



# PANAMA PANORAMA

KEEP IT UNDER YOUR HAT, BUT THERE'S MORE TO THIS CENTRAL AMERICAN COUNTRY THAN MEETS THE EYE. PAUL RICHARDSON DISCOVERS ITS CARIBBEAN COASTLINE AND UNSPOILT ISLANDS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEN KOCHY



Punta Valiente, in Panama's Bocas del Toro archipelago. Opposite, a Kuna woman in traditional costume on the island of Achutupu

**I**T WAS THE PIG at the check-in desk. That was the moment when I realised I was well and truly off the beaten track. Despite the early hour and the tropical humidity, I wasn't seeing things: there was no mistaking the small box with slatted sides that lay on the floor at Panama City's domestic airport, nor the tiny pink snout that protruded through the slats.

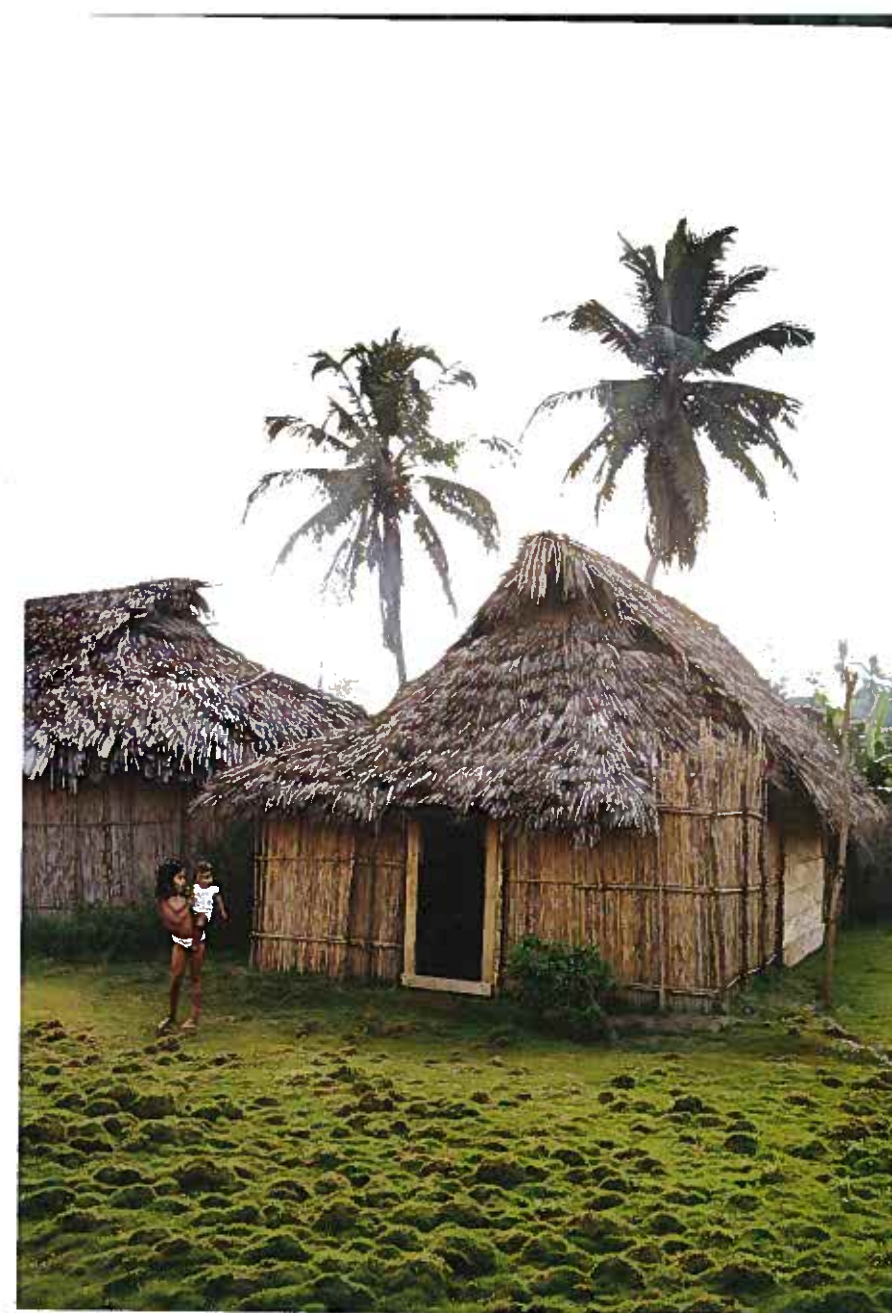
The Air Panama flight to Achutupu is not your average EasyJet intercity bus ride. For one thing, there may be livestock on board. For another, your fellow passengers may have bare feet, rings in their noses, and legs and arms bound with brightly coloured beads. These would be members of the Kuna tribe that rules the roost along the eastern end of Panama's Caribbean coast. It was partly the Kuna people's obstinate refusal to accept the intrusion of Western culture into their traditional way of life – other than the use of aeroplanes – that had attracted me to Panama.

Until just over a year ago this was, for me, a faraway land of which I knew little. I must have read about the canal, Panama's very own wonder of the world and its major source of revenue and fame, in a crumpled *National Geographic* in some dentist's waiting room. Then, recently, the country began to swim into my ken. I read somewhere that John McCain, the US Republican candidate for the presidency, was born in Panama at a time when the country was an outpost of the USA. Then came the notorious case of the British canoeist John Darwin, who faked his own death in order to start a new life on the proceeds of his insurance policy in Panama.

As it happens, both these facts say something important about the state of the country. Although



A Kuna woman at work on the shore of Achutupu and, right, one of the tribe's huts. Left, a street in Casco Viejo, the old town in Panama City



the USA gave up its claim on the canal in 1999, US influence is still strong (the official currency, not just the under-the-counter, unofficial one, is the US dollar). The idea of retiring to Panama, as crazy as it might seem at first, is rapidly gaining popularity among the huge-and-growing elderly population of the USA – and increasingly, it seems, among the would-be expats of the UK.

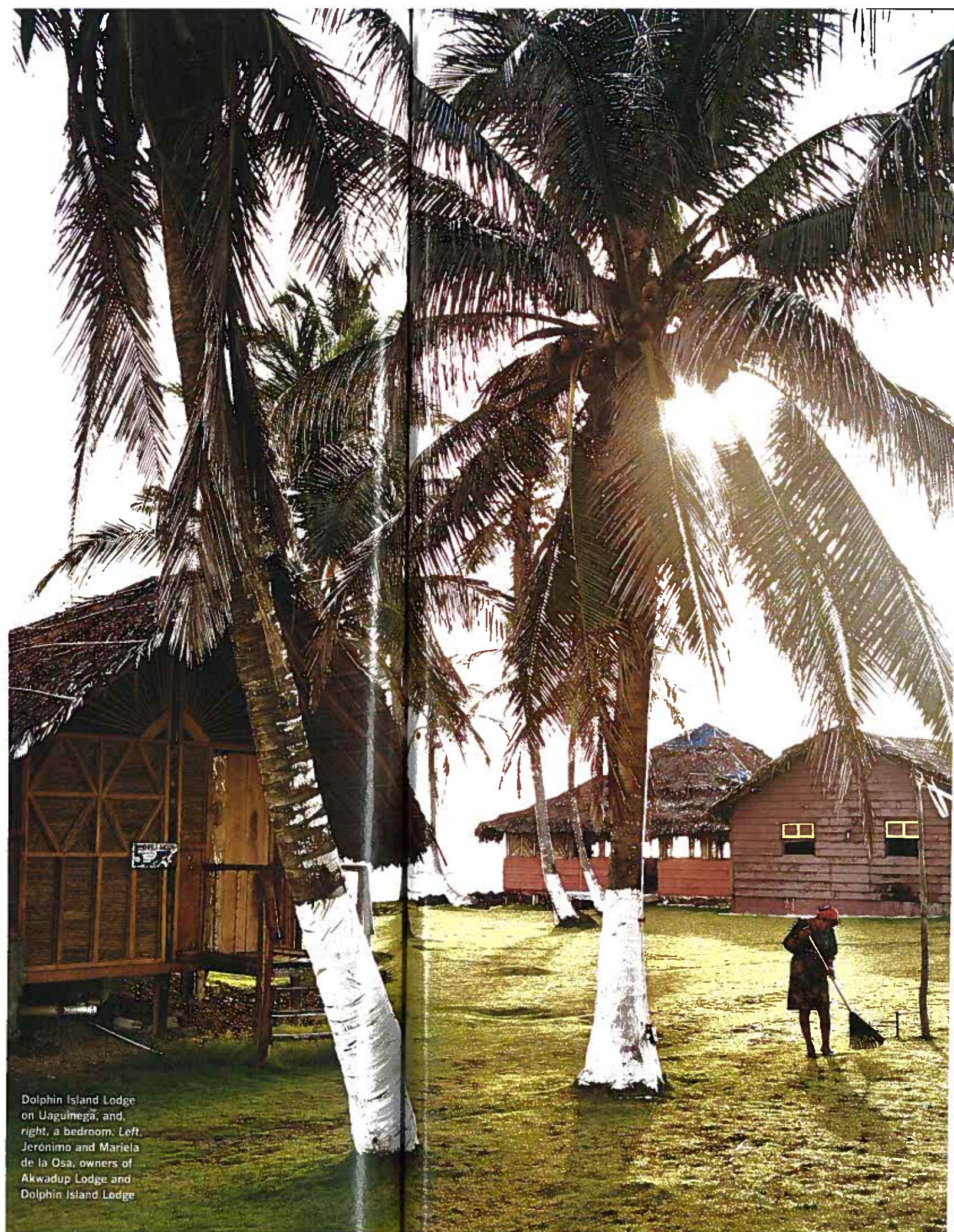
But there is so much more to Panama than I could ever have imagined. This country is a causeway, a pivot between two gigantic continents, and a bridge between two oceans. It has a capital city that came as a complete surprise to me – a vibrant, high-rise metropolis, far and away the most sophisticated city in Central America. What Panama has in greatest abundance, however, is wild nature. Like its neighbour Costa Rica, Panama possesses some of the last great tracts of virgin rainforest in the Americas, and some of the last swathes of untouched coastline. The statistics are telling: it is home to more than 10,000 species of plant and 940 of birds – more than in the whole of North America. Unlike Costa Rica, which has been in the green-tourism business for years and, arguably, has become somewhat over-commercialised in the process, Panama is only just beginning to exploit its prodigious natural resources.

After a first night in the charming and old-fashioned Hotel DeVille, which was to become my safe haven in Panama City, I set off from



Marcos A Gelabert Airport at dawn. The 20-seater plane pushed skyward out of the city, leaving behind on the left-hand side a thicket of skyscrapers. Panama was always an economic hotspot, even in Spanish colonial times, but now the place is booming. There is no underestimating the scale of Panama's new-found prosperity. One of the major players among the new breed of foreign investors is none other than Donald Trump, whose Trump Ocean Club International Hotel & Tower (cost: US\$220million) is advertised as setting 'a new standard for luxury living in Latin America'. Speculation is rife. In the Casco Viejo, Panama City's richly atmospheric old-town district, original colonial houses that have fallen into rack and ruin are now going for millions of dollars. It is, perhaps, an index of the way things are going here that a Frank Gehry building, the Museum of Biodiversity, will shortly be landing in Panama, like some alien spacecraft from another galaxy. (Gehry's wife, Berta Isabel Aguilera, happens to be Panamanian, which may have had something to do with it.) The museum is scheduled to open in 2010 on a causeway that juts out into the bay.

The in-flight magazine I was flicking through was stuffed with adverts for country-club resorts, luxury condominiums and 'exclusive residential communities' complete with golf courses, shopping malls and 'exercise trails'. All this publicity sat rather uncomfortably next



Dolphin Island Lodge on Uaguinegā, and, right, a bedroom. Left, Jerónimo and Mariela de la Osa, owners of Akwadup Lodge and Dolphin Island Lodge

to breathless reports of virgin wilderness and deserted beaches, quaint villages and real live indigenous tribes such as the Emberá, Wounaan, Ngöbe-Buglé and Kuna.

**A**S THE PLANE CAME IN TO LAND, I mulled over what I knew about the Kuna people and their homeland, a territory in Panama known in their own language as Kuna Yala, and unofficially, in Spanish, as San Blas. The territory, which has existed in almost complete autonomy from the rest of the nation since 1925, consists of a 200km strip of rainforest that runs right up to the Colombian border and plunges inland for around 150km, and an archipelago of so many islands that the Kuna say there is one for every day of the year. In fact, the number is closer to 400, of which 47 are inhabited.

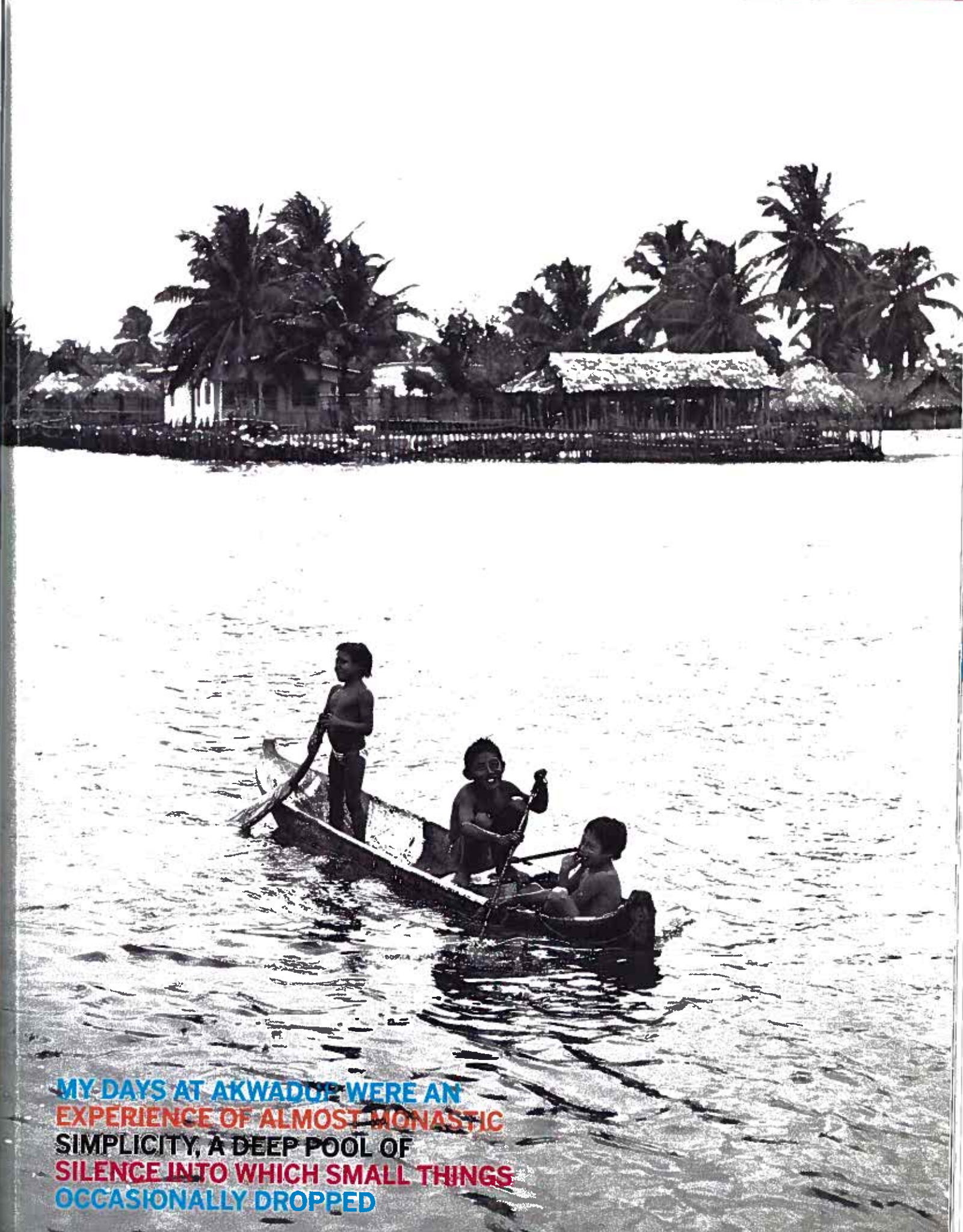
The Kuna people are natural conservationists. Though not one of Panama's 14 national parks, their reserve, the Madugandí, is better preserved than many of them. Unlike other Panamanian tribes such as the Wounaan and Emberá, the Kuna people have always resisted the allure of progress. Under Kuna by-laws it is illegal for *ouagas* (non-Kuna people) to own land in the region, and no investment by outsiders is allowed.

The history of tourism in Kuna Yala is therefore short and to the point. In the early 1990s there was a backpackers' hotel in the settlement of El Porvenir. Then a couple of pioneering lodges opened, with capital slyly provided by *ouagas*, but these were burned down when their non-Kuna provenance was discovered. Nowadays, the extent of the tourist infrastructure around these parts is a handful of Kuna-run eco-lodges which sleep no





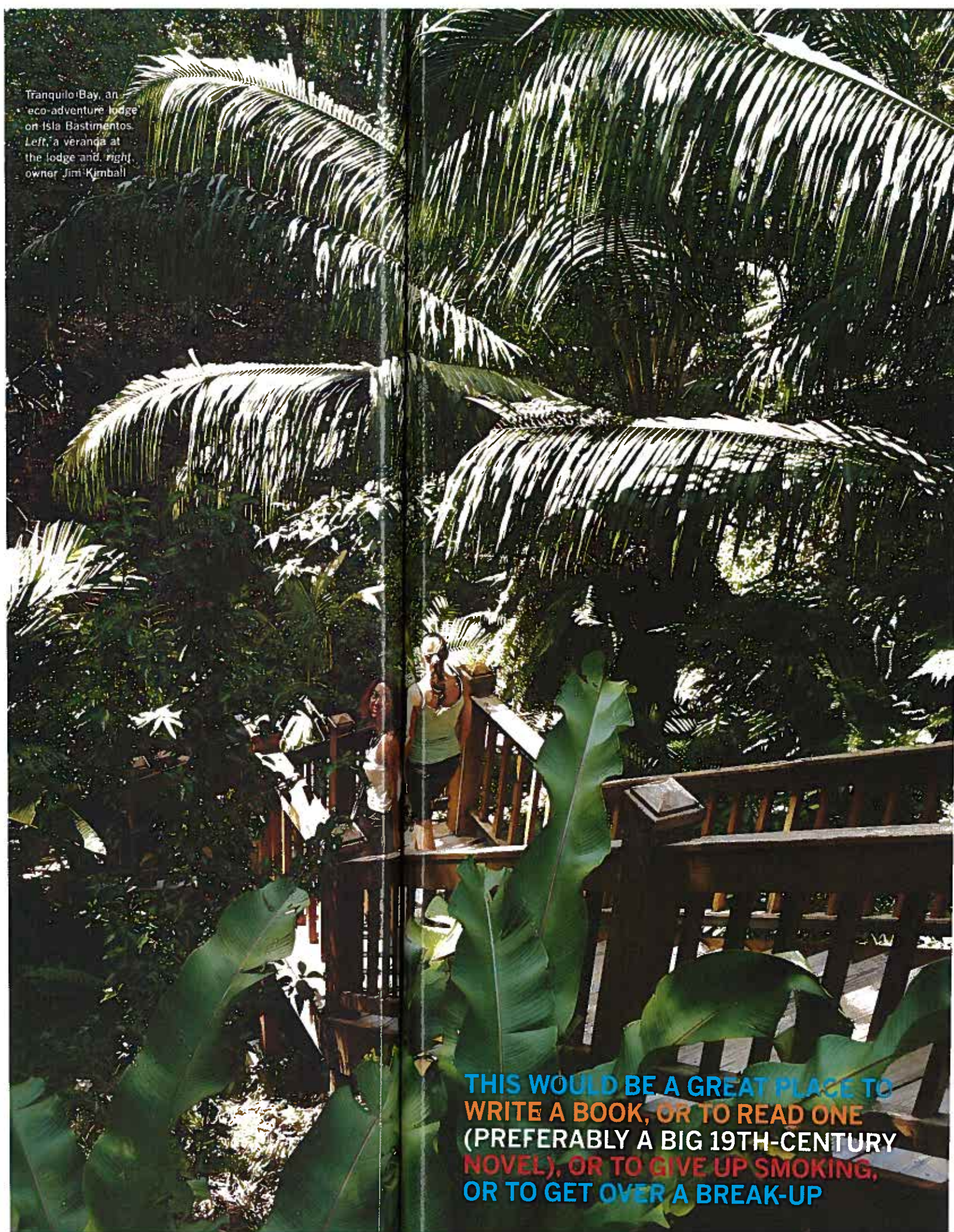
Brightly embroidered traditional dress of the Kuna, with strings of tiny beads wound around the legs and arms. Opposite, Kuna children off Achutupu



**MY DAYS AT AKWADUP WERE AN EXPERIENCE OF ALMOST MONASTIC SIMPLICITY, A DEEP POOL OF SILENCE INTO WHICH SMALL THINGS OCCASIONALLY DROPPED**



Tranquilo Bay, an eco-adventure lodge on Isla Bastimentos. Left, a veranda at the lodge and, right, owner Jim Kimball



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read one (preferably a big 19th-century novel), or to give up smoking, or to get over a break-up.

My hosts at Akwadup were the de la Osa family, who also own the Dolphin Island Lodge on an island called Uaguinega. From time to time they proposed an outing. One day I was taken to a nearby island where the locals live hugger-mugger in shacks, a Westerner's clichéd idea of how a tribal society lives. Kuna women in bright costume padded along the sandy paths. They proffered shy smiles, but most were reluctant to be photographed. An old lady came to her gate with a pineapple she wanted to sell: a dollar bought me the fruit and a snapshot of this image of traditional Kuna womanhood, complete with the line of kohl down the nose, the ring in the nostril, the dress with an appliqué chestpiece known as a *mola*, and the coloured beading all up the arms and down the legs. Kuna women are pretty and small-boned, and wear this ensemble with great aplomb.

It was mid-morning on a broiling day, and the children were coming out of school, wandering home, each carrying a plastic bowl of beans and rice. In the house of a local family the women brought out a pile of hand-sewn molas for me to inspect. I was amazed by the intricacy and beauty of these designs, which are the Kuna's greatest source of cultural pride. Some of them bore naive images of animals and plants rendered in garish colours on a black background. Others, which represented a purer, older style, were geometric, with op-art patterns mesmeric to the eye. The best of these molas were folk-art masterpieces. I gave in to my Western urge to acquire, and bought about 20 of them for a few dollars apiece before I headed to the airport. On the flight back to



more than a dozen in all: collections of shacks on stilts along the waterline, most of which have solar power and recycled water.

My own eco-lodge, where I finally arrived after a boat trip from Achutupu, had a rustic plainness verging on the spartan, yet this happens to be among the most luxurious places to stay on the archipelago. Akwadup Lodge is the only construction on its own tiny island: seven shacks painted a Caribbean, mint-ice-cream green, with roofs of coconut-palm leaves lashed together, each with its own solar panel powering a couple of energy-saving lightbulbs. (The Kuna are pioneers of sustainable energy; the rest of Panama has yet to catch up.)

This is Caribbean tourism, but not as most Caribbean tourists know it. The days I spent at Akwadup were an experience of almost monastic simplicity, a deep pool of silence into which small things occasionally dropped: a bright seabird tiptoeing along the sand, or a wooden kayak in the distance, paddled by a pair of Kuna fishermen.

The backdrop to life in Kuna Yala is the mainland, a strip of distant dark green rising to misty greyish peaks. I spent much of my day simply gazing at this panorama. No doubt about it, this is the Caribbean in its rawest, most real state. There is little to do here except swim, snorkel and sleep. But I found the remoteness, even the lack of amusements, oddly comforting. This would be a great place, I thought, to write a book, or to

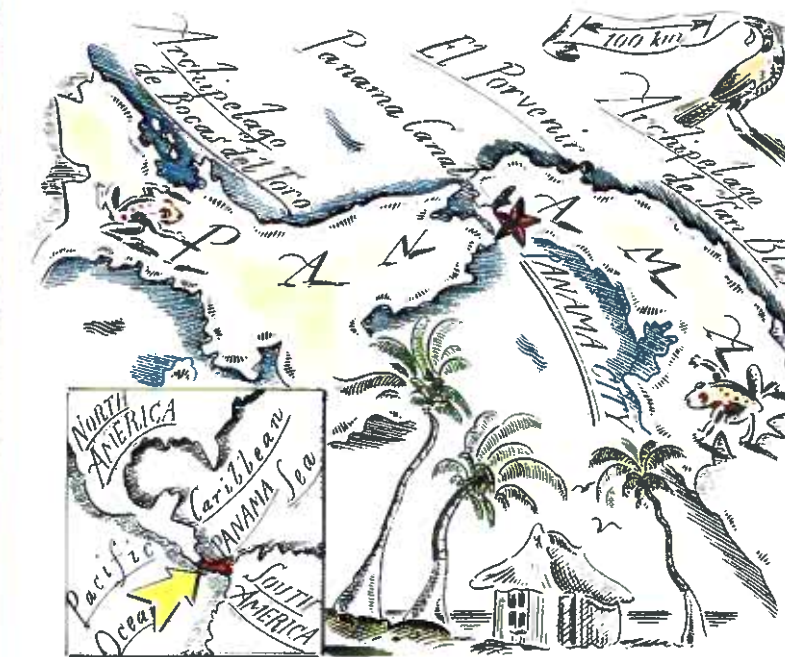
Panama City I could see both oceans, Pacific and Atlantic, and the grey snake of the canal, with a queue of tankers waiting in the bay. A major expansion of the canal is currently under way, creating work for locals and immigrants and thereby adding to the city's economic boom.

**N**EXT MORNING FOUND ME ON another internal flight, this time heading westwards to Bocas del Toro. For years Bocas was a hard-to-get-to beach destination for surfers and backpackers, inaccessible by road and with few places to stay. Ten years ago there were just three flights a week from Panama City; now there are three a day. Travellers who feel that they have 'done' Costa Rica are venturing across the border to the much less well-trodden landscapes of Bocas. And, naturally enough, the place is changing. US retirees are arriving in droves, seeing Bocas as 'Miami for half the price'. Tourism is on the up and up, although as yet it still seems relatively low-key and low-impact.

Bocas del Toro is a complex landscape of islands, some densely forested, others no more than atolls surrounded by beaches and reefs. On the ocean side, two arms of the mainland reach across to close off the archipelago from the fierce Atlantic. It's a fascinating labyrinth of sheltered bays, secret coves and tracts of jungle heaving with wildlife. After reading *Lonely Planet Panama's* bleak picture of rampant development, of virgin rainforests disappearing under the weight of golf courses, malls and marinas, I had feared the worst for Bocas. What I found came as a welcome relief.

I was staying with Jim and Renée Kimball at Tranquilo Bay, an 'eco adventure lodge' on Isla

A house built by the Ngöbe-Buglé people, in Punta Valiente. Below left, kayaking off Zapatillas Cays



## PANAMA LOWDOWN

### GETTING THERE

**Air France** (0871 663 3777; [www.airfrance.co.uk](http://www.airfrance.co.uk)) flies from Gatwick to Panama City via Atlanta from £690 return.

**American Airlines** (020 7365 0777; [www.americanairlines.co.uk](http://www.americanairlines.co.uk)) flies from Heathrow to Panama City via Miami from £928 return.

**Air Panama** (00 507 316 9000; [www.flyairpanama.com](http://www.flyairpanama.com)) flies from Panama City to Achutupu (for Kuna Yala/San Blas) from around US\$135 return, and to Bocas del Toro from US\$196 return.

**Aeroperlas** (00 507 315 7500; [www.aeroperlas.com](http://www.aeroperlas.com)) flies from Panama City to Bocas del Toro from US\$196 return.

**Black Tomato** (020 7610 9008; [www.blacktomato.co.uk](http://www.blacktomato.co.uk)) arranges bespoke trips to Panama. An eight-night trip taking in Panama City, Kuna Yala/San Blas and Bocas del Toro costs from £1,999 per person, including all international and internal flights, transfers and accommodation in Hotel DeVille, Akwadup Lodge and Tranquilo Bay, plus guided tours of Panama City and the Ngöbe-Buglé village on Punta Valiente, and a snorkelling trip off Bocas del Toro.

**WHERE TO STAY**  
**Hotel DeVille.** Calle 50 y Beatriz M de Cabal, Panama City (00 507 206 3100; [www.devillehotel.com.pa](http://www.devillehotel.com.pa)). Doubles from US\$286.  
**Akwadup Lodge.** Achutupu (00 507 263 1349; [www.sanblaslodge.com](http://www.sanblaslodge.com)). Doubles from US\$185.  
**Tranquilo Bay.** Isla Bastimentos, Bocas del Toro (00 507 380 0721; [www.tranquilobay.com](http://www.tranquilobay.com)). Three nights (minimum stay) from US\$945 per person, incl activities.  
**Dolphin Island Lodge.** Uaguinega ([www.uaguinega.com](http://www.uaguinega.com)). From US\$135 per person

Bastimentos, which is a boat-ride away from the funky little capital, Bocas Town, with its clapboard houses and laid-back surfer vibe. Jim had been in the oil and gas industry while Renée had been an attorney, both in Houston, Texas, when the couple decided they wanted a new and more exciting life.

There are plenty of other Americans in Panama. The housing crisis back home and the low prices in familiar dollars have made it seem like a great idea to buy property down here. But I'll wager that very few of them have immersed themselves so completely in Panamanian life – both its social and natural life – as Jim and Renée have. They are fighting fiercely to stop some of the more destructive developments proposed for Bocas del Toro, most notably the Red Frog Beach Club on the other side of Isla Bastimentos, which is a suburban sprawl of condominiums, a marina and the inevitable golf course, all to be built on land that was previously tropical rainforest. The Kimballs also actively support conservation in the area, collaborating with local tribes

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