to put on a noticeboard included: Please do not drop litter; do not touch the children on their shoulders; do not take photographs unless you have sought permission; and do not take photos inside the 'Sacred Hut'.

This was our first insight into local Guna life and a typical village, which

was fascinating. The small island (less than half a square mile) had a population of 1,000 including 75 children, mainly housed in bamboo huts with palm-frond roofs. As we were shown around, it was clear they were very proud of their spotless village; even the pigs were in self-cleaning pens above the water.

### Isla Pinos

With a high forest terrain reaching 150 metres, Isla Pinos is easily identifiable from a distance and is an excellent island to make landfall for those sailing from Cartagena in Colombia. Its white-sand beach and abundance of palm trees make it stunningly beautiful. A bar on the beach serves food by arrangement, and will even cook fish you've caught yourself for a small price.

### Mamitupu

This is small but compact village situated off a palm-tree-lined desert island. Again, it was the children who were happy to see us and be photographed; the elders much more reserved and less inclined to smile or interact.

While we were there, a Colombian trading boat came in, which visits once every two months and brings clothes and supplies to trade for coconuts. The coconut was at one time the official currency and still holds a lot of importance; it's now also one of the Gunas' main exports, →

**MAIN PIC**  
*Two Drifters at anchor at Holandes Cays in the western San Blas*

**FACING PAGE**  
*Scenes from Guna Yala villages in the eastern San Blas*

**THIS PAGE**  
*(top) Bartering for lobster, (below) Mamitupu in the eastern San Blas*





along with lobster, king crab and octopus.

### Western San Blas

Attention must still be paid to the charts, eyeball-navigation and careful planning. Hopping between the various groups of cays made for very pleasant sailing; we even managed to break out the gennaker on a calm day.

Arriving into Green Island, we spotted more boats than we'd seen since leaving Colombia. Perhaps something to do with finding 3G and 4G connection in this area.

### Coco Bandero Cays

The beautiful Coco Bandero Cays, located behind a four-mile long protected outer reef, has excellent snorkelling. We swam with brightly coloured parrot fish, puffer fish, angelfish, eagle rays and stingrays. There was even a nurse shark that rocked up to the back of the boat one evening.

### Naguargandup Cays

Mainly uninhabited, the Naguargandup Cays are scattered along a six-mile coral barrier reef. The deep channel that passes between these cays and the mainland is well-protected, so the area is sheltered and the waters calm.

The pretty islands of Canbomba and Salardup are popular and great for swimming and snorkelling. They are deserted, except for an enterprising family living on each, who make money from selling essential groceries and cooking the catch-of-the-day for a few dollars a head for those who wish to dine out.

### Holandes Cays

Some 21 beautiful islands lie behind a seven-mile long protective barrier reef. Some of the anchorages can

accommodate a small cruise ship, others just a handful of boats.

In calm weather, we headed into the Central Holandes, and off the beaten track into an uncharted anchorage that was breathtakingly beautiful and very quiet. Being on the windward side of the island, our view of the sea was a myriad of blues broken only by the surf crashing onto the reef.

The anchorages at BBQ Island and Banedup are the most popular in this chain. They are also home to a crocodile or two that live in the area, so we remained cautious about being on the beach at dawn and dusk.

The very photogenic BBQ Island is spotless with a beautiful beach and the clearest blue-water we've seen in the San Blas, but it comes at a price – a visit to swim or sit on the beach costs US\$3 per person and that's in addition to the US\$10 anchoring fee. The snorkelling and fishing is superb; just trawling lines off the dinghy, we caught a large and very tasty grouper.

### Chichime

Chichime is a protected anchorage surrounded by beautiful islands with a multitude of palm-fronded coconut trees, sandy beaches and several tiny eco-resorts/cabanas. It has some of the best snorkelling in the San Blas on the nearby reefs. Its straightforward entrance offers easy access to the many backpacker

**ABOVE**  
(left) A deserted island in the western San Blas; (right) a close encounter with a crocodile on Isola Gerti



Jenevora Swann and her husband Fergus Dunipace have been liveaboards on their catamaran *Two Drifters* since 2014. They sailed around Europe before crossing the Atlantic in 2016. Having explored the Caribbean and the East Coast of the USA, they are now sailing in Central America. [Facebook.com/](https://www.facebook.com/)

charter boats leaving from Puerto Linton and Portobello, and heading to Colombia.

### Isla Gerti – where the crocodiles rock!

At Isla Gerti, we took an organised trip in a 28ft panga (local boat) up the Rio Mandinga to see crocodiles.

The panga had two twin unlinked 40hp engines running on separate tiller throttles.

The crew included a captain, who used extreme skill with hand-eye co-ordination on the throttles to manoeuvre the boat swiftly around obstacles, plus an English-speaking guide and a 'spotter'. The spotter hand-signalled when there were shallow areas or upturned branches to avoid and used a long pole to push us off the bottom when it got too shallow for the boat's engines.

The trip was mesmerising; stunning coloured birds lined up on the muddy banks, including pelicans, eagles, vultures, green and blue herons, and tropical kingbirds. And the two large aquatic reptiles we saw did not disappoint. In true celebrity style, the crocodiles allowed a couple of photographs to be taken before slinking away to safety, into the depths of the river.

An hour upstream, we stopped against a sandbank. The guide encouraged us off and with trepidation we followed, keeping eyes peeled for croc-tracks. A football was produced and a team effort of the Brits against the Gunas ensued, the threat of crocs rocking up to muscle in all but forgotten. It was an awesome afternoon and cost only US\$15 per person.

Ultimately, the San Blas Islands were one of the most magical cruising grounds we have explored so far, offering a totally different and wilder side to Caribbean cruising.

