

we all work



© 2001 Joy Patman

Panama Indigenous Kuna Woman Sewing a Mola in San Blas

From the first minutes I set foot on Isla Maquina in Panama's San Blas archipelago, the island and the indigenous Kuna women made a lasting impression. The aerial views of their unspoiled environment, the vibrant colors of the women's traditional dress and beadwork, and the longstanding matriarchal system under which the communities continue to live and thrive intrigued me.

Word spread that visitors had arrived. Children and women came down the paths of this tiny island, wanting to see who we were. Some were waving *molas*, the beautiful multilayered appliqué and well-known export of the region.

We attempted conversation about our physical appearances, and finally, were aided by some of the Kuna children who had learned Spanish in school. The small gold nose ring I've worn since Peace Corps training in Fiji didn't pass muster. Compared to the quarter-inch thick gold rings wedged through these women's septa, mine was too small and incorrectly placed!

Now it was our turn to inquire about their beaded arm and leg bands. The kids had tired of translating, so we pointed and gestured. They eventually understood and led us down a path to a woman's house. There we were the center of attention as two women wrapped our legs with similar designs. The dark space was filled with giggles and Kuna banter reminiscent of a sewing circle.

The next day, as someone accompanied me around the island, I caught Veronica Martinez sewing this *mola* in the hammock outside her house. -- Joy Patman

Panama (Republic of Panama)

Capital Panama

Population 3,360,474 (2009 est.)

Life Expectancy 77.25 years

Literacy 91.9% (age 15 and over can read and write)

Languages Spanish (official), English 14%

Religions Roman Catholic 85%, Protestant 15%

Government constitutional democracy

Source: *The World Factbook, 2009*

Panama



This photo appears on the **we all work** International Poster, produced by the RPCVs of Wisconsin-Madison, 2009. For more information and to order a complete set of full-size posters, see <http://www.rpcvmadison.org/>