

# Panama's less-travelled Pacific Coast is home to nature's best – and the country intends to keep it that way

This remote coast is worth the visit for its wildlife wonders, pristine beaches and unforgettable food

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Scuba diving in the Gulf of Chiriquí, Panama.  
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The moment I saw the whitetip reef shark, another diver's flipper kicked me in the face. I was 20 metres deep, and by the time I got the connection to my oxygen supply back in my mouth, the slight drift had moved me closer to this new finned friend. Startled, I swam away, farther into the reef. Soon, I was facing 10 sharks gathered on the ocean floor, and a strange feeling of excitement and calm came over me.

Swimming with sharks was not what I expected for my first-time scuba dive in the ocean. But here I was in Coiba National Park, the [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#), during peak shark season (January to March). Known as the Galapagos of Panama because of the large number of endemic species that inhabit the 38 islands, Coiba was once a penal colony, and the restricted access from 1918 to 2004 allowed wildlife to flourish on the islands and the surrounding waters.

I spent a scorching hot day in February exploring three of the 30 dive spots around the protected park's coral reefs, in awe of the large sea turtles, colourful butterfly fish, parrotfish, barracudas and needlefish, and surrounded by countless schools of shiny spot-tailed grunts – and yes, sharks.

Diving was a dream I had put on hold during the pandemic, and revisiting it was the push I needed to experience more adventure, in spite of the comfort zone I had built up in recent years. I wanted to not only see abundant life under the waves, but also less crowded areas that have only recently opened to tourism, with local guides working to have less impact on the environment. The Pacific Coast of Panama proved to be the right place for it.

For divers going to Coiba, the small fishing village in Santa Catalina Island is the main hub. It's also a surf spot for pros and beginners or a laid-back getaway far from Panama



Scuba diving in Coiba National Park, Panama, in February during peak shark season.

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

City's booming tourism, with quiet beachside boutique hotels from the family-oriented Nativo to the trendy and romantic Villa Coco, and restaurants that serve mouth-watering traditional Panamanian dishes and freshly caught seafood. A large fishing federation works to conserve the coastal marine resources of the Coiba National Park and its surrounding areas, so I went to check out a restaurant run by a local co-operative of fisherwomen who are part of this effort.



The author boards a fishing boat to the remote island of Isla Leones.



Collecting black shell clams in mangroves on Isla Leones.  
CHASE HARDER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

For this unforgettable food experience, I took a 20-minute boat ride in the Gulf of Montijo to the remote island of Isla Leones (population: 280). At the shore, I met Paula Serrano, who runs both the co-operative and the restaurant, Las Aventureras. In the forest along the coastline, she showed us how to find black shell clams from the cold, clear water at the roots of the mangrove. I ducked under the branches and grabbed a few thick shells, but Serrano took them, placing them gently back into the water. They were babies, she said, and we can only eat clams larger than five centimetres.

“It’s our way to live with our environment: ensure conservation,” Serrano said. It’s a delicacy the women prepare as a refreshing ceviche, along with a meal of freshly caught local lobster, corvina, coconut and achiote rice, sweet plantain, and yucca.



Paula Serrano of Las Aventureras in Isla Leonos prepares a meal.  
ARUNA DUTT/THE GLOBE AND MAIL



Black shell clam ceviche, local lobster, corvina, coconut and achiote rice, sweet plantain and yucca.  
ARUNA DUTT/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Las Aventureras is one example of the country's bigger push for more sustainable tourism. Not only has the government developed a strategic plan for it and committed \$301-million over five years until 2025, but the new SOSTUR (short for sustainable tourism) initiative has made it easier to find and book community-based ecotourism adventures. To see what else this gulf had to offer, I ventured east to another of these SOSTUR-recommended destinations.

Mata Oscura, in the province of Veraguas, has luscious green rolling hills with views of the ocean, and I'd heard it has become a popular spot for digital nomads and surfers. I had pictured a commercialized environment and a lively party culture, but that's far from what I found. Here, the local-run foundation Agua y Tierra does most of the conservation work. It started 13 years ago as a group of marine biologists conserving the Turtle Eco Route, where sea turtle populations nest and take their first steps into the ocean from July to November each year, a phenomenon that thousands of tourists witness.

The foundation also turns profits back to the community from other ecotourism activities, such as mangrove kayak trips. Mangroves store on average 1,000 tonnes of carbon per hectare, and with 1,744 square kilometres of mangroves in Panama, they've helped the country become one of the few carbon-negative nations. I joined Finca Agroturística Canta Rana, run by a father and son whose family have owned the entrance to the four-kilometre mangrove route for the past 50 years. They led me through the narrow opening of the enormous spidery roots, eventually reaching a calm river for a long and peaceful paddle around these resilient trees.



Jacinto Rodríguez, marine biologist and president of Agua y Tierra.  
ARUNA DUTT/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Later, I settled in at Morillo Beach Eco Resort, a secluded six-room hotel, where the guests (retired birdwatchers and wildlife enthusiasts who themselves had only just met) greeted me as if I was new to the family. The second greeting committee was outside my room: howler monkeys, which one by one climbed from trees to the roof.

Deforestation from agriculture has drawn 15 of the howler monkeys, an endangered species, to the jungle around the resort, says the hotel's owner, Cari Mackey, who lives on the property. A few years ago, the owners rescued one injured baby monkey and brought him back to health with advice from a wildlife vet before releasing him back to the wild. Later, I saw Mackey in the middle of another rehabilitation: two baby squirrels, one injured after falling from a tree in high winds.

The resort's main attraction is its access to what is called the "beginner" surfing beach of Playa Morrillo, which is only a short walk to the larger waves for those more advanced at catching them than me. On my way there, I felt the breeze of a large blue heron's colossal wingspan before I saw it soaring past. I must have disturbed its peace, since there were no other people or residences on this pristine stretch of sand – only palm trees and small burrowing crabs. The waves were toned down, protected by an outside reef and island, and though the sun was setting, I'd lost track of time as I flew along them on a bodyboard.

That night, the howler monkeys' faint grunts and groans, and even the small earthquake that woke the entire building up at 3 a.m. couldn't keep me from fading back into what felt like a well-earned slumber.



The author at Morillo Beach Eco Resort.  
CHASE HARDER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL



The author visits one of the beaches in Costa National Park.  
CHASE HARDER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

## If you go

**Getting there:** Copa airlines have daily flights from Toronto and Montreal to Panama City. This winter, Air Transat will increase weekly flights directly to Rio Hato, which would cut down the drive to Mata Oscura or Santa Catalina by around two hours, compared with a five-hour drive from Panama City. Take the smooth Pan-American Highway, as well as some scenic roads that offer many opportunities for tourists to stop and see different parts of the country.

Dives can be booked with Expedition Coiba Dive Centre ([expedicioncoiba.com](http://expedicioncoiba.com)). A visit to Las Aventuras in Isla Leones can be booked through Pacific Adventures ([pacificadvent.com](http://pacificadvent.com)). More information on rural and community tourism experiences across Panama can be found through the SOSTUR network digital portal ([sostur.org](http://sostur.org)).

For a hassle-free trip with transportation and activities included, El Trip De Jenny's local tourism specialists run trips nationwide. Day tours can be booked two days ahead, but it is recommended to book multi-day trips at least a month ahead ([eltripdejenny.com](http://eltripdejenny.com)).

*The writer was a guest of PROMTUR Panama. It did not review or approve the story.*



boat ride, the remote island of Isla Leones offers guided tours to find black shell clams which can only be eaten if they are over five centimetres. Paula Serrano, who runs a restaurant called Las Aventureras, describes the clam rule as a 'way to live with our environment: ensure conservation.'  
ARUNA DUTT/THE GLOBE AND MAIL (FOOD, CARI MACKEY); PROMTUR PANAMA (TURTLE); CHASE HARDER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL (BOAT, CLAMS)

