



07 CHASING THE BULL

BY MICHAEL BEHAR

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JODY MACDONALD

SAILING A FULLY STOCKED 57-FOOT LUXURY CATAMARAN, KITESURFER AND ENTREPRENEUR GAVIN McCLURG

SETS OUT TO FIND AND TAME THE BIG WAVES AND STRAPPING WINDS IN PANAMA'S BOCA DEL TORO



THE KITE RUNNERS
Panamanian kiteboarding pioneer Moises Niddam savors some of the expedition plunder; opposite, Scott Wisenbaker making the most of a windless day.



NAUTICAL SEDUCTIONS
From left, Brazilian kiteboarder João Pedro Simonsen on deck for an afternoon kite session; one of Panama's other attractions



McCLURG IS SELLING THE LURE OF DISCOVERY, A JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN, WITH NO EXPECTATIONS. IT'S A CLASSIC RISK-VERSUS-REWARD SCENARIO.

chain for the more hospitable San Blas archipelago, farther south. But McClurg is here, 13 months into a five-year peripatetic voyage around the world, on a trip that's part business venture, part walkabout. To fund the globe-trotting, he sold fractional ownership of *Discovery* to a group of wealthy investors. In exchange, they get to spend a couple of weeks each year aboard the yacht, wherever she happens to be. And for the next eight days, she'll be trawling Panamanian waters.

Tiny islands are everywhere, green gumdrops cast adrift in an ice-blue sea. Some are no bigger than a school bus. Only a few are populated. Half of the 9,000 inhabitants live on Isla Colón, in Bocas Town, the provincial capital and once popular shore-leave desti-

It's January, Panama's dry season, and blazing hot. The air is stagnant and thick, like a wet sponge, and nose-ums nip at my arms and legs. Thanks to some able captaining and a bit of luck, we make it through the estuary, and McClurg revs *Discovery's* engines, heading east at seven knots. A breeze flushes over the deck and evaporates trickling sweat from my brow. It feels good to be moving.

This is McClurg's first visit to Bocas del Toro, or Mouths of the Bull, a seldom-visited string of nine islands and more than 250 cays and islets strewn along Panama's northeastern coastline. A dearth of safe anchorages—reefs girdle most shores—means yachters often bypass this



KITE, MAST, AND SINKER
With her sails tucked away, *Discovery* gets a sunny respite; addicted to kiting, Wisenbaker gets his fair share of wind and sea.

nation for American Navy seamen stationed in Panama City. Beyond Colón, roads are scarce. Thickets of mangroves and supersize foliage smother the landscape, a thriving rainforest so remarkably diverse that the Smithsonian maintains a tropical-research institute here. Beaches are rare, occurring only where the jungle recedes to expose slender bands of brilliant yellow sand, like sashes of fine silk left by Christo.

There's no better vantage from which to watch the passing blur of azure surf and emerald islets than the deck of *Discovery*. She's gorgeous. The central saloon is enormous, with plush, wrap-around-sofa seating. There's a widescreen TV, panoramic windows in the coach house, and a navigation station geeked out with GPS, radar, a satellite phone, Internet, and a single-sideband radio. The interior is slathered in golden hardwood, with teak floorboards and mahogany paneling. Four of the six cabins have flat-screen TVs, DVD players, and air-conditioning. Toys abound too: surfboards, scuba gear, sportfishing rods and lures, an electric tow winch and paragliding gear (the winch can hoist gliders to 3,000 feet, then release them to ride thermals for hours above *Discovery*), spear guns, a two-seater sea kayak, a carbon-fiber stand-up paddleboard, and, of course, kites and kiteboards.

Gear aside, finding a break for kiting in surf isn't as easy as it might sound. Kitesurfing, as opposed to riding flatwater, first requires a classic reef break—long, consistent rollers that travel relatively slowly. Then steady wind is needed: not too strong, or it will turn waves to mince-meat; not too weak, or it won't keep your kite aloft. And direction also matters, with winds ideally parallel to the swell. There are only a few places where all the elements converge for great waveriding with a kite: Western Australia, Peru, New Caledonia, Indonesia, Chile, and one or two others. McClurg wants to add Bocas del Toro to the list.



In January 2007, McClurg started making phone calls—to pro kitesurfers, to fellow mariners, to anyone who knew anything about these obscure islands. Convinced that nobody had ever kiteboarded in Bocas, he decided that an expedition was in order. He'd heard rumors of ample surf breaks and spent hours scrolling through Google Earth images to locate them. As for the wind, McClurg found that passing cold fronts generate wind, and the bulk of those fronts barrel through in late January. His research ended there. "Eventually, it got to the point where it was a roll of the dice," he says. "I knew this might be a long shot, but I've done this enough that I thought it seemed worth checking out."

A Bocas expedition is a bold, expensive, and risky endeavor for McClurg. But he's the Pied Piper of adventure, and he's enticed kilters from five countries (the U.S., Brazil, France, Panama, and Israel) to travel thousands of miles to be here. It's a sizable party—25 in all, including nine world-renowned kiteboarding waveriders, a four-man documentary film crew, and a veteran surf photographer. Scott Balogh, a 37-year-old American expat who lives in the Bocas, shows up riding a new 1100cc Sea-Doo. Balogh soon becomes our de facto guide, as he's the only one with any firsthand insight about this place.

Also on board is Scott Wisenbaker, a 32-year-old vice president for Goldman Sachs in New York City, and his girlfriend, Nashara Alberico, 33, a wealth manager with Morgan Stanley. They live in an Upper West Side apartment—"on the 51st floor," Alberico points out—and met through a mutual friend at Goldman Sachs "on the 41st floor." Wisenbaker, a *Discovery* co-owner, paid handsomely to come on the trip. "It's a lot more money than your typical vacation," he tells me. "But it's worth it to be able to get to places you couldn't otherwise go." McClurg is selling the lure of discovery, a journey into the unknown, with no expectations. And Wisenbaker,

THIS PAGE (RIGHT): ERIK AEDER



GUST OF FRESH AIR
Even without the wind, World Cup windsurfing champ and kite designer Raphaël Salles enjoys one of the Bocas' pristine beaches.

the finance guy, gets it: It's a classic risk-versus-reward scenario. "You try to put yourself in a location where wind and waves come together," he says, "but in the end, what you get is what you get."

The first trick to learn in kitesurfing is how not to drown. The second is mastering dazzling moves. The raley, which entails unhooking from the harness and swinging your legs behind you while airborne, is one of the most technical. Mauricio Abreu, a 31-year-old professional kitesurfer, explains to Wisenbaker how to execute this without getting knocked unconscious. "If you get into trouble, pull the bar over your head and do the Superman thing," advises Abreu, a former pro surfer who was one of the first to kite using a conventional surfboard.

It's not the last impromptu coaching session Wisenbaker will have with Abreu or the handful of other riders onboard. Among the team are a kiteboarding world champion, an Olympic windsurfer and World Cup winner, and a Frenchman whose aerial acrobatics recently won him a pro-kiteboarding freestyle championship. The talent is humbling, and for Wisenbaker the chance to rub elbows with these guys—and hone his kiting style—is a major draw. Imagine spending a week at St. Andrews with Tiger Woods and Jack Nicklaus and you get the idea.

It's late afternoon on day two when Wisenbaker gets his first chance to ride with the pros. The wind hasn't made her debut, so this will be a surf session. McClurg drops anchor near a head-high break. Wisenbaker slathers his board with wax and dives off the stern, paddling after Abreu toward an empty, four-mile-long ribbon of sand known as Playa Larga, on Bastimentos, the second-largest island in the Bocas.

I grab a snorkel and fins and paddle to shore. The riptide is ruthless, and I'm gasping after ten minutes. But it's worth it. On the beach, the cascading jungle drips with life. The forests here get more than 230 inches of rain annually, higher than anywhere in Panama. There are ferns, palms, wild pineapples, and turtle grass. Birds screech from the depths of this jade labyrinth. The Bocas span 200 terrestrial square miles (roughly the size of Tucson, Arizona) and sustain 155 square miles of coral reef, along with some 2,500 animal species, including black-bellied whistling ducks, crab-eating raccoons, and leatherback turtles—seafaring giants that can weigh nearly as much as a Volkswagen Beetle.

After two hours, we regroup for lunch on *Discovery*. Wisenbaker is smiling and chatty. This is progress: He hasn't cracked a grin or muttered more than two sentences since arriving—a gloomy New York winter and freefall on Wall Street have lacquered him with a coat of dourness. But the morning session with the pros provided much-needed cerebral solvent. It helps, too, when chef Nico Chemarin, a Frenchman who specializes in Provençal cuisine, emerges from the galley with platters of prosciutto, cheeses, tropical fruits, and a pear tart.

Chemarin is lanky, Kojak-bald, and gruff, and sweats buckets. He is a cooking machine. With the boat plowing headlong into six-foot swells, big enough to make you queasy, Chemarin remains cloistered in the stifling galley, hacking apart raw chicken with a nine-inch cleaver while the hull lurches. Chemarin claims he's incapable of getting seasick, but "when I go on land, I get ground-sick," he tells me. Indeed, one evening we dine on Isla Carenero, and Chemarin barely lasts ten minutes before hustling back to the boat. Perhaps, though, it was just the meal: "I was sure we were eating cat food," he bemoans later.

The next day, we stop briefly at Zapatillo, a bean-shaped island less than 800 yards long. It marks the farthest distance we've ventured from Colón. At its northern tip, a triangular spit of beach protrudes

from the tenacious jungle. A few riders rig their kites on the sand and get them aloft. The wind dies at once, and six mini Hindenburgs crumple into the sea. By evening, a hard rain is falling. It pummels the boat all night, making it difficult to sleep below. At dawn, it's overcast and the air is rancid and steamy. We're halfway through the trip, and soggy nights and windless days have silenced our group. Nobody wants to say what everyone is thinking: What if the expedition gets skunked?

But McClurg has a plan. "We're going to Cusapín," he informs us. "The wind has to be stronger there." His rationale is its location: Cusapín is not an island but a village at the end of a craggy peninsula that juts into the Caribbean like a saber. Its eastern half is unprotected, exposed to open ocean and (presumably) wind. The four-hour excursion to get there takes us through another stretch of mangroves and across ten miles of open water. Big-wave kite champ Will James, who once landed a monster 459-pound Pacific blue marlin from his jet ski, feeds out 120-pound test line with a squid lure on the leader and clamps the rod into a deck-mounted holder. Barely five minutes elapse before the reel starts spinning. James has wandered off, so Wisenbaker grabs the rod and lands a two-foot Spanish mackerel. We catch three more, and Chemarin attacks each haul like Edward Scissorhands, transforming the fish into magnificent plates of sashimi and makizushi accompanied by a sinus-scouring homemade wasabi.

At Cusapín, we anchor in a glassy bay and pile into a dinghy. It's drizzling, and the wind remains elusive, so we leave the kite gear stowed on *Discovery*. A few dozen wide-eyed villagers, Ngöble-Buglé Indians, greet us on a dilapidated dock. It heaves under the weight of the locals, who are giddy to have guests. McClurg speaks Spanish and learns that a short hike across an isthmus will take us to the surf.

THE PASSING SHOWERS HAVE STOPPED, AND WITHIN MINUTES THE SLATE SKY IS AWASH IN COLOR; A SWARM OF KITES SOAR ABOVE ESCUDO.

The path is red clay. It's wet and muddy and slick as ice. We trudge upward, stumbling, sliding, until our legs are coated and orange. We reach a low pass, about 600 feet high. From the saddle, we hear the muffled explosion of surf. Everyone breaks into a sprint, tumbling downhill into the whitewater. A gaggle of villagers follow, perhaps 40 strong, and huddle on the sand. They're slack-jawed and mesmerized: A group of *norteamericanos* has just emerged from a rainy mist on a 57-foot luxury yacht to ride waves in their backyard.

Cusapín is a jewel among the Bocas breaks. Even with no wind, everyone is exultant. Later in the trip, we will detour back here. The swell is larger when we return, and by

day's end, Abreu—who hitches a ride back to *Discovery* in a dugout canoe paddled by two boys—returns with a snapped board, a result of the angry surf. But he's unfazed. "I go through 15 boards a year," he says. "Good thing I'm sponsored."

The wind has decided to spend the winter in Aruba. It's day five, and we're running out of time. But McClurg has a wildcard. "About 40 miles offshore there's an island called Escudo de Veraguas," he informs me early one morning. "I hadn't intended on going there. It's not in Bocas. It's in open water. But it must have wind, because there's nothing to stop it for miles around." I can't tell if this new scheme is just a ruse to rally the troops or whether McClurg is divining some kind of ancient mariner wisdom that says islands PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 102

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in the middle of nowhere are always windy. Balogh, our local guru, endorses the idea. Although he has never made the trek, he's raring to go: Clad in raingear, he straddles his Sea-Doo like a cowboy on a horse. Apparently, towing the jet ski behind *Discovery* will swamp the craft's engines, which means Balogh will have to tail us for the crossing. It's a two-seater, and Wisenbaker volunteers to keep him company.

It's more or less a straight shot to Escudo, about a three-hour trip. At one point, however, we lose sight of Balogh and Wisenbaker on the Sea-Doo. In theory, we should be able to hail them on the radio. But something goes wrong. "The radio isn't working," McClurg confesses. "I am totally freaked." Balogh and Wisenbaker are far offshore riding a ten-foot jet ski across open water with no way to reach us. We consider turning around, but a mile-wide green strip appears on the horizon. It's Escudo. We get closer just as a pod of dolphins arrives to surf our bow wave. Then, abruptly, the wind begins to blow. We're 50 yards from Escudo when we spot surf crashing over a submerged reef. Next Balogh and Wisenbaker appear, a bit stunned that they safely navigated a 22-mile ocean crossing on a bucking Sea-Doo. "We had surfboards with us," says Wisenbaker. "The worst thing that could have happened is that we'd have had to paddle 20 miles."

Balogh and Wisenbaker are safe; dolphins, wind, and surf abound. It's too much, too fast. We're astonished and ecstatic at the same time, not quite sure what to do. McClurg drops anchor, and the clanking capstan jolts us into action. Kites and boards are chucked feverishly into the dinghy, and we shuttle to a broad beach. The passing show-ers have stopped, and within minutes the slate sky is awash in color; a swarm of kites soar above Escudo. The surf is modest, the wind is light, but riders are carving up the reef breaks with glee, thrilled to have finally found that nexus of wind and waves. "I can practically guarantee no one has ever kited here," McClurg will write later in his log.

Discovery is reeling in the dark by the time we're all on board again. A group decision is made to about-face and sail northwest up the coast to look for better waves and stronger wind. Most of the crew turns in early, but in the middle of the night, the clickety-clacking of winches awakens me. Someone is raising the mainsail. I scramble on deck. The jib is already up, and McClurg is grappling with the halyards. It's a cloudless night, and the moon, waxing nearly full, illuminates a froth of whitecaps. The wind is smooth and true at 15 knots and readily fills the sails. *Discovery* gyrates in a circular hula-dance rhythm when it's motoring. Under sail, however, she's steadied by her keel and slices through the swell with knife-edge certainty.

The expedition is not over—we'll spend three more days scouting, getting a couple more kite sessions in unsurfed waters, including an hourlong bout in a ferocious rainsquall. But the payoff at Escudo is the trip's most enduring milestone: Culminating a day kitesurfing virgin breaks with a midnight sail transcends our hard-fought search for wind and waves. When a few others arise and gather by the rails in the lunar twilight, I realize we've reached the tipping point—the precise moment on every expedition when reward overtakes risk, and you're glad you came. We stand silently and sway in unison over undulating seas, like cantering stallions whose only desire is to press onward, to remain in motion. ☺



TRIP NOTES KITING THE BOCAS

ACCESS

Continental (continental.com) offers five-hour nonstops from New York to Panama City's Tocumen International Airport. Panamanian airline Aeroperlas (aeroperlas.com) connects to Bocas del Toro twice daily, leaving from Marcos A. Gelabert domestic airport and touching down on the island of Colón. If you end up overnighing in Panama City, head for the Bristol, a 56-room colonial-chic boutique hotel in Panama City's financial district. The lobby bar has a louche tropical Graham Greene vibe. Doubles from \$335; thebristol.com

ISLA COLÓN

Isla Colón, the largest of the Bocas islands, is the natural jumping-off point for exploring the archipelago. The capital city is also called Bocas del Toro, though locals just call it Bocas Town. > Punta Caracol Aqua-Lodge is a necklace of luxe private cabins perched on stilts above the shallows of Almirante Bay. The lodge offers snorkeling, fishing, and dolphin-watch-

ing trips, as well as guided treks to neighboring indigenous communities. Don't miss the fresh pineapple salad and grilled local lobster at the thatched-roofed restaurant. Cabin suites from \$374, including airport transfers; puntacaracol.com > Hacienda del Toro, on nearby Isla San Cristóbal, is the place for cocktails, with 20 kinds of rum. Take a 15-minute water taxi (\$6) from the Bocas Town dock. Owner Neil Thomas can arrange guided tuna-fishing excursions. Half-day trips from \$200; haciendadelatoro.com

SAIL DISCOVERY

Gavin McClurg's 57-foot luxury catamaran, *Discovery*, is on year two of a five-year round-the-world kitesurfing expedition. Shares, which constitute part ownership, entitle buyers to one 10- or 14-day trip each year. Owners travel to join the boat wherever it is at the time, dropping in on stamp-size atolls and obscure bits of seacoast via float-plane. Evenings are spent on deck, enjoying sashimi that was swimming two hours ago, cold beer, and the kind of psychedelically starry skies you only get way, way off the grid. In 2009, *Discovery* will cruise the South Pacific, with jaunts through the

Marshall Islands and Indonesia. At press time, there were five shares left. Adventure shares (10-day), \$20,000; Epic shares (14-day), \$30,000; offshoreodysseys.com

ADVENTURE

Though long popular with venture-some surfers and divers, Bocas del Toro's watersports infrastructure is still developing. Many visitors make arrangements through their hotels. > The crew from Panama Private Tours will take you to the best surf breaks in Bocas. Drop 20-foot faces at Silverbacks, or ride the world-class left peak at Carenero Island. Owner Fidel Ponce will charter kitesurfing expeditions during the December-to-March windy season. Four-day kitesurfing tours, \$560; panamapivatours.com > La Buga Dive Center, in Bocas Town, has PADI-certified dive masters offering a full menu of excursions, from shallow reefs teeming with parrotfish to the spooky submerged pinnacles of Tiger Rock. Dives from \$60; labuga-panama.com —EMILY MATCHAR



For details on planning your own Bocas trip or buying in to *Discovery*, visit outsidego.com.