



Panamá - 6/03/2022 - 21/05/2022

Of all countries visited until now (12 so far!), Panamá was the biggest surprise to us. Known to most people only for the famous Canal, and possibly as the biggest exporter of Chiquita bananas, culturally and nature wise the country has so much to offer, that we stayed for more than 2 months, and still feel that we missed out on a lot. The nice thing about traveling the way we do, is that you can change your plans easily; the hard part is planning ahead...



From Kingston, Jamaica, it's a day's sail to San Andres, a remote Colombian tropical island, close to Nicaragua. The island is a favourite destination for Colombian tourists, who come here to party, bake in the sun and enjoy the incredible blue sea. We only stop for diner and fuel, in the morning we snorkel around Johnny Kay,



an island with 5 different shades of blue water, and finally continue our way to Panamá.



Two magnificent sperm whales pass our path. Moby Dick is never far, in our minds. In general determining which kind of whale you see is quite an art, but sperm whales are easily recognisable by their asymmetric breathing hole, that directs the blow sideways and forward instead of straight up.

Dolphins accompany us for a ride on the bow wave, showing off their incredible swimming skills. Even Theo, our boat dog, looks in awe when they play around in the dark blue sea.

Bocas del Toro – 6/03/2022 – 11/03/2022

We arrive in Bocas del Toro, on the border with Costa Rica, just after sunset, and carefully work our way through the crowded anchorage in the dark. At sunrise we find ourselves in a tropical bay, with the town of Boca slowly waking up besides us. We drop the Zodiac in the water and head for town, to get cleared in into Panamá. Immigration, Customs, ministry of Agriculture for Theo, and finally the harbour master give us the green light, our passports are stamped and we are free to go.

Bocas del Toro is a province in the North West of Panamá. It is called the Venice of the Caribbean, where island hopping is a daily occurrence, or the Galapagos of the Caribbean, as one of the most biodiverse regions in the world.



The town of Boca breathes youth, surfing, yoga and scuba diving, with beautiful bars and restaurants, trendy shops, guest houses and charming hotels built on piles along the seaside. After stocking up on groceries, Monara weighs anchor and we head for the Red Frog Marina, part of the Red Frog Eco Resort on Isla Bastimentos.





The captain and Arne get a private golf cart tour through the beautiful rainforest resort, we spot a family of sloths, tiny poisonous red frogs hide between the fallen leaves and monkeys follow us on our walk through the jungle (our first monkeys in the Caribbean). The North side of the island reveals the most pristine

beaches, with palm trees growing over the light blue sea, white sand and the occasional little restaurant or beach club belonging to the resort.

For three days we enjoy this peaceful environment, we eat the best hamburgers ever, Theo finds some friends to play with on our beach walks, we fill our Instagram accounts with the typical palm island pictures and finally head South through the narrow Gap, searching for some solitude in an anchorage between the mangroves, where we can explore the local coral reefs.



The further East we venture, the more remote the islands we come across. We walk all the way around the first uninhabited Zapatilla Island, covered in rainforest, and head for the Bluefield Laguna, where we anchor near Punta Alegre, and visit

the Ngobe Indian village, where time stood still. Locals in dugout canoes offer bananas and coco nuts, we have some small toys and school stationary for the kids, and get a wonderful insight in the simple life of these indigenous people, who live of fishing and agriculture.





In Escudo de Veraguas, our next destination on our way East, we explore the wild south shore by dinghy and carefully investigate the caves, made in the high rocky shores by the pounding seas. We snorkel the coral reefs along the western shore, working our way between large colourful coral heads hiding beautiful schools of tropical fish.

A turtle hurries out of his habitat to let us in.



Colon – Shelter Bay marina 11/03/2022 – 16/03/2022

Our next stop is Shelter Bay Marina near Colon, the entrance to the Panamá Canal, where Arne, Sylvie and Leon fly back home. The marina community is an interesting mix of cruisers that passed the Canal on their way to the Caribbean, and boats ready to head West, into the vast Pacific.



In Panamá you can get all the supplies you need for the boat. We order a 205 liter barrel of special engine oil for our old Gardner engines and two solar panels for Monara, in order to reduce our generator use, when we are at anchor on sunny days.



Our last big shopping opportunity was in Montego Bay, Jamaica, so when we enter the huge Rey supermarket in Colon, we can't resist and fill our cart to the rim... Monara is all stocked up and ready to leave again.

Cartagena - Colombia – Club de Pesca Marina - 19/03/2022 – 29/03/2022



While Sylvie is away, Jeanne, Martha Luna and I decide to make a 3 week detour to Cartagena, Colombia. We explore this interesting city that loves to party, offers first class shopping and has a wide choice of very good and affordable restaurants.

Over the last decade the old city centre, Cartagena Viejo and adjacent Getsemani have been renovated with mural paintings, trendy restaurants, rooftop bars, clubs and shops.

We haven't seen shopping malls like the ones in the old city since Miami, so the girls spend some time there.



We make a beach tour on Paso Fino horses, who descended from the horses imported by Christopher Columbus into the Caribbean.



Due to a genetic defect, they developed a smooth four beat natural gait, that makes riding extremely comfortable.

We visit the Mercado de Bazurto, a maze of tiny streets with shops offering fish, meat, groceries, fruits, vegetables, clothes, and so much more. The market is that



dirty, that people are advised to wear closed shoes... But it's a colourful and intense experience, although we are happy when we are directed to the exit again.

Cartagena shows us a glimpse of a country that has thrown off most of its Narcos past and is quickly becoming one of the main tourist destinations in the Caribbean. We have to meet Sylvie, who flies into Panamá again, so we leave this wild partying city, back to where we came from.



Kuna Yala – Panamá – 01/04/2022 – 28/04/2022

Sylvie, her brother Patrick, his kids and two friends of Jeanne join us in Kuna Yala, also known as San Blas, the autonomous province ruled by the Kuna Indians, bordering Caribbean Colombia.



Our cruising guide describes these 365 islands as:

Worldwide they are unique in many ways, home to the indigenous Guna Indians, who have best preserved their culture and traditions out of all the tribes in the Americas (...). At the same time you have one of the most untouched stretches of rainforest and a cruising ground of incredible beauty, all in the same place.



We spend an unforgettable fortnight swimming, snorkelling, exploring, surfing and cruising between these virgin tropical islands in light blue waters, white fine sand beaches and palm trees. On a regular basis a launch with Kuna Indians will come alongside, selling fruit, vegetables, bananas, bread, lobsters and fresh fish.



While snorkelling we spot sharks, baracuda's, sting rays, and a myriad of colourful fish, hidden in the coral reefs. Under a million stars we spend two nights around a campfire with other cruisers, grilling marshmallows, dreaming away about faraway destinations, exchanging ideas and plans.

The villages are concentrated on a few of the islands, and most huts are still built in traditional materials. Kids play around, swim in the sea, each island has its schools; they seem very happy.

Kuna Yala is a matrilineal society, where women control the money and the men move into the women's family compound when married. In order to remain free, quite some men decide not to marry, leaving the mothers with their children.



The women are dressed in traditional coloured dresses, wearing beads around their legs and arms, golden rings in their nose. They make money by making and selling 'molás', Panamá's most famous handicraft.





Men used to work on the mainland, in the pineapple and coconut plantations, sailing their dug-out canoes across the bay early each morning.

They diverted to the tourist industry in the last 15 years, as small cruise ships started to visit the area, and yachts have discovered this well-kept Caribbean secret.

The Kuna Indians are incredible seamen, in their narrow dugout canoes they travel around their archipelago, sailing whenever possible, rowing when required.

There is a strong belief that part of the cocaine transport, originating from the jungle in Colombia, is transferred through the autonomous province, and stored on the deserted islands of Kuna Yala...



On our last day in Kuna Yala we come across Lisa, a famous transvestite, a master



mola maker and tour guide. There is no stigma attached to homosexuality in Kuna Yala, and many Kunas dress up as women, act and speak like women, and surround themselves with small children to look more feminine. The niece of Sylvie, also called Lisa, buys some exceptional molas made by Kuna Lisa...



Portobello and Colon – 29/04/2022 – 04/05/2022

After three weeks of playing around in this paradise, the rainy season sets in and we're stuck on the boat for several consecutive days of continuous heavy rain. We decide to leave Kuna Yala behind, and head for Portobello, a large bay that, between 1574 and 1702, was used by the Spanish to transfer tons of gold and silver found in central and South America to Sevilla. Ruins of the fortification can still be visited. We visit the church of the Black Christ of Portobello, a wooden statue of Jezus of Nazareth with a black face, that has become holy and is visited by pilgrims from all over South and Central America.



We understand from the local (Italian) restaurant owner that the community of Portobello mainly consists of descendants of African slaves, who were left behind when then last colonists left. As the area was quite isolated, the freed slaves made their own rules, and for example for a long time all the land was owned by the community, and you could build your house wherever you wanted, without owning the land.

Panamá Canal – 04/05/2022

The next day we head for Shelter Bay in Colon, to prepare for the crossing of the Panamá Canal. We hire an agent to do all the administration, a Canal employee comes to measure the boat, we rent extra lines and fenders and get two rope handlers to assist us during the transit.





French engineers started the construction of the Panamá Canal in 1879, but in 1889, after more than 20,000 lives lost in the harsh geographic and climatic conditions, they had to give up the project. Among the people that survived yellow fever while working on the Canal was French impressionist Paul Gauguin, who moved on to paint his famous works in Tahiti. The French were forced to sell the right of ownership and the Canal equipment to the United States government, and from 1903 to 1914, the Canal was completed, with the help of 75,000 labourers. The Canal opened August 15th, 1914, and was operated under American military control, to be handed over to Panamá in 1999. Since starting in 1914, the canal has not been down for a single day, transferring ships 24 hours per day. The largest possible 369m long container ship

typically pays 1 million dollars for a passage, we were allowed for a smaller fee...

On May 4th, as a birthday present for the captain, we start our crossing at 14:00 by entering the first locks on the Atlantic side and just before midnight the doors of the last lock open, and we glide into the Pacific Ocean.

In the first three locks, moving up from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gatun Lake that connects both lock systems, we follow a large cargo ship in the lock. After crossing Gatun Lake and the famous Gaillard Cut, we reach the Pacific Balboa Locks, where we typically



enter first, followed by a large cargo ship. Everything in the locks is made for large ocean crossing cargo vessels, and we feel small and humble amidst all this.

But hey, we made it into the Pacific, with a 62 year old trawler!! After Iceland, Greenland, Canada, entering New York, heading south along the US East coast and visiting some Caribbean gems, in small steps, we feel that we made a big leap on our journey around the world...

Panamá City – 05/05/2022 – 07/05/2022

We enter the marina after our Canal crossing at 02.00, and are happy to get a good night sleep. In the morning, we find ourselves looking at a glass and concrete wall of high rise buildings, a skyline like we haven't seen since New York, and quite a contrast with the huts in Kuna Yala.



When looking up “10 best things to do in Panamá City”, visiting the old city centre and the Canal come up, followed by take a plane to San Blas, Las Perlas or Boccas de Toro...

In the old city, that reminds us of old Havana, we visit the restaurant Fonda Lo Que Hay, advised to us by some friends in Havana, and are blown away by the spectacular tastes of the dishes. This is by far

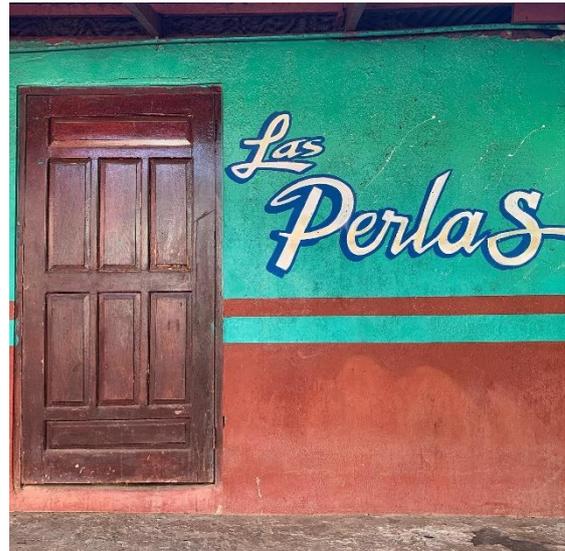
the best we've eaten in the last year! The next day we explore the shopping malls and fill up on groceries, as we want to explore Las Perlas, south of Panamá.

Las Perlas – 07/05/2022 – 17/05/2022

The Perlas Islands derive their name from the world class pearls that were collected by skin divers for centuries. The rocky islands from volcanic origin are covered in lush rainforest and bordered by white beaches. In the 16th century they were the base for many pirates, who would attack the Spanish gold fleet coming from Peru to Panamá.



As the rainy season has started, the light blue waters have become murky and even when anchored in 3m of water, we can't see the bottom anymore. We spend some quiet days cleaning the hull of Monara with dive tanks, walking the beaches, we visit the fishing village of San Miguel, where we have an unforgettable night with Patrice and Pilar, two elder Europeans who have been living in this remote village for the last 25 years.



For the last five to six months we have not seen any serious tide differences, but now, on the Pacific, tides can reach 4–5m, with beaches disappearing at high tide, and your dinghy stuck on the beach 200m from the water at low tide. On top of that, the pacific ocean swell, famous for the surf on the West Coast of America, makes beaching your dinghy an adventure on its own.



After picking up Rik and Geraard, two friends, in Panamá, we decide to show them a glimpse of Las Perlas, by trekking through the jungle, exploring the beaches and swimming around. At night we are in the middle of a huge thunderstorm, with torrential rains and lightning all around us, every few seconds. The next day we round Isla San Jose, the South Western tip of Las Perlas, where huge rocks, covered in trees, protrude from the sea.

Another dramatic thunderstorm drives us out of our

anchorage around 23.00, and we decide to head straight for Punta Mala and Benaó Beach, one of Panamá's best surf spots, on an overnight trip. Rain drives us on, the surf spot is too rolly to anchor, so we continue until we can anchor next to the jungle in Guanico. The only restaurant in the village serves us shrimps with French fries, with a 2 liter bottle of Coca Cola, for the



democratic price of 26 dollars for 7 persons. The beer truck hasn't arrived yet, so no beer...

Climbing from the beach into the dinghy in the dark, with waves rolling in, is always a challenge, and as usual everybody is wetter than planned. As we chug along in the Zodiac, a large dolphin suddenly appears next to us with a huge splash, and starts playing on the bow wave of the boat. We are in awe with the spectacle happening only a meter from us, bioluminescence sparkling off and leaving a trail in the water, like fairy dust. Wet clothes are forgotten, Theo is overexcited, seeing and hearing the dolphin that close by, and we have to hold him to prevent him from jumping in.

When we climb on board, zodiac stored securely on the roof and have a last beer, we can hear the breathing of the dolphin around us, in the dark, as it is hunting near our anchorage. These exceptional moments make you realise how fortunate we are, to be able to travel to these secluded places.

In Honda bay, our next destination, we are met by Domingo and his son Kennedy. Domingo, in his seventies, comes out to each visiting yacht, to sell fruit and vegetables. In return he is happy with some t-shirts, a few gallons of petrol, some fish hooks or whatever you can spare. Every morning, for one hour, Kennedy rows up and down the bay to exercise. He brings us red bananas, and asks us if we can pass on a message to yachts coming south, to bring him a backpack for his daughter.



There is no road in Honda Bay, everything that comes in comes by boat, the bay and village are surrounded by impenetrable jungle.

We visit the local village, we drink a beer in Jardin Yuditza, a colourful bar, freshly painted, with a very proud bartender. The local youth, slightly tipsy, try to get a





conversation out of our daughters, by talking about Theo. They seem very disappointed when we decide to move on.

The next morning we weigh anchor very early, as we have a long way to go to Puerto Armuelles, the border town where we will have to clear out of Panamá. We get assistance from Omar, who takes care of all our paperwork, making four neat piles of copies of passports, crew lists, cruising permit and dog certificate, to be distributed to customs, immigration, port captain and

ministry of health. In two hours the administration is done, Omar even shows us around in the town by car and brings us to the supermarket. Finally he calls his colleague Gabriela in Costa Rica to announce that we are on our way...

What a nice person, Omar, so helpful and kind, and living in one of the most beautiful countries we have ever visited, Panamá. Muchos Gracias!

