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PTY
PANAMA

BREAK AWAY

Village Life

A unique home stay in a tropical paradise. BY ARCHANA RAM

As far as travel mottoes go, “Live like a local” has been my most rewarding one. In Buenos Aires, I rented an apartment and had actual neighbors. In Myanmar, I convinced a restaurant owner to teach me a Burmese recipe. In Vietnam, I befriended a tour guide operator to find out how she spends her time off. But it wasn’t until I visited Panama’s San Blas Islands and lived with the Kuna tribe that I truly understood what it means to feel like a native in a new land.

Situated just northwest of Panama in the Caribbean, the San Blas archipelago encompasses more than 360 nearly unspoiled islands—one for every day of the year. From ombré blue waters to dangling palms, it’s the stuff desert island fantasies are made of. Most of the islands remain uninhabited, but a handful are occupied by the Kuna, an indigenous people who once ruled the land now known as

Panama. Today they invite tourists to sleep, eat and play on their islands.

There are a few resorts, but my boyfriend and I preferred a more rustic experience. That meant sleeping in ramshackle bamboo cabins, using a no-flush commode with a bucket of water and swatting away incessant sand

ABOVE: Two Kuna girls on the San Blas Islands in the Republic of Panama. BELOW: A beach on the San Blas Islands.



KEN WELSH / ALAMY (TOP); IMAGESOURCE / ALAMY (BELOW)



TOP: A Kuna woman making traditional mola tapestries. BOTTOM: Aerial view of thatched-roof houses.

flies. But to obsess over a bed or shower was to miss the point: to live like a Kuna.

Beyond classic beach activities—snorkeling, knocking down coconuts and frequent naps on the sand—we played with the local children and watched a Kuna man catch an iguana for dinner. We took a boat to a neighboring island, where we saw local women wearing and selling traditional mola tapestry, colorful panels of layered cloth featuring cutout designs. And each night, we convened like a family for dinner by candlelight. Though the food wasn't gourmet—a hot dog sans bun one night and unsauced spaghetti another—staying for a third night earned us fresh-caught lobster; seafood is a staple of this hydrophilic community.

No iguana for us, but that was perhaps the only indicator that we were seen as outsiders. Because during our three days, we felt like insiders. Without a trace of kitsch or commercialization, the Kuna managed to open themselves to us in a completely natural way. They live in paradise, and for a few short days, we just happened to live there with them. ▾

EDITORS' PICK

Hyatt's Cookie Cart

Craving a sweet treat after a long day of travel? Look no further than a new kind of room service: the afternoon cookie cart. Complimentary cookies in hotel lobbies always provide a delicious welcome, but the Hyatt Palm Springs is going above and beyond—directly to guests' rooms. Delivered by management each afternoon, the cookies are completely free and unlimited. The "Wow Carts" also offer fruit and water for those hungry for a healthier snack. hyatt.com/palmsprings



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