

## PARADISE ISLAND, SAN BLAS, PANAMA CANAL

In January 2007, the Van Gogh was due to anchor off the island of Porvenir in the San Blas archipelago, north of Panama. Because of the heavy swell, the Captain decided that it was too dangerous to tender ashore here. After trying, in vain, to manoeuvre the ship broadside onto the waves, he ordered one of the small tenders, with 3 crew members on board, to search for another island where the waves were less strong.

Eventually, the ship's crew found an uninhabited, private island, where the owner had a private jetty, 3 wooden thatched roof huts, and a concrete toilet block. The Van Gogh was charged a fee of around £170 for the day's rent of the island, which is very little when compared to other berthing fees. We all enjoyed a day on the island, where we were treated to a barbecue and drinks from the bar. We all had a swim in the warm sea, both passengers and crew, before returning to the ship in time for our evening meal.

On this cruise, we go straight to the uninhabited island, and because the weather is kind to us, we are all able to tender ashore in record time. First of all the big metal barbecues, food, drinks, ice and towels go ashore, then passengers, including us of course, are tendered to the island in 7 separate journeys.



When we arrive, the Barbecue is already lit, and hundreds of chicken pieces, sausages, pork ribs and burgers are being cooked. The staff have brought over to the island, bowls of salad, fresh fruit, cakes and biscuits, and even cans of soft drinks and several kinds of cold beers. Waiters walk along the beach supplying people with drinks, and we have a very pleasant afternoon indeed, relaxing in the hot sun. It is also good to see many of the ship's crew and staff relaxing on the island too.

We find a place to sit on the white sand beach, spread out our towels, and plunge into the warm turquoise water. Alongside us in the water, we can see many black and white pelicans fishing in the sea, or preening themselves in the tall palm trees that cover the island.

There are 365 islands in this chain, all are less than 1 metre above sea level, and they are all comprised of white sand, coral, palm trees and very little other

vegetation. About 50 of these islands are inhabited, and the people are poor and live in wooden houses, on stilts near the beach.



The local inhabitants, the Kuna Indians, are only about 4 feet tall, and the women dress in brightly coloured, hand embroidered, blouses, and wear rings through their noses. A number of them have come over to the island in their canoes, and have set up stalls to sell their craft items to us. Souvenirs on sale include embroidered T shirts, shirts, dresses and oven gloves, and

also jewellery made with Haematite beads.

While we are buying some souvenirs from one of the stalls, a large multicoloured moth lands on Owain's T shirt, and is reluctant to leave. It is at least 6 inches across, and has an evil looking face. Eventually, the moth flies off, and is immediately pursued by a bird that seems to be only slightly larger than it.

All too soon it is time to leave this beautiful island; we are tired after our long day in the sun, and will be going to bed early. This evening we will be taking on fuel inside the breakwater by the Panama Canal, ready for our 10 hour journey through the 3 sets of locks tomorrow.



