

Hostel Mamallena Guide to Sailing from Panama to Colombia.

Want to know what this trip is all about? Read on,

The Intro

Do we recommend you taking this trip? Hell Yes we do, We are backpackers like you and have done the trip, and loved it, more than once or twice ourselves and want to help you guys have the same great experience we did. **Is it safe? Yeah, we think it is,** there are some real horror stories floating around the Gringo Trail but this trip has changed hugely in the last couple of years and unsafe boats have now been pushed aside and left empty. There are still some crazy captains around, but hey, sometimes that is what makes for the best trips! If you decide to take a boat from Panama to Colombia you'll enjoy 2-3 amazing days sailing in the beautiful San Blas islands of Panama. The open sea crossing to Cartagena is seen as one of the worlds toughest by the global boating community, Please make yourself well informed of what you are getting yourself in for, and then relax, its a great trip, a must do and completely safe....Trust us! This is an opportunity not to be missed. White sand tropical islands are waiting to be explored. Snorkeling like you have never seen before, swimming or just relaxing on the deck of your yacht. Why not catch your own seafood, if you can. Experience the traditional lifestyle of the Kuna Islanders. Eat Lobster that have been caught just minutes before, the list goes on.

The Trip

This is a 5 day trip but it is all about the 2-3 days in the islands followed by the **30-45hr open ocean crossing to Cartagena, without stops!** Don't be unhappy if you arrive early on the 4th day(which can happen!) That normally means the open ocean crossing was less than 30hrs and you were lucky enough to have had less time probably being sea sick. Its better not to argue with the captain about the early arrival, he might take you back out to the rough seas for a few more hours to make up for it (That's a joke! Well we hope so anyway). The trip **price includes all meals, water, departure fees and taxes,** but does not include the transport costs to reach the boat which are detailed later in this thread. **The captain of the boat will take care of all immigration requirements.** Snorkeling gear is included in every trip and the quality will vary from captain to captain depending on how often they replace their sets. The number of sets will also vary from one each to one between two people, if you love snorkeling then it is a good idea to spend \$10-\$15 and grab your own set before heading to the boat. Fishing gear is also included but this is normally just a line and lure being pulled by the boat as you are sailing, rods and reels are a rarity nowadays. Remember that there is NO opportunity to get money once you leave Panama City. There are **no ATMs in the islands,** nor Portobelo or Puerto Lindo, and your next bank will be either Cartagena or Turbo (if your boat is heading to the border). **Payment for the trip is made in cash,** sorry no Credit Cards, and collected by the captain once you are on-board. It is advisable to start withdrawing money from an ATM a few days before so that there are no last minute worries as some banks set withdrawal limits lower than what you need for the trip.

The Food

Meals vary by boat with some having a big lunch and small breakfast and others vice versa. **On every trip you are served 3 meals a day** with most dinners being seafood and rice or pasta based, sometimes on the boat and sometimes on the islands with the locals, again this is captain dependent. Lets hope at least one meal is the catch of the day that you pulled in for everyone (get photos to show your friends of course!). Please let us know at the time of booking if you have special dietary requirements. All boats accommodate Vegetarians, Kosher etc and may ask you to bring some supplies up from the city with you as such things are limited in San

Blas. Other items such as alcohol (of course you'll be wanting beers and rum right?) and soft drinks you will need to take yourself. It's often a good idea to buy these in Panama City, it is much cheaper and the shopping in San Blas is more limited. Most boats will have limited refrigeration for Beers, sodas etc but not ice unless you are lucky. Snacks are optional and not really needed unless you are an 'eat between meals' type of person, most boats will have fresh fruit available at all times for you to snack on. Some boats include a lobster meal, others charge a small fee for it, while others think it is being over fished and may be against it on-board.

The Route

The traditional route is to Cartagena via the San Blas islands sailing from Panama to Colombia. You will spend 2-3 days in the islands, the amount of time is dependent on the captain and quite often the weather conditions on the open ocean. Two anchorages, once departing immigration in San Blas, is a normal trip, three or more anchorages then you have a great captain who wants you to have the best possible time. You can also expect that the captain will use their engine for most of the trip due to the need for maneuverability around the reefs in the Islands and to help sailing against the wind and currents on the way to Cartagena. The engine will be noisy and it will help the inside of the boat get hot, all the more reason to hang out up on deck in the fresh air and learn some sailing techniques. Some captains also offer a trip to the Panama/Colombia border which is a 4-5 day trip where you'll sail through the entire group of islands and finish in the Colombian town of Sapzurro, avoiding the dreaded 2 day open ocean crossing. From there you'll take a lancha to Carapurgana, a speedboat to Turbo and then buses to Cartagena, Medellin or wherever you're going. Most prices for this sailing experience are between \$450 and \$500pp. It'll then take another day or so and \$85pp to reach your destination. The area around Carapurgana is beautiful and known as a secluded Colombian beach resort town. There are very reasonably priced hotels and budget hostels there and transport to Turbo leaves at 7.30am each morning for \$25 each and takes 2hrs.

The Departure Point

There are a couple of departure points but the majority of sailboats in Panama are currently leaving from the San Blas islands themselves. It will cost a little more, but it means that travel time to reach them is less and you have more time sailing in the beautiful islands, which is what the trip is all about right? There are no buses on this route and you'll need to take a 4x4 to reach the boat, but this is easily arranged by us at the hostel. You will take the 4x4 at 5.30am on the morning of your boat's departure from your hostel in Panama City and the total cost will be \$45-\$50pp for the jeep, local taxes and a fast boat to take you out to the Captain.

The other departure points consist of Portobelo and Puerto Lindo, which are on the Caribbean coast around 1.5hrs from Colon City. You can reach these small towns by bus from Panama City at a relatively low cost of \$5-\$6pp and around 3hrs travel time. The captain will arrange a meeting the day before departure to collect passports etc and you will stay in a local hostel there that night and hopefully leave early the next day.

The Costs

Prices have been increasing and currently range from \$485 to \$550 per person, depending on the boat's size, quality and of course, the captain. Please know that a cheaper boat does not mean a lower standard of trip, it just means a captain with lower operating costs. The quality of boats can vary, but we feel that the boats we deal with are some of the best operating between Panama and Colombia. The price may also seem high, but consider what you're receiving. 5 days of food and accommodation, 2-3 days in the islands, arriving in Cartagena and of course, the experience of a yacht charter that would normally cost around \$300 per day in the major Caribbean islands. The price of one way flights to Colombia can range between \$330 and \$400, so sailing from Panama to Colombia and having 3 meals a day prepared for you is just a much better deal.

The Meet and Greet

Once on-board the Captain will stow away your large bags, leaving you with your day pack and all the essentials you will need for the trip. It is better to **organize your bags before you depart** as this will save on time, you won't need much on-board, some t-shirts, shorts, sunscreen, toiletries, ipod/camera chargers, books, sea sick pills etc etc. **Most Captains will collect payment and passports when you arrive at the boat**, and you will not see your passport again until your hostel in Cartagena, but don't worry as this is normal procedure. You should also get a brief tour of the boat and safety instruction in case of emergencies. This is the time to say if you are uneasy about anything to do with the trip. Make sure you're comfortable with what you've been told and feel free to ask any questions. It's a long way to Cartagena and you need to feel safe for the entire voyage. If, for whatever reason, you do not feel safe then do not be afraid to leave the boat. If it's for a legitimate reason then no captain will have a problem refunding your deposit, they will probably be a bit grumpy but that is their problem, not yours.

The Expectations

Remember that these are budget, backpacker based sailing trips. **Some of you will have cabins, some of you will share beds as strangers and others will sleep in the saloon of the yacht on sofas.** Be prepared for cramped spaces with not much privacy, and remember if the weather is bad you'll be spending a lot of time with your fellow passengers. A couple of boats offer daily showers but on most trips your best, and possibly only shower, will be while you are snorkeling or drunken skinny dipping with the luminescence plankton. Oh, and Air-Con...Not a chance. You're also not going to be getting breakfast in bed and you'll not be waited on. The only cocktail barman will be one of your fellow passengers. Everyone normally helps out with cleaning and cooking duties and some captains may ask you to help out with keeping watch on the way to Cartagena. No experience is required and the captain will take care of all sailing operations, you just make sure the Auto-Pilot stays on course and yell 'Land Ahoy Skipper' if you need to. If for whatever reason you do not feel comfortable doing this, don't worry, the captain will not mind. Safety always comes first! Take sunscreen or you will probably get burnt, Take Mearol or you will probably get Seasickness, Take Alcohol or you will probably feel left out, Take a book and charged Ipod or you will probably get bored, Take \$50 (at least) in small bills as spending money or you will probably not be getting souvenirs, Take a small water bottle to refill on-board or you will probably find drinking hard when it gets bumpy, Take a good attitude towards the boat, it is the Captains home, their house, where they live, treat it as you would your own home or you will probably upset them but Don't take drugs or you will probably go overboard and finally..... **Take no expectations and you will definitely be having a fantastic time.**

What do I learn along the way? What do we do for fun?

Some Captains are happier than others to show you and teach you some sailing skills or knot tying along the way. If you're interested in sailing then ask if you can assist with the operations of the boat and the captain may say yes, or he may say no. Sometimes in certain weather conditions they prefer everyone to stay below decks for safety.

The actual sailing route through the San Blas islands and where you anchor is totally dependent on the Captains, they all have their favourite spots and Kuna families that they know. They usually take you to the places where they know you'll have the best time, both with the beaches and the locals. You can expect barbecues on the beach, great snorkelling sites, fishing where possible, interaction with the local indigenous tribes, parties and more. It all depends on the captain, your fellow passengers and you. Some trips party more than others, some are just downright wild and others are more relaxed and tranquillo but we're pretty sure that if you go along with the right attitude then you're going to have a great time.

The Fine Print

Please remember, these aren't our trips. We help both you and the captains arrange the trip but each captain is independent and operates as they wish, we have no control over their actions. That said though **we do limit the boats that we work with and only use boats we consider safe and captains we trust** even though some could use improvement, which we happily tell you before booking them. If a boat is bad we don't want to hide or from you and let you book it somewhere else unknowingly, we want to tell you about it and let you decide for yourself what's the best boat for your trip. **We're not in the business of you having a bad time so we actually care about who you go with.**

Few of these yachts travel to a strict schedule so it's never sure that the boat you want will be ready to leave when you are. We maintain a list of boats that are ready to leave for Colombia and when we hear from you we'll send you our current list. It can be an idea to ask for the departures list in advance as more boats are starting to set departure dates a month or more ahead of time. Sailing from Panama to Cartagena can be great fun but there are often stories of storms, damaged boats, boats on reefs, drunk Captains, stoned Captains(very common actually), lack of food, people falling overboard and so on. Go out there for fun but remember that you're in the hand of the mother nature and the captain, once on the open ocean your captain is Master and Commander and there to keep you and his boat safe and arriving happily to Colombia.

The Comments.

We want to know how your trip goes. When you arrive in Colombia please return to this page, find the boat you sailed with and leave them a quick review so other passengers know what to expect. If it's bad, we'll know to tell the captain and everybody else. If it's good we want to tell others so they can have the same great time you did. But no matter who you go with we know you'll love sailing to Colombia.

We work with more captains than any other booking service, giving you the best chance of choosing the safest boat for your trip. We are not obligated to fill some boats before others and can tell you honestly who is good and who is bad, who is safe and who is not.

Email us mamallenapa@yahoo.com to make a reservation.