



Home Sweet Bocas: An Overwater Villa in Panama



Courtesy Sweet Bocas

When Canadian restaurateur Annick Belanger first came to **Panama** thirteen years ago, the intention was never to stay. But then, she fell in love with a 15-acre piece of land in Bocas del Toro, Panama's northwestern archipelago of six lush, tropical islands that are framed by the Caribbean Sea. "It was a swamp," laughs Annick who now splits her time between Montreal and Panama, "but there was something about it that captured my imagination. I had a vision of what it could be, and I knew right away that I would follow it."

That vision turned into Sweet Bocas, a gorgeous multi-level villa that is a handcrafted passion project, a unique base for exploring the activities-rich Bocas area and the ideal backdrop for an amazing house party all wrapped into one. Technically, Sweet Bocas is on the main island of Isla Colon but it could not be more removed—both geographically and in spirit—from the main town. Approaching from the sea (guests transfer privately from the main Bocas marina), the house appears like a luxury boat, seemingly floating on the water.

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Courtesy Sweet Bocas

The extensive grounds themselves are gorgeous, full of tropical gardens that Annick designed and planted with the help of a local farmer who specializes in permaculture (an agricultural principle focused around sustainability). There's a large lake framed by a walking path, a clay tennis court and groovy special dining spots, like an overgrown pergola for al fresco lunches; a chic, all-white floating pontoon, swathed in mosquito netting, for cocktails; and a Moroccan-themed, open-air kasbah for dinner. Overlooking the lake and raised on wooden platforms, two tented camps with king-size beds, in-suite bathrooms and air-conditioning are available in case any of the guests fancy some glamping.

But the piece de la resistance is Sweet Bocas' 20,000-square-foot main house, with its 360-degree jungle and sea views, and surrounded by waters so clear that you can see schools of colorful fish zipping by simply when sitting on the deck. Built over a shallow lagoon, the three-level house is made floor-to-ceiling of teak, all of which came from a local farm across the bay ("We bought them out," says Annick). Downstairs, there's a sprawling open kitchen and living area, with tons of comfy sitting nooks, both inside and out, on the large wrap-around deck. There are seven bedrooms, including four large ones on the first floor with incredible views. (Sweet Bocas can comfortably host eight

couples, if two are willing to sleep in the tented camps, and “tons of kids,” according to Annick, who has dressed up the day beds all across the property for little explorers.)

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The fact that Sweet Bocas makes everyone feel immediately at home is by design. Annick is uber-plugged-in (ask her anything about Panama), passionate about sustainability and community, and has an incredible eye for stylish details. The organic beauty products in the spacious bathrooms are from a kibutz in Israel; the linen sheets are custom-made in Italy; the hammocks come from Brazil; the throw pillows hand-stitched by women of a tribe in the Peruvian Andes. Sweet Bocas strikes the perfect balance: there’s nothing precious about it so you feel comfortable, but it’s also beautifully art-designed.



Courtesy Sweet Bocas

“Where I can, I work with local communities,” says Annick, whose affinity for bright colors dates back to her childhood in Cameroon. “The concept behind Sweet Bocas was to be self-sufficient and to give back, especially to the place where we are.” Her team hails from many parts of the world, including Austria, Ecuador and Holland, but she also employs many Bocas natives, including from the indigenous Ngöbe-Buglé tribe (she’s also very involved with **Give & Surf**, a local non-profit that does amazing work around

early-childhood education).

For their guests, Annick and activities manager Tom Pelgrum, who looks a bit like a long-lost Hemsworth brother, organize an array of experiences, including boat trips to white sand beaches, snorkeling and scuba diving, jungle hikes and exploring the five other islands of the Bocas archipelago. A masseuse, personal trainer and yoga instructor are on staff, and Sweet Bocas has a well-equipped gym and a slender pool for laps.

Then again, this is the type of place where many arrive with big plans to explore and end up simply staying put. You can dive right off the deck for some light snorkeling, take one of the SUP boards out on the lake or on the sea, devour novels while lounging on the colorful chaises, in a hammock or on the netting pulled across the turquoise water (again that boat reference).



Courtesy Sweet Bocas

The days are punctured by meals prepared by talented on-site chef Wilmo Ordonez. Congenial and modest, the Ecuadorian whips up seriously delicious food, inspired by the bounty of Bocas, including produce from the property gardens and seafood delivered straight from a boat. Lunches are light and flavorful, dinners inventive and never the same, and a late-afternoon snack might be freshly made empanadas or crispy

bruschetta, served with glasses of perfectly chilled roses and whites. Chef Wilmo, who works out of a sun-flooded prep kitchen with a groovy soundtrack, creatively cooks his way around any food allergy, preference and craving. He's a huge part of a stay here—and might just be the person you miss most back home.

Then again, Sweet Bocas overall has that certain dash of magic that makes it difficult to leave. It gives groups a beautiful, serene, inspired backdrop to focus on the simple things: the sun, the sea, the glorious nature, enjoying family and friends. "So many of us lead really stressful lives," says Annick. "We underestimate our need to take care of ourselves until we are in a place that allows us to do that. I've had wives say to me they have never seen their husbands so relaxed, kids who forget that they have iPhones. To me, that's what I wanted to create: a healing place that gives guests that ability to unplug and recharge."

Home sweet Bocas, indeed.

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- Simone Girner on June 5, 2018

