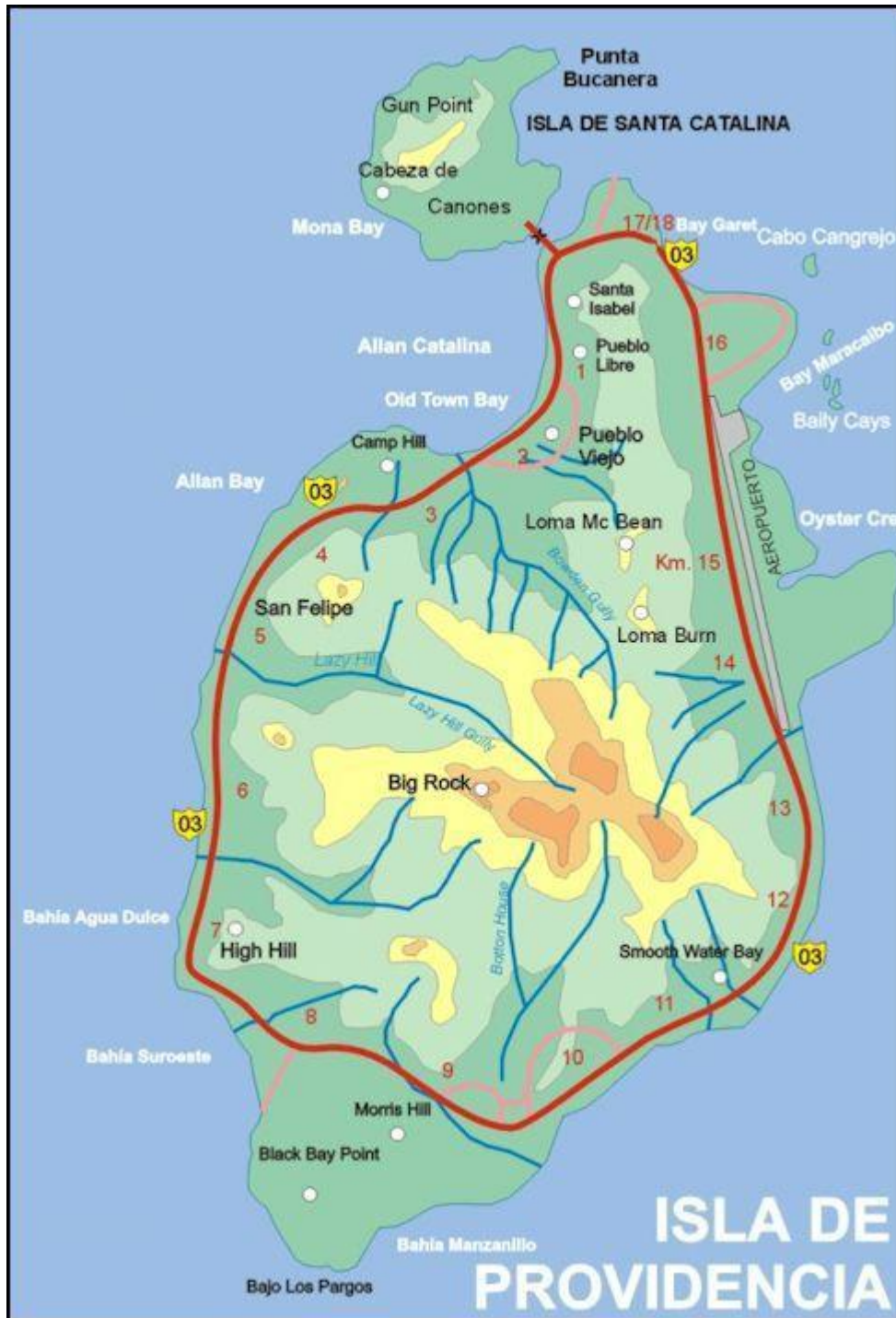


Providencia Island Tourist Information Packet by PaisaTours.com

This is PaisaTours.com's printable tourist information package about Providencia Island. Supplement this information with local advice, but consider that the local advice you receive from your hotel probably won't be so extensive. This document has been designed for you to print and use once you are in Providencia. Read it on the plane, or on the catamaran if your stomach can handle it.....



Everything in Providencia has an English name as well as a Spanish name – here's everything's translation so as not to confuse you:

*Bahia Aguadulce = Freshwater Bay
Bahia Manzanillo = Machineel Bay*

*Bahia Sur Oeste = South West Bay
Cayo Cangrejo = Crab Caye*

Boat tours:

Option 1: Organized/group boat tour (cost approx 30,000 pesos per person). Most hotels can arrange a group boat tour around the entire island for you. Departure is normally from Aguadulce – you'll stop at Crab Caye, Lovers Bridge (the bridge that connects Santa Catalina with Providencia), Morgans Head (a rock formation on Santa Catalina) and probably Manzanillo Beach. This is a cost effective way to see the island, and a good way to meet other tourists. Boats often all call at the same spots at the same time (the boat drivers seem to travel in unison) – in my opinion this degrades the experience. All of these places can be visited independently, without the need of a boat tour – if visiting independently, you'll have these beautiful sites to yourselves, rather than having to share them with your boat load, plus the other boat loads of tourists. For that reason, I strongly recommend taking a private tour (option 2) if you can afford it.

Option 2: private boat tour (cost approx 300,000 pesos to charter a private boat for the day). This option is more expensive, but if you find others to travel with you, it becomes much more cost effective. You'll also be able to visit the sites you want to visit, when there aren't other tourists around. Take Crab Caye for example – this is the highlight of the boat tours, whether they're group or private tours. All the group boat tours stop at Crab Caye at the same time (in the morning), so you'll be sharing the little island with various other groups if you take a group excursion. The advantage of visiting on a private tour, is that you'll probably have the whole island to yourself – this is a really unique experience. Also remember that the turtles only come to feed around the island in the afternoon (after 3pm is best) – you can snorkel with them at this time, but you'll miss these amazing turtles if you come on a group tour (too many boats scare the turtles off, and the the group boat tours all arrive in the morning, when the turtles aren't present!). With a private tour, you'll also get to visit the best snorkelling sites (if you ask), as well as beaches that are only accessed by boat (again – ask). A private boat tour offers a completely different, far more unique experience compared to the group tours – it's really worth the extra money. To organize one, ask your hotel, or ask for a recommended local fisherman to take you (or even ask me to recommend someone).

Beaches

Providencia is blessed with some wonderful beaches with very calm waters. My favourite is Manzanillo beach. It's my favourite because it's completely undeveloped, very beautiful, very empty, and very private. To get to Manzanillo you'll need your own transport, or a taxi. My fiancée's favourite beach is that at South West Bay – mainly because the water is exceptionally calm there. From Aguadulce, it's a 20 minute walk to South West Bay. Another beach that we both love

is Fort Bay on Santa Catalina Island. This small beach has the calmest and clearest waters in the archipelago. It's amazing to snorkel from here all the way up to Morgans head – en route you'll find some amazing snorkelling. To get to Fort Bay, turn left after you cross the Lovers Bridge that connects Providencia to Santa Catalina – it's a very beautiful 10 minute walk from the town centre on Providencia Island. You'll pass a ruined old Fort that dates from the days of piracy en route to Fort Bay. Keep walking along the path and you'll eventually get to Morgans Head – I prefer to snorkel there though.

Aguadulce (where most hotels are found) also has a very pretty calm beach. However, the three beaches I've already mentioned are more special. In addition, you'll find various other small coves and beaches on Providencia and Santa Catalina – Pasha Beach, Almond Bay and Red Beach (on Santa Catalina, this can only be accessed by boat – it's a Robinson Crusoe like experience) to name a few. Crab Caye is another great spot for chilling and swimming – there's no beach, but you can laze about and swim, and it's possibly the most beautiful part of the entire archipelago.

Restaurants

Seafood lovers – welcome to heaven! Try the local black crab dishes – especially the crab claws for starters. If you order a lobster, check the size first. Most lobsters served here are very small – hopefully I don't need to tell you that eating baby lobsters isn't good for the environment. Providencia used to have enormous lobsters all over the place – now they're all small due to overfishing – so do your part and refuse to eat the small ones.....

Seafood haters - you're in for a tough time. Lots of chicken I suspect. Don't consider ordering a steak – they're pretty poor, everywhere.....

Vegetarians – you're in for a tough time too..... try Bamboo (see below), Il Postino or Cafe Studio.

Note that a lot of restaurants close on Sundays – you might struggle to find many open....street food vendors often come out on Sundays though...fine barbecue chicken is often sold in front of Pirata Morgan hotel in Aguadulce on a Sunday, and the beachfront restaurants in South West Bay will be open.

Our favourite restaurant is Bamboo, which is on Santa Catalina Island (turn left after the footbridge from Providencia – 5 minute walk from the centre – closed on Sundays though). The prices are very reasonable, and the local food always excellent, as is the service. The crab here is amazing. Ask for a table on the small pier in front of the restaurant - the views of the harbour and Providencia are wonderful. Bamboo is one of the few restaurants in Providencia when you can normally ask for a vegetarian dish (ask for one - they won't appear on the menu).

Another favourite of mine is Il Postino, an Italian restaurant found in San Felipe (San Felipe is halfway between Aguadulce and the town centre (Santa Isabel) – look for the sign on your right 100 metres after the small bridge if coming from Aguadulce). It's only open 4 months of the year though - if it's open you'll see the sign. The speciality here is pasta.

Caribbean Place (aka Donde Martin) is the best restaurant in Aguadulce. There's a very wide variety of dishes on offer - I normally opt for the coconut prawns. It's the most expensive restaurant in Providencia, but you get good food.

Pizzas Place in Aguadulce does some remarkably good pizzas. I order a delivery about every week. Stick to the pizzas though – after all they specialize in pizzas, and the chicken dish they prepare has caused some upset stomachs in the past....

South West Bay has a variety of beach front restaurants, including El Divino Nino, Mr Arturo and Miss Mary. South West Bay is the best place to get lunch on the beach. I'm a particular fan of El Divino Nino's "mixed plate", a ridiculously enormous dish that offers lobster, conch, crab and fish at a remarkably reasonable price.

On the road between South West Bay and Freshwater Bay, Cafe Studio is another good restaurant with reasonable prices – it's run by a Canadian lady.

On Manzanillo beach, Roland's bar offers sea food. There's a couple of other shacks where you can pick up a bite to eat – but from my experience, they always seem to be closed. Roland's is always open though. Roland's is a rather legendary local rasta....

Generally speaking, all the best restaurants (whether defined in terms of value for money, quality of food, or a mix of the two) are the independent ones not attached to the hotels. Hence, you're best off avoiding those all inclusive packages. Almost all the hotels in Aguadulce (except Posada del Mar) have a restaurant, but generally I don't eat there. Having said that, Miss Mary hotel (in South West Bay) and Miss Elma hotel (in Aguadulce) are good options – primarily for their lovely, tranquil beach front locations. The restaurant at Cabanas Aguadulce is pretty good too.

Kayaking

Whether you think you like kayaking or not, you really should give it a go here in the calm turquoise blue waters of Providencia. Visit the right places, and you'll constantly want to throw yourself off the kayak into the amazing crystal clear waters you'll encounter.....

The most scenic area to kayak in is the McBean Lagoon National Park. Here you can take a kayak through usually calm waters to the amazingly peaceful mangroves and lagoons of the national park, as well as kayak to the stunningly beautiful Crab Caye (go in the afternoon to snorkel with the turtles). More energetic kayakers can kayak to the crystalline waters of the Three Brothers Cayes, which is great for snorkelling and spotting large manta rays. Ask at Posada Cocobay (which is found right in front of Crab Caye) to hire kayaks – the cost is 30,000 pesos per kayak (each kayak fits two people) for half a day.

The other great spot to kayak in is around Santa Catalina Island. Cross the bridge to Santa Catalina and walk 5 minutes to the left – you'll see the kayak hire place that never has anyone present, so ask around to find out who'll rent you one. You can kayak up through the amazingly calm waters to Morgans Head, or kayak round the whole island in 90 minutes or so. Stop off at the small beaches only accessible by boat en route.

Hiking & Walking

Most tourists take the hike to El Pico, the highest point on the volcanic island of Providencia. They do so as they are mis-informed – it's actually far more scenic to walk around the National Park. Why hotels don't encourage tourists to visit the National Park I don't fully understand. The McBean Lagoon National Park really is spectacular – the views of Crab Caye, the Three Brothers Cayes, the lagoons, the mangroves, the rainforest clad volcanic peaks, the turquoise multi-shaded seas and the distant crashing reef from the top of Ironwood Hill are without doubt one of the most stunning views I've ever encountered.

The standard hike around the National Park lasts about 3 hours and incorporates mangroves, lagoons, "dry forest", Ironwood Hill, and a range of other habitats. Guides are **free** – ask the Park wardens on Crab Caye or visit the National Parks office on the edge of the town centre (Santa Isabel) to arrange a trip (give them a days notice though). Do leave your guide a tip (it's free after all!). However, you will each have to pay the Park entrance fee of 12,000 pesos (though you'll almost certainly pay this anyway when visiting Crab Caye).

The most commonly undertaken hike is to El Pico (The Peak), which at 360 metres in height is the highest point for many hundreds of miles. It's a steady one and a half to two hour slog uphill through the rainforest. The reward is the wonderful views and fresher air at the top. The easiest route is from Casa Baja – you don't really need a guide as there is only really one path, having said that tourists do occasionally get lost if they go alone. If you want a guide, ask your hotel to arrange one for you (costs will vary widely depending upon who you ask – try to pay about 50,000 pesos).

McBean Lagoon National Park

The small, very beautiful island called Crab Caye (Cayo Cangrejo) is the most amazing part of the National Park. The sea is a beautiful shade of turquoise here – it's a great place to chill out, admire the views, and go swimming or snorkelling for a couple of hours. Don't miss the stunning views towards the reef from the high point of this tiny island. Try to visit in the afternoon as you may well have the whole island to yourself (in the morning, all the group boat tours arrive). In the latter part of the afternoon, you're likely to be able to spot turtles here.

The rest of the National Park consists of the Three Brothers Cayes (more good snorkelling – lots of stingrays usually), Ironwood Hill (wonderful views – see the hiking and walking section), mangroves and lagoons (through which you can kayak) as well as many coral reefs.

Scuba Diving

The scuba diving is excellent in Providencia. There's four main scuba dive operators: Sonny Dive Centre (in Aguadulce, look for the sign near the Pirata Morgan Hotel); Felipe Diving (on the beach in Aguadulce); Sirius Dive Centre (ask at Hotel Sirius in South West Bay); and Scuba Town (in Old Town Bay, a 20 minute walk or few minutes drive from the town centre). All are highly professional and have similar prices. Sonny has the most modernly equipped dive boat, and plans to soon offer extended diving trips to the very remote Northern Cayes such as Quitasueno, Seranilla, Serrana and Roncador that are found hundreds of miles to the North and East of Providencia.

Town Centre, ATMs, Banks & the Tourist Office

In the small town centre (Santa Isabel) you'll find a variety of simple shops, a few small supermarkets, two banks with ATM machines (foreign cards work fine) and the Tourist Information Office (near the pier). If you arrive by catamaran, this is where the boat will dock.

Nightlife

Rolands Bar on Manzanillo Beach is the best place to head for a reggae bar (run by a friendly rasta named Roland) on the beach in the evenings. There's a fire on the beach usually every night. You'll need to have your own transport to visit Rolands.

Alternatively, try Richards Place, found in South West Bay (in the middle of the beach, in front of the tiny offshore rock/island). Richards Place is also run by a friendly Rasta (named Richard), they usually have a beach fire every Friday & Saturday night, and more often during the high season. It's a cool spot to hang out in during the day too. You can walk to Richards Place in about 15 minutes from Aguadulce (no need to follow the road all the way round to South West Bay though – take the steps down to the beach on your right, and walk a further 2 minutes along the beach).

On the weekend evenings, many of the locals hang out around the bar in front of the bridge that connects Providencia to Santa Catalina (on the Providencia side).

On Friday and Saturday nights there's a couple of discos that might be open. Ask locally to see what's going down. Bear in mind that these places are complete dives, and you'll probably get a lot of friendly but drunken attention as you'll be the only non-local there.

Taxis, Transportation & Vehicle Hire

Hitch hiking is quite easy in Providencia, especially so around the main circumference road. However, people (and cars) vanish between 12 and 2pm as everyone goes for a lunch and siesta.

Taxis cost 20,000 pesos to take you pretty much anywhere. If you pre-arrange a taxi, this will probably be the cost. If you hail down a passing taxi, it will probably cost much less than this. From

the airport to wherever you are going, the fare will be 20,000 pesos. Moto-taxis (pretty much everyone who has a motorbike is a moto-taxi) cost a fair bit less.

Golf buggies can be hired for about 100,000 – 120,000 pesos for 24 hours, though prices vary depending upon the season. There's a couple of places in Aguadulce that hire golf buggies. Motorbikes/ scooters can also be hired - for about 50,000 pesos for 24 hours. There's various places to hire scooters in Aguadulce as well as in the town centre Santa Isabel. If your hotel is not found in either of these locations but you still want to hire a vehicle, you can normally get one delivered to your door – ask your hotel.

Getting to Providencia by Flights

From San Andres both Satena and Searca/Decameron have two flights (morning and afternoon) to (and from) Providencia. There's at least 4 flights per day – last minute availability is only a problem during the high season (even then, it's often not a problem because as many as 8 flights per day in the high season). You can ask about booking these flights at the airport in San Andres. The cost is normally about 300,000 – 350,000 pesos return.

Getting to Providencia by Catamaran

The 30 seater catamaran called El Sensacion departs from the Nene marina in San Andres at approximately 8am, but check this locally. The journey takes 2.5-3 hours depending upon the weather. Departure dates are Monday, Wednesday and Friday (if not more frequently). The ticket costs about 180,000 pesos for a return. Try to book and pay the day beforehand. The boat returns from Providencia to San Andres at about 3pm on the same days. (0057) 3125672713 is the phone number of the local catamaran representative in Providencia if you have any questions.

If you found this information useful – do thank me. You'll probably see me knocking around Providencia Island in an oversized silver Ford pick-up or a micro sized green Kawasaki pick up.... say hi.... I'm a friendly guy....

Chris

www.paisatours.com

