

Story and photography by Tor Johnson

PAST PERFECT

A solo sail transports an eager sailor from Panama's culture-rich past to the modern day

My two-person crew and I had sailed 5,000 miles from Portugal, and we were only too happy to be making landfall in Panama's lush Bocas Del Toro Islands. Before we even sighted land, spectacular lightning shows and torrential rain squalls told us that our trusty companions the trade winds were now lifting over the isthmus, condensing into Caribbean Panama's incredibly humid, rainy climate.

It was a dramatic entry to one of the world's great cruising grounds. Bocas del Toro ("Mouths of the Bull," named after the many river mouths in the area) is a chill Caribbean surf town with the fantastic little Bocas del Toro Marina. Fabian, who runs things, had us almost completely checked in with the authorities over WhatsApp before we even got ashore.

My crewmates Jeff Max, a long time sailing friend, and nephew Rowan, both of whom had made the long trip from Portugal with me, jumped ship in Bocas Town right away. They were attending to work and a girlfriend, respectively, but who could blame them for wanting to get ashore after 5,000 miles? And suddenly it was just me, singlehanded my new-to-me Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 509 through a beautiful, complex chain of islands. I couldn't have been happier. Ocean crossings, while challenging and wonderful, are a means to the real payoff: cruising in a place like this.

The Ngäbe Indians are the primary ethnic group here, and I often saw seafaring Ngäbe well offshore in beautifully crafted canoes made of a single log. Throughout the myriad islands, I saw them fishing from canoes under sail, paddling as an entire family, and





In waters teeming with sealife, Panamians offer up the best, be it at anchor thanks to a local fisherman turned salesman, above, or a fresh-caught octopus, below right. Life is on the water here, and boats offer transportation, fun and business opportunities, right.

once several miles out to sea, a fisherman paddling while standing up in his dugout, making impressive progress with a long carved paddle, effortlessly slicing through the water.

It shouldn't be a surprise that the Ngäbe are a seafaring culture: steep hillsides are covered in dense, wet rainforest jungle, and virtually impenetrable mangrove jungle lines the coast. Thousands of islands and deeply indented bays make up the terrain. A strenuous overland hike that might take hours is a canoe journey of minutes.

As soon as I dropped anchor, I was usually greeted by Ngäbe in canoes bearing lobster, crab or luscious, warm baked coconut flour biscuits, all at reasonable prices. Life isn't easy—more than 90% of the people live in extreme poverty, making less than \$2 per day. Less than 10% are employed. But as the Ngäbe will point out, money and jobs aren't necessarily the measure of a good life. The sea and the land are teeming with life. Farming and fishing can feed the family.



A curious Ngäbe tradition is the Balseria, a three-day festival in which groups challenge their neighbors in a traditional sporting match wherein competitors throw long balsa wood poles (balsas) at each other's legs, seeking to disable their opponents. There is a lot of drinking and fighting, and indeed the games don't even begin until the third day, by which time the hosts have ideally given their guests so much fermented corn, banana and palm leaf liquor that they will be more easily defeated.

Outsiders call the games a drunken brawl, which looks to be partly true, since alcohol and fighting are actually sort of the point. The games are outlawed by the government, but the Ngäbe feel it's part of their culture. It's a ritualized confrontation involving swagger and aggression, but it might also be a way to "let off steam" and avoid larger confrontations between groups. The Ngäbe after all have a fierce warrior heritage, some of the few who were never vanquished by the Spanish conquistadores.

Eager to see more of the area, I set off from Bocas Town, tacking out the wide, shallow, reef-lined channel into the Caribbean. After 5,000 miles downwind, it was good fun beating into an onshore wind. *Kābolo* leapt into the short, choppy sea, her straight 50-foot Briand-designed hull powering right through. Once clear of the headlands and reefs, I cracked the sheets and reached off at 9 knots for the Kusapin Peninsula, watching the lush jungle and white beaches slide quickly past to starboard.

I dropped anchor in remote Laguna de Bluefield, named for a colorful Dutch Jewish pirate named Blauvelt who raided the Spanish in the mid-1600s in retribution for their expulsion of his people. A local boy named David immediately showed up in a sailing canoe with his faithful dog, always at his side. David's family has a farm in the bay, and David gravitates toward the animals. When I mentioned that I wanted to cross over land to the exposed ocean side of the Kusapin Peninsula to look for a rumored

The Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 509 makes way across the Caribbean, sailing from Martinique to Panama.





surf spot, David asked if he could guide me. We spoke Spanish, although most locals are bilingual, speaking their native Ngäbere and Spanish.

We motored to the head of the bay in my dinghy, where David pointed out a nearly invisible long river channel covered in dense mangrove jungle. Without David I never would have found it, nor the only road, a well maintained concrete foot path.

Kusapin's exposed sea coast turned out to be a treasure of rugged emerald green hills embracing white sand beaches and the blue Caribbean, which was rolling in with perfect surf! This was a great find for me. I spent hours surfing all alone. And David was pleased to find his lost dog which had run away from home some days before roaming the beach. David called him Perdido ("lost one"). We loaded the dog into my dinghy and brought him back to the family farm.

David showed me around the farm, and when I left the next day, he presented me with a book he had made, complete with

pictures he'd drawn of me surfing, my boat and the great times we had exploring the area. His mother gave me a woven basket she made, full of their produce, and I donated some cash for the family education fund.

The crew at Bocas Marina had told me about an island gem called Escudo de Veraguas ("Shield of Veraguas"). Although not a well protected anchorage, they said it was naturally pristine, uninhabited except for a few fishermen, and could be circumnavigated mostly inside its reefs by dinghy.

I anchored in the lee of the island over a long, shallow sand bank that nearly touched the keel, and set off around the island by dinghy. I'd never seen terrain so varied on such a tiny island. Long white sand beaches gave way to eroded volcanic islets, a labyrinth of coral reefs, a maze of mangrove forests studded with small islets, then coastline of jungle caves hiding white pocket beaches. Although less than three miles long, the diverse landscape of tiny,

isolated Escudo de Veraguas is home to several species found nowhere else in the world, like a pygmy sloth, a unique fruit bat and a worm salamander. The island is considered the traditional birthplace of the Ngäbe people.

I could have spent much longer at Escudo de Veraguas, but I wanted to take advantage of a break in the easterly winds to continue 100 miles east to another anchorage I'd been told about: pristine Rio Chagres. Once a strategic portal to the Panamanian isthmus and the Las Cruces Trail to the Pacific, the Chagres was guarded by a substantial Spanish fort, which still stands. English pirates from Henry Morgan to Edward Vernon raided the Spanish coffers of their stolen gold over many years. Now the Chagres is forgotten, a nature reserve accessible only by boat.

Singlehanded limits the ability to keep a good lookout, especially at night, and in an area so close to the Panama Canal, I was wary of increased shipping and fishing traffic. My plan was to avoid sailing



David, who befriended the author, was never without his faithful dog Perido in his dugout canoe, and offered to serve as a guide to the nearby river channel, nearly invisible due to a dense covering of mangrove.

at night whenever possible. But this leg was over 100 miles, more than a day's run. My solution was to hoist anchor well before first light, covering the first, less congested 30 miles before sunrise. Visibility was terrible in downpours of seemingly solid water. Fortunately the expected ship traffic was very light, and the deluge gave way to an obliging westerly wind with the dawn. I spent the day under the asymmetric spinnaker, catching tuna and jibing downwind in the light wind, hoping to make Rio Chagres before dusk.

On cue, Fort San Lorenzo, guarding the mouth of the Chagres appeared with enough daylight to spare. But a sizable reef blocked the center of the river mouth, and with the murky river water it took a sharp lookout to avoid it, even with the help of a good chartplotter.


Once safely inside the wild jungle river, I sailed upstream for miles, perfectly protected. Howler monkeys roared and screamed as I glided past their perches. Brilliant birds and strange butterflies

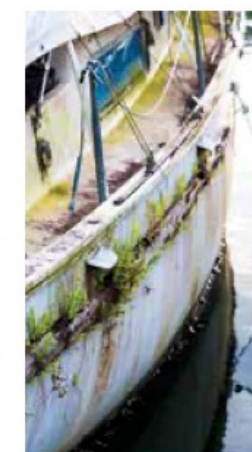


fitted, while jaguars lurked in the shadows. It had been a long day, and once safely anchored, I quickly drifted off in my bunk to the ruckus of the howler monkeys.

The next day, like most days in Panama, was unbearably hot and humid. I had to jump in the river for a quick swim, but immediately thought better of it and slithered back aboard. I learned later that swimming is not really recommended... due to crocodiles.

Instead I took my rigid inflatable several more miles up to the head of the river, where I hiked up to the top of Gatun Dam, which provides not only water to run the Panama Canal, but hydro power and drinking water for Colon. Suddenly emerging from a primeval jungle into the Gatun Locks of the Panama Canal, I stood witness to the shipping commerce of the modern world. Ships rumbled by loaded with hundreds of thousands of containers packed with computers, smart phones, TVs and housewares for their new homes. Then I turned around and descended back in time, into the primordial jungle river, to find *Kaholo* still swinging peacefully at anchor in her own Eden.

Panama is like that: a country with one foot in the past, and the other firmly in the present. In a day I'd sailed from an indigenous world of subsistence farming to the world of booming trade and industry. At the fantastic full service Shelter Bay Marina, only a few miles west at the canal, manager Juanjo and his flawless crew helped load my boat on a ship to be transported like magic to the Pacific Northwest, for another chapter in the cruising life. But I'll never forget my time with David and his family, living with the land in a simpler world of the past. 



A lone *Kaholo* is doubled in the crystalline water of Rio Chagres, left. In the rainforest climate, just about anything, including an aging hull, becomes a host for more life, top. David and friends hang out on *Kaholo's* transom.