

## **Days 1-2 Wisconsin (after completing an Ironman) -> Panama City -> Bocas del Toros (Dolphin Bay)**

The trip to Panama was supposed to be a cake walk trip, aimed at recovering my body from a grueling [Ironman triathlon in Madison Wisconsin](#) (2.4 mile swim, 112 mile bike, 26.2 mile run). I ended my 13 hour race at 8pm after stager walking nineteen miles of the run because 'I hit the wall' way way way to early. A lesson to everyone: race at your pace (I went too fast on the bike). The only reason I finished is because Missy would not let me quit.

The next morning, despite being dead to the world, Missy and I somehow willed ourselves out of bed at 3:15am to catch our 5am flight to Panama City.

I felt like crap. It hurt to walk, stand, sit, carry bags and when forced to scale stairs I experienced mini nervous breakdowns. But, this was my trip and I may visit Panama only once.

\*\*\*Nitty gritty boring details of Panama City. Panama uses US currency and lists prices as Balboa (1Balboa=1US dollar). The international airport cab rates were \$28. We staid in the not very impressive but doable [Saba hotel](#). This was later to be a source of regret as we found the most enchanting part of the city was in Casco Antiguo, a \$8-10 15 minute cab ride away and it would have been preferable to stay there despite the extra cost\*\*\*

We immediately set out to Casco Antiguo, where bold painted colors covered decaying buildings. Alleys were tight but not claustrophobic. It was set up for tourists but not too cheesy.

Our fondest memory will forever be [Granclement](#), where Missy and I experienced a peak ice cream experience with basil ice cream. This may have been one of the trips highlights.

We had diner at [Tantalo](#) which was billed as tapas, but the size of the dishes were generous. We recommend this place especially since they have a sick rooftop bar.

The next day we paid the obligatory trip to the Panama Canal, which became an image that resonated throughout the city and country. Panama City is highlighted by not too gaudy sky

scrapers and the city bustle moves like a relaxed lets get going pace as slums speckle the outskirts of the city. The city stands as a canal from developed and developing country. It is neither first nor second world, more like one and a half.

Jeffery Sachs always talked about economic progress as taking place on a ladder of development but in Panama I would consider it a system of locks as you can see the swell of investment money flowing by the millions of gallons into areas like Casio Antiguo that hope to lift up this Central American country to higher levels of prosperity just as the barges through the canal are lifted across through the ingenious system of locks.

After the canal I got my exotic meat fix by chewing on some fried chicken hearts and gizzards at a local hole in the wall asado before heading to the local airport to fly a prop plane to Bocas del Toro.

We stayed in [Dolphin bay hideaway](#), a remote resort not accessible by road requiring at 30 minute boat ride from the down town Bocas area. We were the only residents in the tranquil 4 room botique compound. Protected by silence and calm, it presented itself as the ideal spot to plant myself in hammock and heal. Just rest, relax and heal.

After dinner, I limped through the pitch dark to the dock jumped naked into the sea. It was still, clean and salty. No debris and no lights. Only the sky beaming galaxies and glow in the dark fish floating next to me.

I dare to expand consciousness and I yearn to gain the focus that will allow me to push aside my ego. It is this psychic ball and chain, my ego that holds me back. It prevents me from reaching my full physical potential and it keeps me disconnected from the ocean linked universe. The starlight and the ocean reflections unite while I float isolated. Bobbing in the weak current as a closed vessel not letting the undulating cosmos elevate my being. It's too often that I don't spend the time to cater to self immolation which is needed in order to truly capture dreams. Find the real dreams, the unheard dreams. Relax and let experience open the self, the self that's found in the world, externally in.

My midnight swim marked the starting point of my trip. My stiffness began to ease, my clarity began to build and and I felt alive.

### **Day 3-4 Dolphin Bay (with the Ngobe)**

[Dolphin bay hideaway](#) is relaxed, off the grid and tucked away in the still Caribbean waters on the island of San Cristobal. There are no roads by land that lead here, only the propulsion of a boat provides passage. The grounds are eclectic and meticulous. The doc hugs a small cozy bamboo thatched hut and leads you passed an irregularly shaped dipping pool, a garden teeming with tropical plants of pink, orange, red and green, a Lili pond, palm fronds arranged regally like a throne and lots of tranquility. There were no other tourists to share this paradise but we soon realized that we were milling around in territory claimed by humming birds briskly moving tree to tree and dolphins popping out of the water from time to time.

Off the grid means no centralized means of electricity or running water. All water comes from rain water catchment systems and electricity is solar and if needed a gas generator. As a result it forces the intentional preservation of all utilities, slowing down the pace and integrating with the wild. Instead of automobile traffic you hear the singing of natives canoeing nearby or milling around in the jungle as they tend to their work of the day. The staff here is a brother and his two sisters, all of Ngobe (nah-vay) origin. The European owner was away for some months.

A rooster tried to get us out of bed at 430am, but we slept in. After breakfast we took a boat ride to the [Zapatillas cays](#). We had the place to ourselves for most of the day until two additional boats spoiled the 1 mile circumference island.

Snorkeling I discovered is a lot of fun. It resembles a lot about searching the Self. The initial tendency is to go deep but many times interesting things are floating beneath the surface. Also, if you find to a promising area, stay patient, you are bound to have excitement pop up.

After a nice chill day at our own little private area on the beach, we head home on the boat half way running into a torrential downpour. It pelted our boat like acorns hitting a windshield. Luckily our host who was captaining the boat had a tarp to hide under finding

full protection while she stood like a soldier with rain pelting her face as she navigated to our home.

Dinner consisted of fried yucca, a vegetable salad (all fresh and local) and lobster, the spiny cave dwelling little suckers that hang out on the local beaches. It was pride in cooking.

The next day, we woke up early for a guided jungle hike on our host's private land. There was no walking trail, so we sloshed through the mud lead by our guide wielding a machete. We limbo-ed under spider webs and were almost swallowed alive by several hungry mud traps. Fortunately, we were given knee high rain boots, unfortunately, this caused my feet to chafe and blister. We saw many birds, tiny frogs and three toed sloths hidden quietly in the tree tops.

The jungle offers the opportunity to strip the civilization (and its discontents) out of humanity and provide the nice and not quite gentle reminder that I am Homo sapiens sapiens, another creature fighting for sustenance. Imagery of animal life ubiquitous in the local art is fitting, why not consider a spider or a parrot your brother?

### **Day 5-6: Soposo tour to live in the jungle with the Naso tribe**

We returned for breakfast, which to quickly remark on this consists of homemade jungle granola, fried eggs picked up that day from the resident chicken coop and a type of pancake made of egg, milk and local cheese and fruit with a bit of flower making topped with pineapple honey a super dense protein rich meal to power our days.

After breakfast we rode on over to [Red Frog beach](#). Afterwards we head on over to Bocas town and then trespassed in the Ngobe Indian community of San Cristobal. This little village of 800 was certainly the highlight of the day.

We left dolphin bay hideaway with a parting gift from our hosts....the hearty homemade granola that we loved every morning for breakfast.

We took a boat from Dolphin bay hideaway to Almirante where we met our new host Virginia to start our tour with the Naso Indians and [Soposo tours](#). From our boat ride, we

took a cab to catch a bus that brought us to a breaking down van that drove us to the river Teribe where we boarded onto a handmade cano that had a motor to ride upstream (against rapids) to then hike in the mud and visit various villages. In between bus and van rides, we ran into the king, seriously, the [king of the Naso](#), Alexis, just chilling in town heading to work wearing a a embroidered shirt that said, no kidding, king of the Naso.

Village life is tough. Houses are elevated on stilts to increase chances of surviving the annual floods. Subsistence farming rules the days as the activities involve jungle harvesting, catering to small gardens and keeping track of free range pigs and chickens. The children here are shy, very hesitant to play with me, the goofy gringo. I went up to a little boy wearing a Spider-Man shirt and asked if the was his favorite superhero. He looked at me with a blank stare. Virginia then interjected, "he does not know Spider-Man. There is no TV or things like that here. He is simply wearing a donated piece of clothing." At night we relaxed in our cabin where despite not having electricity or running water, it was really quite nice.

We had dinner with Virginia, her husband Max and son Michael. She revealed to us the [political struggles of the Naso](#) as they protested the building of the hydroelectric dam. The government won and the Naso lost, they also lost lives, natural habitat and pride. The goal of [Soposo](#) she explained is not just to create a business but to preserve her culture and boost tourism so her brethren don't have the dam as the only source of regional employment. It is a commercial rage against the machine in harmony. It was a fitting metaphor that the Soposo tour requires the technical boating upstream against strong rapids as the entry point to their communities.

Carl Rogers, the famed humanistic psychologist wrote, "Each person is an island unto himself....and he can only build bridges to other islands if he is first of all willing to be himself." This could not be more true in Bocas village life in Ngobe and Naso communities. There is a keen self reliance and at the same time heavy focus on altruism, family, tribe and spirit. Pride in self and in one's heritage builds a community. The facilitating factor that I felt when spending time in Bocas was the diminished stress of ambition . While no one is prevented from pursuing riches, there does not seem to be a message that you must amount to something great or else you are a nobody. Without this pressure life becomes more immediate and balanced.

The next morning, we ate a traditional breakfast, then walked with Max, through the forest of his compound where he showed us traditional medicinal plants and he demonstrated his machete prowess chopping vines, trees and any roughage that dared get in our way. The highlight of the trek occurred when we climbed to the top of a hill, and he planted two trees to commemorate our visit. Now we are tied to this land and we have committed to respecting the sanctity of the Naso natural heritage.

During the walk, I had visions of how splendid it would be to practice medicine in this climate. A patient comes to your hut, you perform an exam come with a diagnosis then head into the jungle and chop down a vine or slice some bark or dig a root and return with instructions on how to prepare a remedy. At least I would not be expected to wear that onerous white coat.

When we left, we shared an emotional farewell to Virginia and Max of Soposo tours.

We returned very early to Changuinola airport, really early and decided to check out the town while we waited. Our impression---- don't spend time in Changuinola.

We finally retired in the [Saba hotel](#) in Panama City where all Missy wanted was to take a hot shower and of course our room was having problems that took about two hours to fix. I was hoping some time in the jungle would wean my wife off her demanding ways, but I am lucky I love her the way she is unconditionally.

Day 7-8: Panama City back to home