

TERRA INCOGNITA?

PANAMA



PHOTOS THIS SPREAD: L-R: T&B; JC Brillembourg; golden treeally; Pango's daughter; JC; pango; Pango on a calm day



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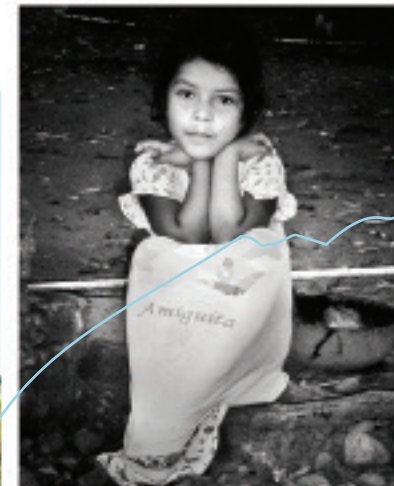
DESTINATION PANAMA, A VAST UNEXPLORED ISTHMUS OF DENSE JUNGLES AND VIRGIN FISHING GROUNDS – AT LEAST, THAT IS WHAT WE’D HEARD THROUGH THE GRAPEVINE.

When I saw an ad on the FDL advertising an affordable spearfishing package to Panama’s Pacific coast, I immediately called my dive buddy JC. With cost being a main qualifier, we decided this was as good a deal as we were ever going to find and booked our spearfishing adventure for early February. February is in the middle of the dry season, so hopefully we’d have clear waters and plenty of targets. The following are a few glimpses into this trip.

GETTING THERE

Finally the time had come to explore Panama firsthand. Would it live up to all the hype? After a long night filled with anticipation, our day of departure finally dawned. Loaded up with an arsenal large enough to overthrow the regime of a small third world country we somehow managed to avoid excess baggage fees, and were on our way. After an uneventful two and a half hour flight we touched down at Tocumen International Airport, but not before sneaking a few peeks at the world famous Panama Canal, and the vast, untamed Pacific Ocean beyond. Once on the ground JC’s worst fear was realized, his luggage did not make it. Don’t worry, the AA ground crew assured us; it will be delivered at your hotel in time for your early morning departure to Isla Ensenada – our home for the next few nights.

Someone from the resort picked us up in a van, and soon we were on our way to the hotel. A breeze full of unfamiliar scents blew in through the van’s open windows, and now and then you could hear the pounding bass from one of the many street parties along our route. It was carnival time. We checked in to the hotel, and headed off into the humid night. It felt as if the whole city had come alive, there were dozens of large stages set up with live music and DJs and there were thousands of people on the streets. After stocking up on the necessary supplies for the following days, we headed back to the hotel for dinner. We had great local fare and beers while we waited for JC’s lost luggage – which never arrived.



After a night of carnival parties and little sleep, the 5 hr bus ride was a welcome opportunity to catch up on some Z’s. A panga was waiting for us at the river mouth and we swiftly loaded our gear as this part of the river would soon be bone dry due to the large tide differential – as much as 15ft. Once at the resort we stored our gear and made introductions to the staff. Within an hour we were off diving, joined by Max, an Italian diver who works as the head-chef for a 5 star hotel in Barbados. He hadn’t seen many decent fish in the days past, and hoped our arrival would change his luck.

THE DIVING

On my first dive I passed an easy shot on a huge marbled grouper, thinking there will be plenty more chances later in the trip. I hear guns going off all around me, and both JC and Max are on the board with some nice uhus. Never having shot uhus before, I started diving near one of the many fish piles on the reef and waited for the big whiptails or bumbheads to investigate. I quickly landed a nice pair this way and decided to try my luck on the pargo. The large pargo I had hoped to encounter didn’t show, and as the light was fading I managed to shoot a tasty barred pargo that was coming in and out of its cave. After timing his routine from the surface, I made silent dive and stoned it just as he exited his hiding place. I bagged another nice barred pargo that somehow managed to dodge JC’s spear with a matrix-esque levitation move. With dusk upon us we headed back to camp to enjoy the spoils.

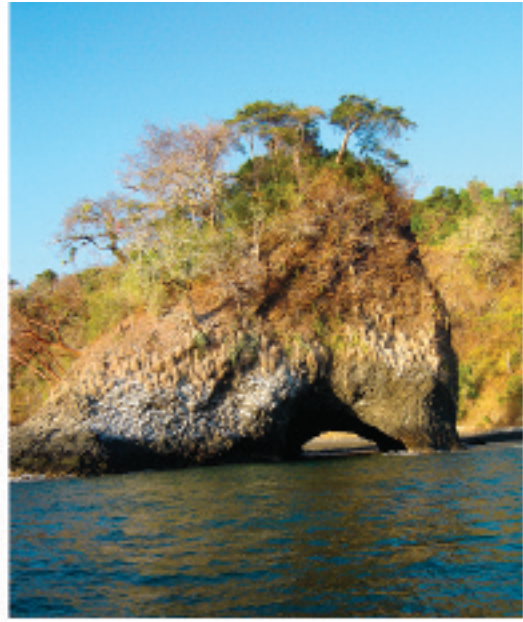


- 1 Caribbean Sea
- 2 Panama City
- 3 Isla Ensenada
- 4 Pacific Ocean

The next day put us at the Islas Secas, or Dry Islands. Here we dove a prominent rock out cropping in the middle of a channel between 2 islands. The current was ripping, making stalking your prey almost impossible. With no pelagic action, we concentrated on the pargo. The few we saw were staying deep, and getting to them on the bottom 75ft below required great timing and lots of swimming against the current. They managed to elude us, and frustrated we moved on. We encountered some of the largest triggerfish we'd ever seen, many well over 10#, with some in the mid-teens. After drifting beautiful reefs, both deep and shallow all afternoon, the large pargo and other gamefish continued to elude us. Between the 3 of us, we only had one sighting. Even when all conditions seemed perfect, the fish never materialized. Even the barred pargo had become elusive and we had to settle for uhus and triggers.

This set a pattern for the coming days, few fish, lots of clear ocean. We saw plenty of marine life, including numerous eagle and manta rays but only a few sharks and very few fish considered good table fare. To add to our frustration, we got word the islands were still to visit, known for its large pargo had been declared off-limits to spearfishing. Over this period we shot a few smallish pargo, some large yellow snappers, snook and plenty of uhus and triggerfish. I managed to catch a barred pargo with my knife when I found him holed up. Unable to get my gun in the hole for a shot, I went for the stab. JC had the biggest fish of the trip so far with a nice pargo weighing in at 29lbs. Besides one fleeting glimpse of a wahoo at a pinnacle, and watching in horror how my slip tip had fallen of its adapter while a school of large siera mackerel swan by, the pelagics remained absent.

When asking the pangero about the general lack of fish with economic value, he mentioned the large super pangas that had recently been working in the area. According to him they were catching so much fish that the spots they had been fishing for generations were barely producing. One night he pointed out the boats working between the islands. There were well over a dozen of them in the immediate vicinity. They were clearly larger than the small pangas and canoes the locals use, and their sheer number would definitely impact the local fish populations. One morning, while trolling for tuna, we passed a secluded cove and witnessed one of the motherships these pangas use as a base. It was a large industrial looking ship



with a half dozen or so pangas moored to the side – this part of Panama had definitely been discovered.

JC's gear finally arrived the day before we left, and we decided to dive the murky river mouth close to camp. The current was raging, but a rock outcropping provided shelter to breathe up. There was life everywhere, and on my first dive I shot a large yellow snapper. I reported my sightings to JC, and he promptly vanished beneath the surface. He surfaced moments later, also with a yellow snapper and the boat picked us up for another drift while we restrung our guns. On my next dive I was greeted by a humongous golden trevally, well over 30lbs. With only a 90cm gun, I knew I had to make this shot count to have any chance of landing the fish. The shaft struck home exactly where I wanted, but apparently the fish had other plans and towed me against the current way up river, before eventually tearing off. With the current picking up significantly we decided to move a little outside of the river mouth to a high spot the pangero knew off. Drifting with the current, he would signal us when to dive. Once the vis opened up below the murk, there was the high spot, just like he'd said. JC reported seeing large snook and a school of jacks blazing past him. On my second dive I snuck up on a sizeable snook and rolled it over with a shot to the back of the head. Not the most challenging stalk, yet very satisfying. We shot a few more snapper and snook, before JC connected with a huge golden trevally that ran the line of his hip reel at warp speed. Not being sure of the shot he asked me to put in a back up shot, before boating the big fish. With the sun getting low, we decided this was a fitting end to the trip, and headed back to the camp.



ISLA ENSENADA – MORRO NEGRITO

The staff at Morro Negrito was extremely friendly and attended to our every need. The accommodations were rustic, with clean bedding and functional mosquito netting. There was a generator running for a good portion of the evenings allowing you to power a fan when trying to sleep. The food was basic, always fresh and consisted mostly of our catch, and fresh locally grown ingredients. The culinary highlight of the trip was grilled iguana, complete with eggs. Max arranged this treat after hearing the pangero talk about it, and asked a local boy the catch him one. After meeting his executioner, the iguana was grilled before being sautéed with some garlic, green bell peppers and onion. Max especially enjoyed the eggs in their squishy, leathery shells. The local people were friendly and inviting, and the boys would meet us at the dock each afternoon to admire (or make fun off) our catch. They had some very dilapidated fishing and diving gear so we made sure to leave them plenty of mono lures and hooks. We also gave them some of our spare dive gear like masks, snorkels, fins and some shafts and rubbers so they could make an Hawaiian sling. They were really stoked, and maybe just like us catch they'll catch the freedive bug.

All in all it was a great trip. Given our level of experience at the time, we did pretty well. I had a great time exploring a new environment with all its inhabitants, and experienced things I'll never forget. Dive safe. PAU

PHOTOS THIS SPREAD >> L&R >> El Toro >> Full Springer >> Gerald >> uhus >> JC >> pargo >> Grilled Iguana >> Vista Morro Negrito >> Max >> dinner >> Gerald >> barred pargo >> guide >> triggerfish >> sunset >> Isla Silva >> Gerald >> barred pargo >> snook

