

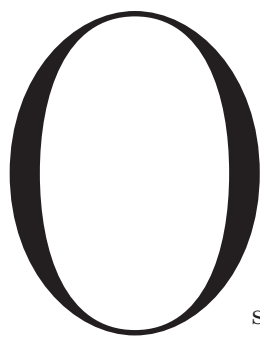
Good Vibes

An aerial photograph of a tropical beach. The water is a vibrant turquoise color, transitioning to a lighter, sandy hue near the shore. A white sand beach curves along the left and bottom edges. Several palm trees are scattered across the beach, with their shadows cast onto the sand. In the lower right quadrant, a white sailboat with a large white sail is anchored in the shallow water. The overall scene is serene and idyllic.

Uninhabited, Untamed, & Untouched

The beauty of Panama's rain forest and
the San Blas Islands can unlock a
different way to travel ... and simply to be.

by Michelle Shultz



OUTSIDE OF THE CITY AND BEYOND THE CANAL ZONE, Panama presents a visitor with surprisingly unspoiled nature. So be sure to hone your listening skills and practice watching for the rustling of trees in the canopy above.

The rain forest in Panama covers 63 percent of the country and sequesters 160 tons of carbon per hectare. Offshore, the small country boasts 1,000-plus islands across two oceans, providing critical foundations for coral-reef ecosystems and serving sailors and oceanographers alike as sea-level indicators.

“Uninhabited” refers only to us, the humans. The rain forest in Panama has a plethora of furry inhabitants. Monkeys of at least six species can be found in the dense rain forest, islands, and around the city — Panama City skyline to your right and monkeys to your left. If you are one of the lucky, you can catch a show from above in the canopy around the city.

Yes, yes, there are those adorable sloths — pygmy three-toed, brown, and two-toed species found in Panama. Cute they are, but they don’t put on a show like the monkeys. Take photos of the sloths and switch to a video for the monkey show. (And don’t forget to watch where you are walking as there are colorful but poisonous frogs in Panama.)

“Untamed” is the howler monkey. Imagine a horror flick with the loudest guttural sound you have ever heard. That might be the scariest sound you will hear in Panama, or anywhere. You won’t believe it when you see it’s from a monkey that weighs only 17.6 pounds. Scary in sound but cute enough to want to cuddle.

They are wise to humans, though, and usually try to ignore us. But don’t fret, because they can be up to 3 miles away and still be heard. You tell yourself that as they begin, while you’re either backing away from that sound at the tree line, or enjoying sundowners at a city café.

“Untouched beauty” may or may not be true of the spider monkey in Panama. A particular inhabitant in the San Blas Islands has been known to interact with guests on his island; we will assume he is in charge. That’s Mobly, the spider monkey. (Please don’t quote me on his name, though, as there is a language barrier with the indigenous Guna Yala Indians who inhabit the islands and speak their own language.)

Despite the language barrier, the Guna Yala are very inviting and pleased to share their piece of paradise with you. So, imagine walking along the most beautiful white sand, palm tree-lined beach, and up walks a monkey. Mobly grabs your hand to continue strolling with you.

That’s right, the monkey who lives on an island with only two families of Guna Yala has just held your hand.

I can’t be sure what would be going through your mind while Mobly approached you, but I know what I was thinking: “Do I have my camera? If I take the camera out, will it scare him? If I take the pictures, will I miss the experience myself?”

Whew! Who knew monkeys would cause so much excitement?



Wooden canoes of the San Blas Islands



Guna Yala traditional jewelry



San Blas Island huts



Spider monkey

There are over 1,002 bird species, 229 species of frogs, some small wildcats, anteaters, and caimans. Oh! And of course, the sloths and monkeys.



Anteater



Keel-billed toucan



Margay



Caiman



Red eyed frog



Sloth

After the stroll, you sit on a log to rest, and Mobly jumps up on your lap and onto your shoulders. Nervous? Maybe. But you would be gleaming from the inside out. Have your camera ready.

Before the sun sets and the howlers come out, swim up to the beach in the crystal-clear waters with a banana. It will float, so you can retrieve it if you lose it. Mobly can be found in his human companion's hut resting in the shade.

A banana will undoubtedly get his attention. Maybe he will come out and accept the banana gift right from your hands. Then you can wander around the sand yard to admire the ingenuity of the Guna Yala—scraps from here and there to make a home. Pieces of boats, pallets, and lost trees tied together for walls and a roof.

If you are like me, you want to hang around to see if Mobly eats the banana. Let's find out if monkeys peel their banana from the end that we consider the bottom.

The price for admission is a trip to Panama, and you get to experience the rain forest with all its flora and fauna. That's over 1,002 bird species, 229 species of frogs, some small wildcats, anteaters, and caimans. Oh! And of course, the sloths and monkeys.

When visiting this country, don't forget the 1,000-plus islands in Panamanian waters ... islands lined with mangroves that filter water pollutants and reduce erosion ... the white-sand beaches that can have a calming effect on most of us. And this is just a sample of what you will see with shoes on. Put on fins and a mask and dive in, and you'll find yourself in an entirely different scene.●

Top: Christine - stock.adobe.com Bottom:left to right: Milan - stock.adobe.com; buteo - stock.adobe.com; ondrejprosimsky - stock.adobe.com; Pedro - stock.adobe.com; Henner Damke - stock.adobe.com; Savory - stock.adobe.com