



SANDRA MCGREGOR PHOTOS FOR THE TORONTO STAR

A lonely boat stands moored on a pier in the secluded Panamanian beach at Bocas del Toro. Visitors will find vibrant reefs, dolphins, surfing, boat trips — and cheap beer.

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

## CENTRAL AMERICA

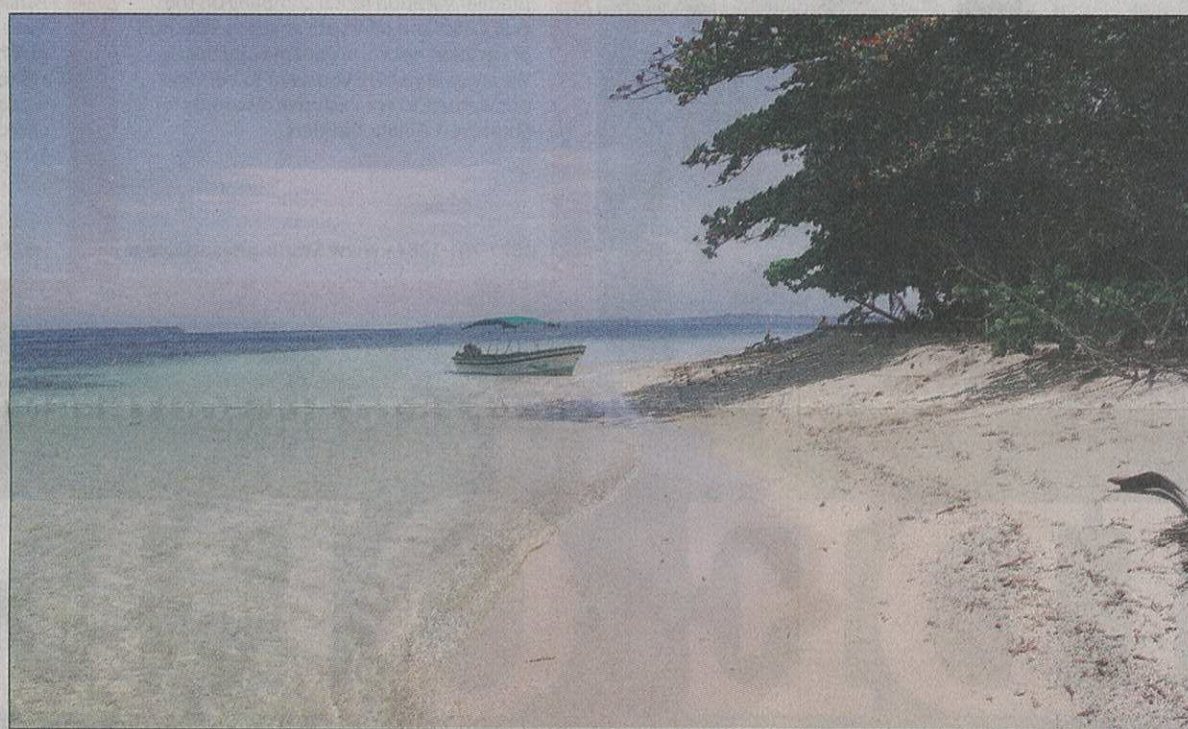
# Discovering Panama's quirky secrets

On islands of Bocas del Toro, oysters are there for the taking and brave souls wander through a cave filled with tiny, furry bats

BOCAS DEL TORO, PANAMA—My friend and I are stumped. In one hand, Juan, our guide, is clutching a knife and with the other he's pointing animatedly toward the roots of some mangrove trees just off the bow of his tiny boat. When we continue to stare blankly, he licks his fingers and rub his stomach. Finally, taking our quizzical looks as assent, Juan jumps into the water and emerges seconds later with more than a dozen oysters freshly plucked from the mangrove. Pulling a lemon from a cooler stashed on-board, he squeezes it over the oysters and, beaming with pride, divides them equally among the three of us. They are the best—and certainly the freshest—I've ever tasted, and a nice, unexpected extra on a daylong, chartered boat trip that cost all of \$20.

Here in Bocas del Toro, an archipelago just off the northwestern coast of Panama, it takes little more than a sense of adventure and a talent for haggling to enjoy an inexpensive day touring islands and swimming in water that looks like melted sapphire. Just an hour earlier, we had spread out a picnic on an actual deserted island. Our picnic had been preceded by a stop at Coral Cay, a popular snorkelling destination where vibrant reefs are upstaged only by their flashy marine residents. While trying to avoid stepping on giant sea cucumbers, we puzzled over fish that would have been equally at home in a horror movie as in a fairy tale. Ready to move on to our next destination, we sprang out of the water and onto the deck of the Coral Cay Restaurant to grab a quick drink. The open-air eatery, which specializes in seafood, is balanced on stilts over the water and happily serves local lobster and fresh pina colodas to wet, sun-drunk, swimsuit-clad guests.

Though there are certainly enough deserted beaches to go around in this archipelago of only a handful of populated islands and more than 200 islets, the base for most explorers is Bocas Town (known locally as Bocas) on Colon, the region's capital and most developed island. Not only does Bocas have the best selection of restaurants and accommodations, it also has the busiest harbour and it's here that travellers hunt for boats to charter to the other islands. There are surprisingly few large tour operators in Bocas, and assisting sightseers is left mainly up to small, local businesses, individual boat owners and fishermen who are only too happy to give up a day's catch for the more lucrative prize of facilitating



A boat waits for its owner who has stepped onshore to a seemingly deserted island in Bocas del Toro, and oysters plucked directly from roots of mangrove trees are lined up for a quick snack.

island hopping.

One of the most popular islands to visit is Bastimentos. Home to a 32,000-acre marine and land reserve, it offers magnificent opportunities to view wildlife like sloths, monkeys and sea turtles. But we went for the day to see the island's most famous resident, a rare, en-

demic, poisonous, red dart frog.

The next morning, exhausted from frog-hunting through the jungle, we decide to spend the day in Bocas. Despite a growing tourist trade, the town's low-key pace shows few signs of accelerating. There is only one paved road and few street lights to illuminate Bo-

cas' predominantly ramshackle, faded wooden homes and shops, many with thatched roofs and stilts.

A popular pastime in Bocas is spending the afternoon relaxing on one of the town's myriad patios lining the harbour. We enjoy fresh ceviche and beer for \$5 while watching dolphins dart among tiny fishing

boats. Come dusk, schools of flying fish tickle their way along the water's surface as a townwide happy hour begins with every restaurant and bar offering some inexpensive combination of tropical drink, beer and food.

Despite its plentiful cheap drinks and convivial atmosphere, there is no raucous, spring break-like party vibe here in Bocas. Until recently the region was known mostly as a Mecca for surfers looking for empty beaches and big waves, and retired expats, who came specifically for what Bocas lacks as a tropical paradise: people.

Even local business owners are of two minds when it comes to the region's increasing popularity.

"If only Bocas could remain a secret paradise and keep businesses booming," says Maria Turner, who came from Canada five years ago to open a small hotel.

Though Bocas still caters mainly to the budget-conscious, adventure-minded traveller, Turner has noticed that eco-lodges and boutique-style hotels are beginning to appear (as are the moneyed tourists who can afford them). "But it's hard to complain about people wanting to spend money," she adds.

My friend and I decide to investigate Bocas' famous bat cave, La Gruta, after having numerous locals and tourists insist that the 300-metre-long cave on the outskirts of town was not to be missed.

We arrive to find an old lady standing beside the cave's entrance. Being the owner of the farmland on which the cave sits, and thus the host of the "attraction" she collects \$1 per person for its maintenance (what it takes to maintain such a thing is not clear), hands us one barely operational flashlight, shakes her head and sighs when she looks down at our shoes (we are wearing sandals, not having been forewarned about the knee-deep water) and finally points toward the entrance of the cave. She doesn't speak a word of English. My questions regarding bat numbers, possibility of rabies and escape routes go unanswered.

I wish I could say I made it through. I am nonetheless proud to say I did last a solid five minutes in the cave before I decided I had proven my worth as an eco-adventurer and, wishing a solid "good luck" to my friend, promptly headed back into town for a stiff drink.

Returning to form, my friend and I spent the next day lounging on a deserted beach, with the jungle at our back and the aquamarine sea before us.

Sandra McGregor is a Toronto-based freelance writer.