

Subject/Area: San Blas Islands & Panama (incl. Las Perlas islands on Pacific side)

SAN BLAS: After waiting for a wx window for a week in Aruba, Herb (on Southbound2 on 12359 USB from 1930Z till over 2300Z) finally got us going. Perfect conditions (E-NE winds 10-15kts) got us in comfort with only about 20 hours of motoring from Aruba to Punta Escoces in the San Blas (average 6 kts.); after hearing the loss of some boats due to bad wx and of other complaining that they had to motor for more than 2 days, it wasn't a bad trip at all!

The Eastern San Blas don't seem to be visited much (except maybe by French and other European sailors!). Don't let the warnings about poor charting of the area intimidate you! With the cruising guides available and sailing only in good light, you will do fine and see another side of the San Blas.

Punta Escoces makes a perfect landfall, with friendly natives in a work camp away from the village (10\$ fee negotiated for 5\$ + regalo).

Isla Pinos: very aggressive "saila" about collecting his 5\$ fee before we could make another step in the village; no diving or fishing allowed; no photography

Bahia de Masargandi: no village, no fees, calm anchorage, nice long river trip

Mamitupu: very traditional village, very strict control of villagers, (6\$ fee), no photo, no fishing, no river visiting, meet Pablo (friendly guy who has lived 6 yr. in England)

Ailigandi: very open spirit (what a difference with Mamitupu!), 5\$fee, photo possible after asking the "saila", fishing OK

Nargana: nice protected anchorage, no fee, post office (register mail taking only 1 week to Europe!)

East Hollandes cays: plenty of good anchorages, we were more than 40 boats around for Xmas and new year and didn't feel overcrowded; nice islands to organize bbq and pot-luck with no mosquitoes; 5\$ fee to Kunas; the best spearfishing of the San Blas (but that's not saying much!) but I did get a 53 lb. grouper with my small speargun!); had good locations for our Padi diving courses.

West Hollandes: rolly, not as nice as East Hollandes.

Coco Bandero Cays: better anchorage on west side but more scenic on east side, good snorkeling.

Mangle Channel Islands: well protected anchorage, nice coral reefs, good for night diving.

Los Gruellos Cays "Kwanadup island": nice little Kuna run hotel/restaurant; scuba on the wooden sailboat wreck in front of resort (white buoy); don't tie to the other mooring as it is very light.

Rio Ciedra: get a local guide to take you to the cascade and pool on the Masarganti River; you will get some river trip in your dinghy followed by about 1 hour walking to the cascade and pool where old stories mentioned a Sirena.

Eastern Lemon Cays: nice wall diving on reef 1/2 mile east of Nuinudup (right on the '30' on p66 chartlet in the green guide), drops to 130 ft with nice corals if few fish.

In general: if you can get by with Spanish you will have no problems communicating with the Kunas (especially young ones); most villages have now phone booths that let you access ATT direct-dial 109; still possible to trade crabs & lobsters for kitchenware, alcohol & tobacco; the San Blas are changing fast but they are still unique in the Caribbean!

Passage from San Blas to Colon: we left the Lemon Cays in strong NE winds after it was already blowing for 10 days (early Feb.) and went non-stop to Isla Linton. In some guides, you will hear about Playa Chiquita as a protected anchorage! Do not even think about it in strong NE swells as we got 10ft steep swells broadside trying to come in and as it didn't seem too calm inside, we quickly turned around, raised our sails again and continued to Isla Linton (we later heard from 2 boats who broke plenty of things while they were at anchor there, in a washing machine motion that precluded any sleep at night!

Isla Grande: windy and not too protected anchorage in N, NE seas; island interesting to visit for its restaurants and touristy ambiance so different after spending over 2 months in the San Blas!

Isla Linton: slightly rolly but good protection; the dinghy trip through the mangrove channel going West along the mainland is interesting (along South side of Isla Palina - p48 chartlet green guide); no activities anymore on Isla Linton and watch out for the wild monkeys there who attack and bite your dog when you go for a walk.

Puertobelo: very nice anchorage only open to the West; visit the forts; nice view and plenty of room to anchor in mud bottom 5 to 30 feet area; bus every 30 min. to Colon; groceries available.

We stayed in **Colon** for 5 months so we had plenty of time to explore the area for provisioning and finding parts!

We recommend "the flats" in Colon as the place to base yourself because of the nice welcome and services extended by the Panama Canal Yacht Club (PCYC): free dinghy dock, free water, self-service laundry, fuel dock, public phone, fax and mail service, and more. The Commodore is a very accommodating person and extends many courtesies to cruisers. We found out that the PCYC now pays for their water and rent since the US pull-out, yet when we tried to give them money for our water usage, the Commodore would not accept it, so we gave it to the charity the YC sponsored. Many semi-permanent "cruisers" abuse the generosity of these people by sucking up all the free services, and never giving any business or even appreciation back. These people leave a bitter taste in the mouth, and someday the PCYC just may not be so generous anymore.

The holding in the anchorage varies, in about 40 ft of water and watch out to not lose anything overboard as the soft mud is like pudding and goes so deep that you'll never find anything that sinks in it! (Plenty of anchors and rode were lost, and this is a diver telling you that!) We alerted at least 4 boats that dragged by us in nighttime squalls over the time we were there.

The other anchoring options have big flaws in our mind! Based at Isla Grande, Isla Linton or Portobello, you get nice scenery and clean water but you have long

bus trips to get to Colon or Panama City to get anything other than basic staples; based in the Balboa Yacht Club (BYC), the water is even more polluted, you get the wake of the Canal traffic, you pay membership fees (\$25)(even if only buying fuel), mooring fees (\$.50\ft), can't use your dinghy, and there are no facilities since the building burned down around Feb. of last year! The welcome is somehow missing (a common comment in the last 10 yr. of bulletins!!!). A possible option is to anchor off Flamingo beach, 2 miles from the Canal, Pacific side, but you have to land your dinghy on the rocks, not forgetting the big tide differences!

Before you cross the canal, we cannot stress enough the benefits to go as line-handlers on other boats. You will enjoy those crossings with friends and not be so stressed when it's your turn, having had time to think out what you will do on your own boat.

When you are in Colon-Balboa, listen to the 0730 cruiser's net on ch72 as some cruisers are mines of information! Things can be found, but not easily. The net can put you in touch with someone who just might know where to go.

Shipping anything in Panama for a yacht in transit duty-free is possible but the flat charges are pretty high so it makes sense to consolidate between different companies you order from or to group orders with other cruisers! We recommend Miami Express (gencio@aol.com - Tel in Miami: (305)477-5977 fax(305)477-6178 ; they have a office in Panama City and a small antenna in Colon) as you can get things shipped by cargo or plane at fair prices both directions. If you are in a hurry, you can use DHL (they have an office in the free zone in Colon). We heard many problems from people using FEDEX ('lost' laptop sent back to US! looks like the local branch doesn't measure up to the standards of this normally efficient company!). Whichever way you choose, always ask in at least 3 different ways what the Bottom Line cost will be. You have to pry all the info out of them.

Cybercafes exists in Colon and Panama City so you can surf the net galore and catch up with your email!

For provisioning, call Winston Martinelli (assist.mgr, super nice guy who speaks English) at Mega-Depot 261-2114 and he will send a bus to Colon to pick up cruisers who organize a group, to the store in P.C. Costco won't provide this service anymore (their loss!). The Super 99 supermarket outside of Colon will send a bus on demand for any number of persons.

Good vet in Colon: Avenida del Fronte for annual shots; you can find Heartguard worm pills at animal supply stores under the name of Cardomec.

Bought a new Canon printer and a VCR for less than \$100 each (prices comparable to US!) but no bargains on laptops!! But via the internet, I found a great company selling refurbished laptops and new ones at bargain prices: United Computers Inc. in Canada (www.unitedci.com); Rhys Trenhaile was efficient and agreeable! ; got 486 laptop for \$230, CD ROM, ... At that price, we bought 3 identical laptops so now we carry our own spare parts! Do not laugh but think about the following: 1) laptops new or old do Not last in the salt air environment! 2) Every time it needs to be fixed you will hear: "we need the parts, we have to order them at high cost and it will take a long time" ... "it's an older

model, I don't know if we can find the parts anymore and laptops don't take standard parts! ..." Now, with 3 identical laptops (2 being vacuum sealed), I can replace the parts myself or at least provide the parts to the technician in the islands! and all that at the cost of one new laptop that is not, I bet, going to last 3 or 4 times the refurbished ones!!!

Propane tanks: you can buy the local 25LB tanks (made in aluminium, should I say aluminum like our US friends?) for less than \$50 with a US valve (keep in mind that they are a bit taller than the 20Lb. in the US.

Outboards: good prices on Tohatsu motors from Abernathy's in P.C. (ask the manager for discounts on anything in the store, if you don't ask ...)

Scuba tanks: no bargains buying them, but great bargain to do the 5 yr. mandatory hydrostatic test (check those tanks in the bilges!!): only 12\$ at Varcacia, a fire extinguisher company (done professionally in one day!) on Via Brasil (next to Casa del Helado) in P.C.

Life-raft inspection: can be done professionally in Colon free zone by Ocean Safety (ask Carlos, the taxi-driver). Cost was less than what we paid 5 yr. ago in the USVI.

We found an AC\refrigeration specialist right in Colon who did a very good job fixing our leaking evaporator, and refilling the Danfoss compressor system with the right amount of freon. His name is Javier Smith, is very contentious, and speaks good English. His home # is 444-0156, or ask the folks at Panafrio, the refrigeration parts store for directions to his shop.

If you want to make any flags with adhesive colored tape on Plexiglas (for example, on the rudder of your wind generator) you can go to Multiplastic 279-0441/ 261-5153 (not far from Abernathy's) with your plan and they will make it at your dimensions (with a nifty computer program) and cut the different color pieces so you can do the job yourself if you like (they can do the whole thing for you if you like). My 2 sided/flag cost me less than nylon one and will outlast it more than 10 times. Show your registry flag for years and it will look great even without wind! (I started an SSCA file in their computer so you may find designs you can use!)

Before getting to Panama, we imagined the place full of stores with boat parts like in Ft. Lauderdale since they have so much boat traffic! Wrong! There are few marine stores and no prices like in Florida! But if the part is not specific to boats, then you may find it, as P.C. is a big metropolis!

Las Perlas Islands:

Visited them in July when few boats were around, stopping in the best anchorages. While the islands were beautiful, the snorkeling was disappointing due mostly to bad visibility (apparently a common thing here!).

Cruising the Perlas is challenging, coming from the Caribbean:

First you get the 15 ft tides, every 6.5 hours or so, that forces you to pay more attention to depth, you don't want to be high and dry at low tide and you don't want to have to put tons of anchor rode because anchored deep! Also, you may consider dinghy wheels if your dink is heavy to drag up the beach.

Second, the winds are always changing: normally from the South this time of the year but often strong Northerlies so you don't want to drag and end up on the beach or the reefs!

Third, the tidal currents are fighting the winds and often you end up not facing into the wind but at an angle so you move all around your anchors, tying knots in your anchor lines (you need 2), and ventilation is not the greatest as the wind comes from the side!

Fourth, numerous thunderstorms get everything wet but at least it's easy to fill up your water tanks!

Fifth, you have to motor a lot going around as often the winds are either too light or right in the nose! (but that's often the case anywhere for some reason, hi hi!)

Now, all that doesn't sound like what you would read in a tourist brochure but it's reality and, despite it, we were glad to have spent 2 weeks here visiting. People were very nice, we got some good fresh fruits and got back in shape after our 5 months in Colon.

If you stop in Contadora, try to meet Guenter HP1XVH, German expat living well on the island. He's a great guy helpful with any radio equipment testing and has contacts in Galapagos! He is conducting the Pacific Islands Net on 14135 at 2300Z that can help you during your passage from the Caribbean to the S.Pac. The net is run in German and English and don't hesitate to break in the first time if you don't hear any English!

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Luc & Jackie s/v Sloepmouche