

ESCAPE

Enchanted Isles

In Panama's Gulf of Chiriquí, Islas Secas takes the private island experience to new heights

By Paul Rubio

VISITS TO ISLAS SECAS BEGIN ON ISLA CAVADA, STREWN WITH SEVEN UNITS (INSET) AND AMENITIES LIKE TERRAZA, WHICH HOUSES THE ISLAND RESTAURANT, BAR, AND MUSEUM (BELOW).





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: AT ISLAS SECAS, DAYS INCLUDE RELAXING AT THE SPA, IMBIBING AT THE BAR, SUNBATHING AROUND THE INFINITY POOL, AND LUNCHING BY THE WATER.

Lost within the jungle-cloaked splendor of western Panama's Gulf of Chiriquí, Islas Secas presents a private island vacation in tune with what modern travelers crave: next-level immersion in nature without compromising ultra-luxury. An entire unspoiled archipelago underscored by palm-studded beaches, towering volcanic cliffs, and species-rich cobalt waters, Islas Secas initially unfolds as a magical nature reserve spanning 14 islands and approximately 20 nautical miles. But at the core of this verdant paradise lies an eponymous seven-unit resort that's light on earth yet heavy on service, amenities, and details.

At first, it's hard to fully comprehend the scope of Islas Secas' natural bounty. In all directions, as far as the eye can see, virgin islands rise one after another. One surfaces as a quintessential white-sand marvel, the next a windswept, skyscraping landmass housing pelagic bird colonies, the next an exhibition of overgrown jungle infringing upon black-sand lagoons. In between, water hues from cerulean to emerald erupt with charismatic marine life, including tropical reef fish, massive marlins, and pods of migrating humpback whales skirting the shorelines. As the extent of these dreamscapes grows clear, it begets the question: How does one approach and appreciate an entire private archipelago?

Since there's no one correct answer, Islas Secas posits—and delivers—multiple. It's possible to pack days with land and water activities such as yoga, kayaking,



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: THE COZY INTERIORS OF A CASITA; BRING THE OUTDOORS IN BY ROLLING UP THE CANVAS WALLS OF A TENTED SUITE; PAELLA MADE-TO-ORDER DURING A BEACH BARBECUE.



hiking, fishing, surfing, snorkeling, sailing, bird-watching, and motorized water sports. On the other hand, savoring multicourse ocean-to-table meals, luxuriating in eco-chic lodging, relaxing in an open-air spa, or being marooned on a far-flung beach (with a personal bar) could be the way to go. Ultimately, any and every combination is attainable thanks to an all-star team dedicated to tailoring your castaway fantasy. (An all-inclusive policy that bundles activities, food, and drinks also helps.)

Most of the personalization and execution takes place on the main island, Isla Cavada. As Secas' sole developed island, Cavada is home base for staff, guests, and all the creature comforts one could dream of when staying on a secluded archipelago. That begins with striking accommodations in the form of four stylish wooden casitas and three safari-like tented suites, all with breathtaking hilltop views, alfresco dining areas, and sliding doors or canvas walls that effortlessly bring the outdoors in.

The light-footed luxury continues with a colorful beachfront restaurant, which is flanked by a micro-museum of island artifacts and natural history plus an Ernest Hemingway-inspired bar, lounge, and library. At higher elevation, an infinity swimming pool overlooks one of the archipelago's most dramatic rainforest-meets-the-sea vistas. Back at sea level, a swoon-worthy jungle spa excites with floral accents, copper tubs, and tradition-steeped treatments. Finally, an impressive water sports center boasts the latest and greatest toys, from hydrofoil boards to Seabobs (underwater scooters) and top-of-the-line fishing boats.

Meet the Neighbors:
ISLA PALENQUE



Those who aren't quite ready to take on a private archipelago can still revel in the Gulf of Chiriquí's magnificence. Say hello to Isla Palenque, a 400-acre private island retreat off Panama's western mainland that's a study in tropical, barefoot chic. With eight whimsical beachfront bungalows and a whopping seven beaches, total isolation is within reach on this band of oceanic jungle. Each bungalow is Instagram-ready, thanks to design-forward elements like front porch swings, oversized net hammocks, and open-air bathrooms with bathtubs in the sand. Each bungalow flaunts direct beach access to a wide tract idyllic for ambles, shelling, stargazing, and more.

While Isla Palenque will entice those looking to perfect the art of doing nothing, it also promises plenty for the active and intrepid. Guided activities are offered daily, ranging from nature hikes in search of howler monkeys, to visits to local villages and coffee farms, to cocktail-making classes. A favorite pastime here, however, is unapologetic exploration, so grab a map and traverse dense jungle until you reach desolate beaches that you can enjoy all to yourself.

Another standout of this property is its price point. With rates beginning at \$780 per couple per night in low season, inclusive of meals and activities, Isla Palenque is one of the world's most affordable upscale private islands. (islapalenque.com)



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Deeper within Isla Cavada, unearth pre-Columbian archaeological wonders along nature trails and anticipate lookout points aplenty. Come low tide, head east as a land bridge connects to Limones Beach on a neighboring isle, where staff can stock kayaks, snorkels, snacks, and tropical cocktails for an afternoon of fun. Go further afield on one of the many boats docked at the water sports center (skippers included) and reach the coral beds at Toro, the bustling reef wall at Tres Marias, or a stunning swathe of Isla Pargo, where the team can arrange a beach barbecue complete with lounge seating and a full-service bar.

Though much of Islas Secas' excellence lies in its natural assets and experiences, it's the personalities and details that make it extra special. For example, within the kitchen there's a dedicated bread maker, an executive chef trained in one of Spain's top Michelin-starred restaurants, and a pastry chef who makes nightly



dessert an artistic event to remember. The bar director is a veteran of Central America's elite bar scene, while the activities director is one of Panama's foremost authorities on bird-watching and guiding. All the while sustainability is woven into every part of the operation, from solar-generated energy throughout, to a localvore approach to island cuisine, to converting 100 percent of food waste into fertilizer.

In total, Islas Secas is an immersive destination rooted in nature, serenity, cuisine, sustainability, and luxury. It's a modern expression of Panama's wild Pacific beauty and a next-gen private island resort for today's eco-minded jet set. (islassecas.com) ◀◀



FROM LEFT: A CASITA'S PRIVATE PLUNGE POOL AND DAYBED; SUNSET WITH THE FRIGATE BIRDS.


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