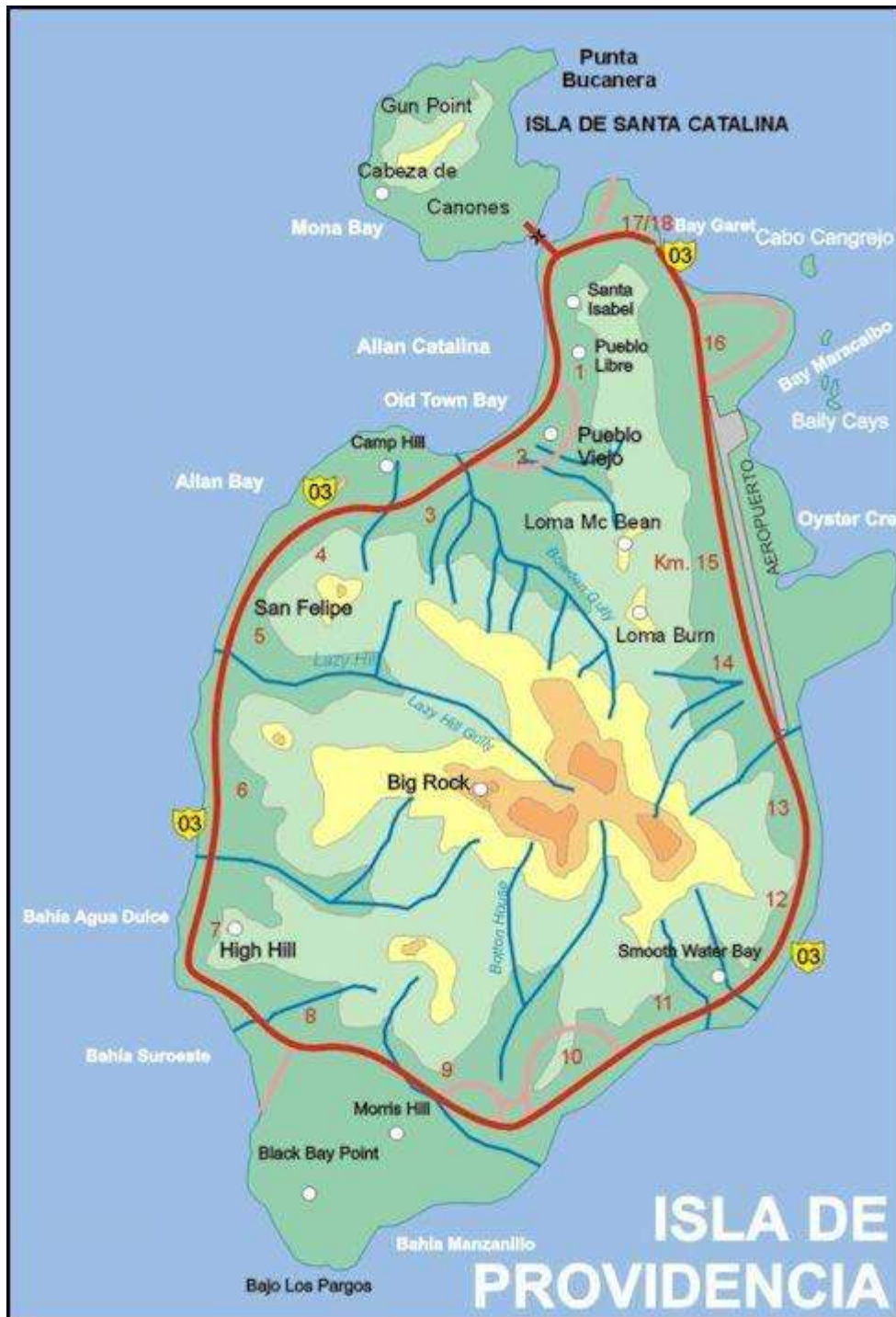


Providencia Island Tourist Information Packet by PaisaTours.com

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 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
Allan Bay = Almond Bay*

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

Tours and excursions of all types can be arranged at Paradise Tours / Body Contact travel agency which is found in Freshwater Bay. Alternatively you can book any of the activities I mention on this page through your hotel.

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 Freshwater Bay – 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 Machineel Beach. This is a cost effective way to see the island, and a good way to meet other tourists, most of whom will be Colombian. Boats often all call at the same spots at the same time (the boat drivers seem to travel in unison) – in my opinion this can degrade the experience at busier times of the year. All of these places might be visited independently (if you've hired your own transportation), 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 any other boat loads of tourists. For that reason, I always recommend taking a private tour (option 2) if you can afford it.

Option 2: private boat tour (cost approx 350,000 – 400,000 pesos to charter a simple private boat plus driver 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. With a private tour, you'll also get to visit the best snorkelling sites (if you ask), as well as beaches and coves 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 track down Hippy (that's his name) in Aguadulce or ask at Pirata Morgan hotel where they arrange boat tours, snorkelling tours and fishing trips.

Beaches

Providencia is blessed with some wonderful beaches with very calm waters. My favourite is Machineel beach. It's my favourite because it's completely undeveloped, very beautiful, very empty, and very private. To get to Machineel 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 Freshwater, 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 (the best snorkelling is the latter stage nearer Morgans head – the first 100 metres is rather boring turtle grass).

Almond Bay (marked Allen Bay on the above map) is signposted off the road running around the island. The beach is found in a small, idyllic cove that rarely sees many visitors. To reach Almond Bay you'll need to park just off the main road and walk downhill to the beach (3 minutes walk). It's good snorkelling here, plus there is a bar as well as a rustic-ly romantic, simple restaurant run a super-friendly guy called Delmar Robinson. A good place to watch sunset....

Freshwater Bay (where most hotels are found) also has a pretty, calm beach. There are various restaurants and hotels not too far away from the Bay – this is the “tourist centre” of Providencia, albeit one without very many tourists.

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 San Andres archipelago. Crab Caye is widely regarded as being the highlight of a visit to Providencia – not to be missed. Forming part of the National Park, you will need to pay the park entrance fee.

Restaurants

Seafood lovers – welcome to heaven! Try the local black crab dishes – especially the crab claws for starters. These are unique crabs that live in the mountains of Providencia – they only enter the sea once a year to lay their eggs. If you order a lobster, check the size first. Some lobsters served here are rather small – hopefully I don't need to tell you that eating baby lobsters isn't good for the environment.

Seafood haters - you're in for a tough time. Lots of chicken I suspect. Beware if ordering steaks – they are normally disappointing.....

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

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...look out for the locals doing organized BBQs for Sunday lunches. The beachfront restaurants in South West Bay are open on Sundays, as are most of the hotel's restaurants.

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 sea food 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 (aka Lazy Hill – a 20 minute walk from Freshwater Bay) – look for the sign on your right 100 metres after the small bridge if coming from Freshwater). It's only open 4 months of the year though - if it's open you'll see the sign. The speciality here is pasta.

Gourmet Pizza in town (Santa Isabel) does some remarkably good pizzas and pastas. It's near Banco de Bogota – you'll see the sign on the road – walk round the side of the buildings at the sign.

There's a handful of other good places to eat in the centre of town (Santa Isabel). A new restaurant on the edge of the town centre is Don Olivo, specializing in seafood. You can also get good burgers and hotdogs from the small "Dos Pinos" store which is just on the edge of town (walking in the direction of the malecon/promenade). Likewise good burgers, pastas as well as more traditional dishes can be found at Rincon de Delicias, which you'll see at the end of the gravelly road opposite the dock in town.

Pizza Crab, up on a hill between Maracaibo and the airport, also does good pizzas and pastas and has great views towards the National Park during the daytime.

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

Blue Coral Restaurant in Freshwater has an extensive menu of all kinds of food, specializing in pizzas.

Pirata Morgan Hotel (in Freshwater Bay) offers a set evening meal for about 8000 pesos – if you're on a tight budget, this is one of the cheapest places to get a meal.

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 famous "mixed plate", a ridiculously enormous dish that offers lobster, conch, crab and fish at a remarkably reasonable price. Miss Mary is where I head if when I feel like eating conch.

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. The menu is varied and the homemade style food always tasty.

On Machineel beach, Roland's beach 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 is a rather legendary local rasta (ed – he's cut his dreads now – he's still a rasta inside as he says!)

Almost all the hotels in Aguadulce (except Posada del Mar) have a restaurant. Miss Mary hotel (in South West Bay) and Miss Elma hotel (in Freshwater Bay) are both 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. More energetic kayakers can kayak to the crystalline waters of the Three Brothers Cayes. Note that you are not allowed to actually visit these small islands (Three Brothers Cayes), which are protected areas and important bird nesting sites – stay in the water/kayak if visiting, and do not step foot on the islands. 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. To get to Cocobay, follow the signs for Maracaibo on the East coast.

The other great spot to kayak 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 – only go round the entire island on a calm day as the North Eastern tip can see some bigger waves.

Hiking & Walking

Most tourists take the hike to El Pico, the highest point on the volcanic island of Providencia. It's actually more beautiful to walk around the National Park. 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.

To hike around the National Park you should ask at the Tourist Information Office in the centre of town and they will organize a guide for you. Alternatively, try asking your hotel/a local tour operator, but they may well try to encourage you to go to El Pico instead. Stick to your guns and ask to be taken to the more beautiful National Park!

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 Bottom House (Casa Baja) – probably best to go with a guide as tourists have gotten a little lost in the past. If you want a guide, ask your hotel to arrange one for you.

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.

The rest of the National Park consists of the Three Brothers Cayes, 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 Freshwater Bay, look for the sign near the Pirata Morgan Hotel); Felipe Diving (on the beach in Freshwater Bay); 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.

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 many nights. 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 Freshwater (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).

Miss Elma hotel also has a new small beach bar in Freshwater Bay.

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). There are a couple of pool/billiard halls nearby.

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 might 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 go up during high season. Motorbikes/ scooters can also be hired - for about 50,000 pesos for 24 hours. Roads have potholes, sometimes roads vanish all together without warning. Driving a scooter at night is particularly dangerous for this reason, and tourists regularly have accidents due to the poor condition of the roads – it is much safer to drive around in something with 4 wheels. There's various places to hire scooters and golf buggies in both Freshwater Bay 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. It is highly recommended to hire your own transportation for at least one day in Providencia – the drives are beautiful, especially along the East coast of the island.

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 normally only a problem during the high season (even then, it's often not a problem because there are 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 350,000 pesos return.

Getting to Providencia by Catamaran

The 40 seater catamaran called El Sensacion departs from the Nene marina (at the *Casa de Cultura*, near the Arena Blanca hotel) in San Andres at approximately 7am, but check this locally. The journey

takes 2.5-3 hours depending upon the weather. Departure dates are Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday (if not more frequently). The ticket costs about 220,000 pesos for a return. Try to book and pay the day beforehand. The boat returns from Providencia to San Andres at about 4pm on the same days. The phone numbers for the catamaran office are 0057 3102225403, or 0057 3107983764 or 0057 385125124. During the highest season (especially Easter Week and late December to early January) the boat departs more frequently - sometimes even doing two round trips per day.

www.paisatours.com