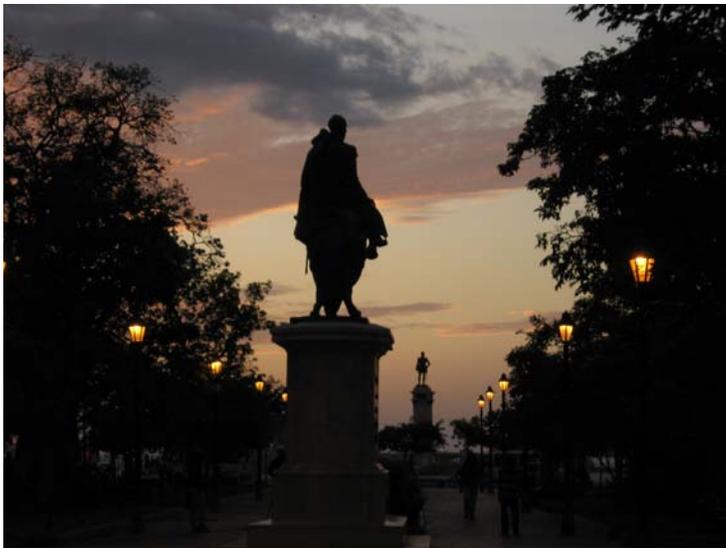


Sailing the Caribbean Coast of Colombia (Illustrated)

Copyright Constance Elson and the Caribbean Compass, all rights reserved. September 2011.
This appeared as a 3-part article in the Caribbean Compass, October, November, and December 2011.
Reproduction allowed for non-profit use only.

As a cruising ground, Colombia gets a bad rap. Insurance companies impose a surcharge if you wish to sail in Colombian waters, blanket warnings persist (e.g. *The Panama Cruising Guide*, 4th ed, p398: "...most cruisers prefer to give Colombia a wide berth"), and in the '80s and '90s Colombia definitely had major problems with guerilla groups on the left and the right that kept prudent sailors far from its shores. But after a decade of serious effort, with U.S. support, Colombia is presently very stable and *la violencia* has been reduced to levels typical of other South American countries. Criminal problems with narco spin-off gangs of former guerilleros do continue but only in very specific regions; for Caribbean cruisers the one area that warrants caution is the bottom of the Gulf of Uraba.



21st C Colombia is a fascinating, dynamic and incredibly beautiful country, with reasonable aspirations of soon joining Latin America's small club of 1st World nations and the benefits of its robust economic growth are relatively widely (by Latin American standards) enjoyed. Colombia offers unusual cruising destinations and experiences, and its coastal inhabitants who proudly call themselves *costeños* are warm, helpful, friendly and gracious. A little-appreciated fact is that modern Colombians are enthusiastic tourists in their own country, in the mountains and along the coast. A consequence of this is that all its cruising

waters also have small hotels, *hostals*, and resorts catering not to wealthy North Americans and Europeans, but to middle-class and affluent Colombians and to adventurous young backpackers from many countries.

Between November 2010 and May 2011, my sailing partner and I sailed almost the entire length of the Colombian Caribbean coast from the Guajira Peninsula in the northeast to Sapzurro on the Panamanian border. The places we stopped at are all well-known to the set of cruisers who sail Panama and Colombia routinely and good sets of notes exist for separate portions and are listed below, but there is not yet a really comprehensive cruising guide for the entire Colombian coast. At the risk of seeming presumptuous in writing this based on quite limited experience, I will describe our trip and provide descriptions and anchoring details. Our information is current and I will also point the reader to sources of information for harbors and anchorages we missed. I will also say a little about governmental regulations, which seem to be in a permanently transitional state. I offer this as a travel aperitif -- with the hope that someone will write a complete travel guide to Colombian waters soon.

Our travels north of Santa Marta took place in November, travels south of Santa Marta took place in April and into May. These "between-season" times may be optimal traveling times; they were certainly good for us. In a month traveling south from Cartagena to Sapzurro, we saw exactly one other sailboat other than at Cholon. I felt I was seeing a glimpse of what cruising in the Caribbean was like 30 years

ago: unspoiled, un-gringoed, requiring enterprise and an openness to the unknown, and entirely blissful. So I write this article with mixed feelings. The desire to see others enjoy an overlooked cruising ground and become acquainted with a gracious hospitable people is tempered by the recognition that many of the anchorages I have listed for these waters are fairly small and will not accommodate large numbers of boats.

Some general comments.

Weather and wind. Yes, it can blow really hard, especially along the northern half of the coast and especially during Jan-April. It is a very bad idea to try to travel these waters on a tight schedule. But all year long, at least once every ten or twelve days the near-shore winds let up for 2 to 4 days at a time, producing manageable, in fact enjoyable, sailing. From May to September almost the entire southwest Caribbean basin has long periods with much convection and little or no near-shore wind and you can motorsail in almost any direction you choose. Early fall can provide occasional strong westerlies interspersed with calm periods. In the event of a really strong westerly wind, get into a protected anchorage or get offshore. As a general rule, winds and waves are lower very close (less than 5 mi) to shore. With a relaxed schedule and the assistance of custom weather information, such as provided by Chris Parker, it is quite reasonable to expect to be able to be entirely non-heroic while cruising along the entire Colombian coast.

Language: the political problems of the 80's and 90's left Colombia isolated. For a fairly well-educated people, surprisingly little English is spoken. Your trip will be much easier and more rewarding if you are willing to speak some rudimentary Spanish; costenos cheerfully will speak slowly if you remind them to. "*Hable despacio por favor*" is a useful phrase to learn.

Navigation: When I give coordinates as 4 digits, ddmm, representing degrees and minutes, the purpose is only so you can locate the general area on a map. Coordinates given as 6 digits, ddmm.mm, with precision to hundredths of a minute, represent accurate positions for navigation. A warning about chart software: south of Cartagena many popular electronic charts are extremely inaccurate. According to our Navionics "Gold" charts, on several occasions we were anchored ¼ mile inland – disconcerting until we learned to turn the thing off.

Provisions: The only places where you can get fuel and water dockside are at the marina in Santa Marta and at Club de Pesca in Cartagena but you can jerry jug diesel and water everywhere. On the southern offshore islands water might be unavailable in dry season. Big cities have big supermarkets and in even the tiniest communities, small tiendas sell potatoes, carrots, cabbage, local fresh food in season, tinned food, often good bread and -- of course -- beer. Cell phone minutes are universally available and if you have a cellphone or 3G modem, you can enjoy wifi everywhere in Colombia. (A wonderful improvement!). ATM machines (*cajeros*) that accept international credit cards are available in the cities but are uncommon elsewhere. Banks and a few tiendas in smaller communities will sell you Colombian pesos for US dollars.

Los Monjes. The Islas Monjes are Venezuelan, but we include them because they are so often used as stepping stone to Colombia from the ABCs. The anchorage (N1221.45, W7054.18) is on the southwest side of Isla Monje del Sur. You moor to a 2" polyester line attached to the sides of an artificially created bay—room for 5 or 6 boats. Unless you are absolutely certain the wind will stay N or E, it is wise to drop a stern anchor in 50 ft of water to prevent your boat winding up on the shore side of the big polyester line (as happened to us). The young Venezuela soldiers who come to your boat to write down your information are stationed there for 3 week stints, are polite and will gratefully accept an offer of

cold juice or soda. There is no charge for the mooring. An easy hike to the top of the rock provides a great view.

Guajira Peninsula. It is a good idea to get a reliable weather forecast before rounding this cape. We stayed 6-12 miles offshore in 8' regular seas and 17-25 knot winds, diminishing to 10 knots later, and sailed the 78 miles directly to Cabo de Vela, arriving at the reliable Pizazz waypoint (below) after dark. We have no first-hand knowledge of the two possible anchorages along the peninsula at Bahia Hondo (N1222, W7147) and Puerto Bolivar (N1215, W7157) but we know sailors who stopped at Bahia Honda for the night and found it adequate. Heading north it would be a very convenient stop. Puerto Bolivar is Colombia's largest coal-shipping port and cruisers are not encouraged to stop there but friends who entered because of engine problems received assistance and were cordially treated. It is well-lit at night, with channel markers.

Cabo de Vela. Go inside or outside the small island Cayo del Morro to reach the Pizazz waypoint



(N1212.25, W7210.69) for an anchorage that normally gets you out of the swells. For really bad weather or a longer stay, move in toward the beach keeping well away from the many small plastic bottles which we later learned mark a complete maze of fishing nets and traps of the local Wayu fishermen. We anchored for 3 days in 9' of water at (N1212.00, W7209.38) during an offshore trough. There was no protection from the NE wind but the water was completely calm and the holding good. The local fishermen were friendly and curious and the dark huts along the north shore turned out to be mostly *posadas* for adventurous eco-tourists. Check

out the surprising Posada Jareena. We had no pesos but bought some from some Colombian tourists to buy beer with. The desert landscape invites cross-country hiking. This bay offers no protection in SW or W winds.

Cabo de Vela to Santa Marta: The rum line is a 124 mi passage that puts you 25 miles offshore at times. It is possible to anchor at the town of Rio Hacha, the tourist gateway to the Guajira, but it is an



open roadstead and only suitable in light or moderate conditions. Hot tip: if you time your trip so that in the hour before dawn you are about 10 miles offshore sailing along W7340-W7350, you may get to see the 18,000' snow-covered peaks of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Once the sun rises, these peaks usually disappear into mist. It is quite an amazing sight.

The 5 Bays: From east (N1120,W7404) to west (N1119,W7410) these are Cinto, Nenguage, Guayraca, Chengue, and Concha. These steep-sided bay are part of Tayrona National Park and are

now (somewhat) regularly visited by the increasingly professional Coast Guard boats from Santa Marta. If your zarpe says Santa Marta you will be asked to clear in at Santa Marta before you can return upwind

and upcurrent to stay here. If your zarpe says Cartagena you will be probably be allowed a one-night yellow-flag stop. In either case you will be permitted to stay if you can realistically plead really bad wind and seas. International visitors to the park must each pay \$17 US at park entrances on land, so don't be outraged if you are asked to pay that. See discussion about Colombian fees at end of this article. Apparently it is now possible to reach all of these bays by 4-wheeled vehicle, so if you see a few folks along the shore, they are either indigenous people (usually dressed in traditional white clothing) visiting ancestral holdings or they are tourists who paid an eco-tour operator a lot of money to get there.

Santa Marta: The new Marina Santa Marta is physically beautiful and gives excellent access to the very likeable city of Santa Marta. Entry is at the north side of the extensive breakwater (N1115.00, W7413.01) and it is advisable to e-mail the office your arrival plans (info@marinaSantaMarta.com.co) in advance. The marina monitors VHF ch68; if no one answers, tie up at the fuel dock at port side of the entry channel and await instructions. A great deal of money has been spent on docks, plaza, bath house and security, all of which are superb. All the staff who work directly with cruisers are welcoming and eager to please. However an ongoing problem is that no one presently associated with the marina has any cruising knowledge and experience; indeed, it is not clear what role serving the cruising community will play in the long-term plans for the marina. We stayed in the marina 4 months, from December to April. At times the winds blew 40 knots in the marina, placing real strain on the docks. We were glad to be in safe harbor. (For more pictures and information about Santa Marta, see "A Month in Santa Marta" and "Guide to Santa Marta" in www.sailblogs.com/member/tashtego.)

Depending on the wind direction, it is possible for a few boats to anchor outside the marina, staying clear of the shipping lanes used by the commercial port. Boats who choose to anchor out should contact the marina to see whether use of a marina dinghy dock will be permitted; government regulations are making this simple courtesy complicated.

Currently there are only two marinas open to transient cruisers along the entire Caribbean coast of Colombia, Club Nautico in Cartagena and Marina Santa Marta. Santa Marta is by far nicer than Club Nautico. Its excellent security makes it the ideal base for land and air travel and Avianca has several daily flights to Bogota from the local airport. However for extensive boat repairs or haulout, you should go to Cartagena with its better-developed recreational marine industry.

Taganga and Rodadero: These two bays on either side of Santa Marta are popular beach resorts. They make a very nice day outing from Santa Marta by boat (a zarpe may be involved) or by land (a 10-minute bus ride costing 60 cents).



Taganga (N1115.94, W7411.60) is fun and funky, too-well advertised in Lonely Planet but still very low-key. There is an active scuba industry there. Rodadero, also known as Gaira, (Pizazz waypoint N1112.10, W7413.75) is Colombia's version of Copacabana Beach. By day both anchorages require firm discouragement of youthful swimmers or paddle-boaters. By night only Rodadero is a "secure" anchorage. While Santa Marta is now the main northern entry port

for clearing in to Colombia it is apparently possible to do so at Rodadero at somewhat lower cost -- contact romovela_lda@hotmail.com for information.

Magdalena River: This river is 950 miles long and drains 1/4 the land mass of Colombia; 66% of Colombians live in its drainage basin. Offshore an abrupt color change tells you when you have entered its outflow. Some boats cross its mouth (N7451,W1106) only 2 or 3 miles offshore, keeping close watch for floating debris, cows, etc. We remained about 9 miles out. We attributed the increasing seas to the river but they turned out to be the beginning of a bad blow which we would have avoided had we remained flexible about our departure date from Santa Marta. (Re-read my weather advice above.) Various entrepreneurs speak about developing facilities for cruisers in Baranquilla but the formidable Magdalena doesn't make that seem very realistic.

Punta Hermosa: This quiet bay behind a long sand bar is conveniently located 16 mi southwest of Baranquilla. Coming from the north the safe waypoint for turning to enter the bay is N1056.07, W7503.22 . This is almost a mile west of the waypoint given in the Pizazz notes; the sand bar appears to have swallowed up an entire island. Once inside you can proceed north almost to the top of the bay in 9'-12' water. We anchored at (N1056.66, W7502.12). There is almost no wind protection but the water is calm and the holding good. It is wonderfully empty, with only a few kite-surfers, weekend sightseers, and a couple of intermittent beach bars. (Rumor heard October 2011: the "Baranquilla" marina is going to be developed here)

Cartagena: Who doesn't want to see this jewel of Spanish Colonial and Baroque architecture and seasonal playground of the world's wealthy?



It is surprising how unappealing the options for bringing your boat to Cartagena are at present, considering its importance as a destination. The only marina open to transient boats is Club Nautico¹ and it is in a state of neglect that has "progressed" from decrepitude to pigsty. However, they do provide a dinghy dock, wifi and a water faucet for about \$3.50 per day and the long-time cruiser community still runs a net on Ch 68 at 8am every morning, offering lots of advice and help if you need it. If you are willing to spend a few nights in a hotel (all price levels are available) you can see Cartagena without bringing your boat there: leave your boat safely in Santa Marta Marina and take a 4-

¹ as of Oct 2011: apparently some folks are still able to stay at the Club de Pesca. Ask around.

hour bus ride (\$13) or else anchor your boat in Cholon² and return to Cartagena using the 5:30 am launch (\$7, 1 hour and a trip in itself!) to spend a few days feasting on the sights.

If you arrive in Cartagena by boat, the Pizazz waypoint (N1023.45, W7534.47) is very helpful for entering Cartagena Bay via Boca Grande because the buoys on either sides of the opening are inconspicuous until you are very close. Once in, you sail along the western shore of Cartagena (CastilloGrande), dumbfounded at the wall of condo stalagmites, before turning into the bay proper. Avoid the buoyed shoal near the statue and anchor near Club Nautico (N1024.68,W7532.50) . If seas or darkness makes Boca Grande hazardous, it is also possible to enter or leave the bay using the marked ship channel at Boca Chica (waypoint for ship channel entrance N1018.90, W7535.68). However we were advised to use that entrance only in daytime. Anchoring in or apparently even transiting the south end of Cartagena Bay at night carries some risk of robbery -- perhaps by the same fellows who spent two energetic and amply compensated hours pulling us out of shallow water when we foolishly left the marked channel ... There are good haulout facilities and long-established marine services for cruisers in Cartagena Bay. The Club Nautico website (www.ClubNauticoCartagena.com) has a tab labeled "Cruiser Guide" that lists all kinds of information and services for cruisers.

Cholon: Older maps may not show it but there really is a Bahia Cholon, about 16 miles south of Cartagena near the southern tip of the Baru peninsula. It is a long narrow bay completely protected from the ocean by mangrove islands. The following waypoints will bring you safely through the only sailboat-accessible entry, the first waypoint being very conservative: (N1010.59,W7540.56) (N1010.41,W7540.32) (N1010.06,W7540.32) (N1010.02,W7540.26) (N1009.91,W7540.20) (N1009.84,W7540.18) (N1009.76,W07540.11) . Navionics chartware will tell you are sailing over an island. It is wrong. The last two points mark a 20' wide channel with a sand bank to starboard and happy motorboaters med-moored at a beach bar to port. This is not a time to watch bikinis! Anchor anywhere in the bay where there is depth. Cholon and all of the Baru Peninsula is vacationland for Cartagenans; fast launches provide transport for day-trippers. Long stays are possible here once you learn to ferret out local services; cruiser cognoscenti hang here for entire seasons. The town of Baru can be reached with a 2-mile dinghy ride along mangrove channels --hire someone local to guide you the first time. Baru offers fuel and water, a variety of local food, domestic and hardware items, and an ATM machine that accepts international credit cards (yay!) Stock up; you won't see another one until Portobelo Panama. The entire shoreline of Cholon Bay is privately owned and only a few places allow you to use their waterfront dock. One of these is the charming Sports Baru, near the cellphone tower. Well-behaved cruisers are welcome to use their bar or restaurant -- their second floor verandah is a sybaritic place for sundowners. Wind permitting, it is also possible to anchor in very shallow waters off the southern tip of the Baru Peninsula at (N1007.74, 7541.26). The on-shore resort there is welcoming and the mouth of a short dinghy channel into Baru is nearby at N(1008.09, 7540.70).



² See section on governmental regulations at end of article.

A unique way to return to Cholon from a trip to Cartagena is to go to the chaotic mercado, catch a local bus headed to the town of Pasa Caballos, get off and walk 2 blocks to a ferry, ride it 250 yards across El Dique (a ship channel built to connect Cartagena with the Magdalena, its modern incarnation was dug in the 1950s) and then catch a ride with one of the motorcycle-taxis who will take you back to Cholon or Baru for about \$13. A bit strenuous but a real hoot.

Rosario Archipelago, Isla Grande: There are several possible anchorages in these islands; There are several possible anchorages in these islands; good maps are said to be available at the offices of the Cartagena Port Captain, on Av. Daniel Lemaitre. We only anchored at Isla Grande. We passed through its breaker-outlined windward reef safely with good light relying on the Pizazz waypoint (N1011.18, W07544.45), left the drab hard-to-spot concrete post to starboard and eyeballed our way in to anchor at (N1010.90, W7544.39). The anchorage was somewhat bouncy when the wind piped up because the protecting coral reef appears to be completely dead but we had its turquoise waters all to ourselves the 4

days we were there.



The tiny (one cottage) resort La Coquera let us tie our dinghy to an onshore tree and walk across their property to the main path. The northern coast of this island is proudly Afro-Colombian -- imagine an island with only footpaths and not a single road, palm tree groves and a small village that decides to own all their land in common to be able to control further development. Along the paths the houses were minimal (think of a stereotypical Caribbean shack) but the yards were swept and the island's 800 local residents invariably greeted us with smiles and a "buenos dias".

When we circumnavigated the island by dinghy we found two brightly-colored luxury

resorts and aggressively ostentatious homes on the leeward side, a jarring contrast with the quieter (but also expensive) eco-tourism on the windward side. There may be private de-salinization plants at the resorts, but for everyone else water comes from cisterns that fill during rainy season; when the cisterns run dry, water is purchased in 5 gal bottles via a Cartagena launch (!). Dry latrines, with unique walls made of adobe and coke bottle bottoms, provided sanitation. Everything on the island had two price tags: a) local and b) outrageous. This is a consequence of the island being a favorite day-trip and weekend getaway for Cartagenans and an eco-holiday for well-heeled northerners in the know. The fishermen who came to the boat wanted \$20US for crab and lobster but we weren't buying. There is a Nature Center on the island and in their log the Bernons mention a private-but-open-to-the-public aviary I wish I had known about. We saw another sailboat anchored near (N1010, W7545). Circumstances had us exit the Rosario Archipelago using a waypoint (N1008.21, W7543.30); it involved ghosting across 12' sandy shallows for ¼ mile – not ideal. The deeper channel to the west, through (N1009.02, W7544.08) looks preferable.

The Rosarios archipelago was our introduction to an economic and cultural offshore world that stretches from Cartagena to Porvenir, Panama. It consists of local residents who live in tranquility and security, entirely without cars, having very few material possessions other than a cell phone and TV (ubiquitous everywhere except in conservative Kuna villages), and who are warm and courteous to strangers. In the

Colombian islands the shorelines are almost all the property of well-to-do absentee owners; shoreline “ownership” is different among the Kuna of Panama of course.

San Bernadardo Archipelago, Tintipan: We anchored off the leeward shore of the largest island Tintipan, in the clearest most beautiful water we had seen since leaving Bonaire. In an effort to anchor in sand we initially were rather close to shore but an onshore windshift made us move 100 yards out to the waypoint (N0947.27,W7550.18). Tintipan must be entirely owned by a very few individuals because the only structures we saw on the south shore were two large homes each sporting a thatch-



roofed palapa built out over water for shady lazy pleasures; the palapas were huge, each easily big enough to accommodate a party of 100 people. The local fishermen and their families all live about one mile west on a rocky treeless island (Santa Cruz de Islote) that a Colombian guidebook claims has the highest population density in the world. It is reachable only by dinghy and the local lanchas. The Bernons describe some of the other islands in the archipelago, including La Palma which has an aquarium. On our second evening in our peaceful anchorage we were approached by a small boat with 5 men

aboard who I had watched fish further offshore for several hours. After we got past the \$20 lobster offering, I said what I really wanted was just two small red snappers (*pargo*). They couldn't figure out how to price such a small ordinary item so we settled on \$4 and everyone was happy. We motored away on a flat calm sunny day, exiting the island group near (N0943.35, W7550.19). There is said to be good snorkeling on the north shore of Tintipan; I don't know if the north shore also offers adequate anchorage when the wind is from the west.

Punta Bernardo: Directly east of the San Bernardo archipelago, a long underwater bank curves away from shore south and then eastward, forming a very large bay offering protection from waves from all directions except SE. Like Punta Hermosa, the bottom is flat, 10-40' deep and has good holding. And like Punta Hermosa, we had the bay entirely to ourselves for 3 days. We crossed the tip of the bank at N09359.40, W7540.82 in 30' of water. There is an impoverished and quite dirty (but friendly) town Beruña with tiendas and a road to civilization (N0941.57, W7537.18). Far more pleasant is the small island of Boqueron at the NW corner of the bay. Until the sea swallows it, it is home to 21 full-time residents who look after 20-30 rustic beach homes, some beautifully designed, used by their Colombian owners during the Christmas and Semana Santa (ie Easter) holidays and very little otherwise. Our day on the island was delightful. The tiny Tienda Del Mar prepared us an excellent meal, served at a comfortable table on the deck of an unoccupied villa. There is a channel on the north side of the island leading into a tiny bay holding one sailboat waiting for its owner. We anchored near long fishing nets (watch for pairs of floating containers!) at (N0941.66, W7541.87). In Log #16 the Bernons describe a stay at Punta Bernardo and mention a nearby adventure resort, Sanguare Resort, which must be one of the large places we saw along the north shore of the bay. Lanchas zip tourists from Beruña and Tolu to Las Palmas, passing between Boqueron and the north shore.

Isla Fuerte: This island is almost entirely surrounded by shallow reefs and we were grateful to two local men in canoes who offered to guide us into a small quiet bay near the southeast tip of the island. It



was big enough to accommodate 3 boats who coordinate their anchoring. The waypoints to enter (at one point you pass over a bar of coral rubble only 8' deep) are (N0923.04,W7610.03), (N0923.04, W7610.28), (N0923.05, W7610.32), (N0923.07, W7610.36). We anchored in 15' of water at (N0923.18,W7610.46) and got permission to use the tiny dock belonging to the last house on the point and cross the property to reach the public path. The alternative if the wind permits is to anchor well out, off the town beach, about ½ mile to the southwest of our small bay. If you are traveling in unfavorable weather, you may not find good anchorage and should be prepared to sail on when you arrive. Which would be a great shame because Isla Fuerte was a

surprise and deserved more than the two days we spent there. As you approach it you can see that it has huge trees growing on it. Much of the shoreline is given over to discreet weekend waterfront homes (belonging to antioqueños from Medellin, at a guess) and aside from caretaker families for those homes, the full-time residents almost all live in the town of Puerto Limon. A pleasant tree-shaded 15-minute walk, sharing the path with tiny donkeys carrying laughing groups of children or impossibly big loads, brings you into town. The surprise is how many of the small houses were carefully finished, at no small expense, and there were paved sidewalk-streets along the shorefront. The town sports a tiny tienda, restaurant and friendly mayor. The Bernon logs about their week on Isla Fuerte in 2006 are a good resource. From Isla Fuerte we sailed 80 miles directly to Sapzurro, although other options are mentioned below.

Sapzurro and Capurgana: It was a thrill to sail into Sapzurro, the end of our Colombian odyssey. The jungle-covered hills in front of the much higher mountains of Darien and big swells crashing into the



cliffs on both sides of the bay added to our exhilaration. Aside from the swells, entry was straightforward up the middle to waypoint (N0839.85,W7721.61). Cruisers have anchored off the town dock but we anchored off the small wonderfully tropical beach to port at (N0839.32,W7721.79) in water that became the color of bean soup after each big rainstorm. Two neglected boats tied to trees on shore reduced the limited available space. One day during our stay, surge and currents had us rolling heavily so we too tied a line to shore to hold the bow into the swells. Our arrival euphoria was slightly dented by a young man representing the “Junta Accion

Comunal” who arrived in a launch requesting approximately \$15 US, ostensibly for a fund to install moorings in the bay, for garbage services (which concept I enthusiastically support) and for unlimited water (which turned out to be had for free at the town dock faucet). We ante-ed up and when the garbage service did not materialize after several days, I located the head of the group at his mother’s house and handed him our bag of plastic and paper garbage to be burned with the household garbage.

Which somehow is Sapzurro in a microcosm. As it turned out, making a stiff payment to anchor was just a warm-up for Kuna Yala, which has become somewhat expensive to travel through.



We stayed a week and in retrospect we should have stayed longer. Sapzurro is described in numerous guidebooks and in recent years it has become a travel destination for people from Medellin and Cali, as well as backpackers crossing the Darien Gap by coastal freighter or sailboat. Sprinkled among the very basic concrete-block houses of original residents are the equally small hostels and guest houses built by newcomers and sporting amusing artistic, architectural, and landscaping flourishes. Be sure to eat a meal at Doña Trini's; she cooks possibly the finest fried fish in the Caribbean. And watch for a white-haired,

brown-skinned man looking like a Colombian version of Gandhi walking along the stunningly beautiful jungle beach where your boat is anchored. He lives in a palapa on the beach, without any walls, and anyone who needs a place to sleep can use a hammock in the adjacent palapa. Isn't that sweet? Do not be fooled: born in Sapzurro, Jorge had a full career in Panama as an architect, has published seven novels, two of which were translated into English, and he and his brother will sell you the entire south wall of Sapzurro Bay, from the waterfall to the headland, for a mere \$40 million US. Just one of several interesting people we met in Sapzurro.



Capurgana (N0839,W7721) is about 1.5 mi south of Sapzurro as the crow flies. For the earthbound, it is a 2-hour walk up a gorgeous jungle trail over the ridge that separates the two towns or a 12-minute launch ride around the south headland into a harbor that looked way too shallow and rocky for sailboats. Capurgana has an airstrip, has more space to grow than does Sapzurro and is further along the tourism-development path but the ambience of both towns is very similar.

Other locations along Colombia's southern Caribbean coast: Currently, most cruisers traveling between Cholon and Sapzurro only stop at off-shore islands, as we did. The adjacent mainland consists mostly of long high-surf coastlines but there are a few anchorages that would be useful to know more about, if only for emergency use. We offer the following scraps of information gleaned from other sailors and from Colombian sources and whose accuracy we cannot vouch for. We look forward to a time when reliable information about the entire coastline is widely available.

(N0931,W7535) Tolu : A popular beach destination for folks from Medellin. Not clear there is any safe anchorage when the waves are high but in times of quiet waters there are many piers where you can bring your dinghy in.

(N0925,W7541) Coveñas: Another popular beach-holiday area and also an important oil transshipment port. There is said to be a protected anchorage there big enough for 3 or 4 boats.

(N0902,W7620) Isla Tortuguilla: A very small one-owner (absentee) island with friendly local caretaker. Not clear there is any good anchorage due to the coral reefs encircling the island (see Log of Jarandeb).

(N0852,W7626) Arboletes: A bit of a mystery. The town is a hub of a cattle-growing region but it is not clear whether it is also a port. The Bernons were advised against traveling there in 2006, possibly for safety reasons.

(N0832,W7655) Laguna del Aguila: Appears to offer protection from prevailing NE winds and waves. In 1994 Jarandeb called it “desolate and remote” with no dwellings on shore. It is a 27 mile sail from here to Sapzurro across the mouth of the Gulf of Uraba. The Bernons were advised to avoid the area near Cerro Aquila a few miles to the north.

(N0825,W7647) Necocli: Some lanchas carry tourists between Sapzurro /Capurgana and this small town. It is an open beach offering no protection if waves are high.

(N0803,W7645) Turbo: Located rather far down the Gulf of Uraba, this is the main connection point between Sapzurro/Capurgana and the rest of Colombia, with several lanchas making the 35 mile trip every day. There is enough water to anchor near the Colombian Coast Guard/Army station and you are advised not to anchor elsewhere. One long-time cruiser in Colombian waters says that the coastline from Turbo to Capurgana is the most beautiful in Colombia. However, be sure you understand what the current security situation is before you travel there.

Puerto Obaldia, Panama: We began this coastal journey in Venezuela and we end it in Panama. The anchorage at (N0839.84, W7725.33) is an open bay offering no protection when waves are from the NW. If the water is too rough, postpone the whole check-in procedure until you arrive a few weeks or months later in Porvenir, Portobelo, or Colon. In KunaYala no one is interested in whether you have cleared into Panama because the Kuna barely acknowledge the existence of Panama. Hot tip: if your Colombian zarpe lists your destination as Puerto Obaldia and weather prevented you entering there, your situation will be treated with sympathy in Portobelo. Check with other cruisers you meet in Kuna waters to see whether that also applies to Porvenir. To clear in at Obaldia, row in and tie dinghy to any tree



along the beach and show your passport to strong-looking but very courteous guys at the police stop; then proceed past an army post and over a footbridge to the immigration and customs offices. When we were there in May, we were told only “two or three” cruisers arrived per month. We were processed efficiently and the customs officer even stayed open an extra 10 minutes after closing time (!) while I retrieved my “radio license” (VHF callsign) from the boat. This extra information was necessary only because I had requested a cruising permit as part of clearing in. A Panama cruising permit may be optional in Puerto Obaldia but eventually you will have to get one in Porvenir, Colon or Bocas del Toro: the \$200 permit is

needed for all dealings with marine authorities. Be sure to check that the end date on your cruising permit is for a whole 365 days and not just for the remainder of the calendar year-- the mistake can be corrected in Colon but it is a nuisance. Puerto Obaldia is dominated by a military/police presence because inland the Darien border between Colombia and Panama is a major drug smuggling highway. The town is not cute in the way that Sapzurro is but seemed relaxed and practical. We stayed only one night, watching dubiously as the passengers on a decrepit Colombian trading boat nearby became noisily drunk; the flashlights of the police stationed in the beach outpost were reassuring. It was our

introduction to these coastal traders, many looking barely able to remain afloat, that bring commerce to all of Kuna Yala waters. We acquired real respect for them as we sailed up the coast of Panama. But that is another story.

Governmental regulations for cruising in Colombia: Every cruising guide for a country should explain the basic arrival/departure requirements. That this is surprisingly hard to do reliably is a comment about the nascent and under-developed state of marine tourism in Colombia. Take the information offered here with several grains of salt -- talking about Colombian regulations is like picking up jello with your hands -- and check the internet resources and with other cruisers for changes and updates.

Entry: Colombia entry procedures are more complicated than those of nearby countries and seem to have been adapted from commercial shipping without much understanding of the differences between commercial shipping and recreational cruising. For an extreme example of how ludicrous this can be, some of the first boats clearing into Santa Marta in Fall 2010 were asked to supply the vessel's pest management plan and clearance papers from the previous 10 ports visited!

There are at present three ports of entry in Colombia: Santa Marta (or Rodadero), Cartagena, and Capurgana. The first two require you to use an agent, the last one does not. Clearing in involves three governmental entities: DIAN, who are concerned with the boat; DAS (immigration), who are concerned with the people aboard (and who may be undergoing a change of acronym), and possibly the local port captain. According to the DIAN and DAS officials I spoke with, they charge NOTHING for a boat and its crew to spend up to 90 days in Colombia. If this is correct it means that the approximately \$75-\$100 entry fee you will be charged in Santa Marta and/or Cartagena goes entirely to the agent³ and to port captain charges, whatever they may be.

“Local cruising permit”: If you are based in Santa Marta or Cartagena and wish to visit nearby bays, islands or anchorages, you are required to purchase a local cruising permit. The Cartagena version has been in effect for some time, costs \$75 and is good for 60 days. The Santa Marta version was instituted in April 2011, costs \$90 and I do not know the time restrictions on it. If the permit is required for day-anchoring, our carefree afternoon spent in Taganga Bay, 4 mi from our marina slip, would have cost us \$90! Not exactly conducive to development of marine tourism. . .

Departure to another country: when departing a Colombia entry port bound for another country, the cost of your exit zarpe should be included in the agent's initial fee. Verify this when you arrive. If you ask for a zarpe that states “*y puntos intermedios*” (intermediate locations), you can stop anywhere along the coast of Colombia and stay reasonable amounts of time, provided you leave the country within 60 days and provided your location is a plausible “intermediate” point. The chances that anyone official will ask to see the zarpe before you reach your stated destination are very small, at least at the present time, but there is peace of mind in having it.

Departure from Santa Marta to Cartagena or vice-versa: you must get a travel zarpe specifically for this. At the present time, this means that in addition to paying an anchoring fee for the second port (not unreasonable), you will also have to pay an agent fee all over again. This perception of paying a

³ It is tempting to conclude that the agent should be dispensed with. However after 90 days, we did all the paperwork for our extensions ourselves and I can attest that the current government procedures are inefficient and time-consuming. I decided that our agent did earn his/her fee, at least for the first entry port. Moreover officials will not deal with you unless your Spanish is pretty good.

“double entry fee” is very self-defeating for the Colombian marine industry. Because of it, many cruisers avoid Colombia altogether or limit the ports they visit in Colombia. One can hope that with better computer record-keeping by DIAN and DAS, persons interested in growing Colombia’s marine industry will see the wisdom of removing or significantly reducing the “double entry” cost of visiting both Santa Marta and Cartagena by boat.

Customs charges: Although not a problem on entering the country these become a big headache if you want to have work done on your boat while in country – or stay long enough that you want mail or need to have boat work done. Every personal or boat-related item with declared value that enters by air is charged 27% duty, with an additional \$30 fee for the paperwork. All air shipments arrive through Bogota and Bogota does not recognize yacht-in-transit status for boat-related items. Shipments arriving by sea are charged less, which is how the Cartagena shipyards manage. Such high fees are extremely counter-productive: boats always need repairs, almost no marine parts are available in Colombia, and few transiting cruisers want to wait 6-8 weeks for parts shipped by sea. Our first (and only) mail shipment cost us so much it literally would have been cheaper to fly to Miami and pick the mail up ourselves. The situation is so bad that the advice offered by long-time cruisers in the southwest Caribbean is “have everything shipped in to Panama and then take it to Cartagena to have the work done.”

For the record, I must state that we did not have any trouble clearing in or out of Colombia. We contacted the Romovela Limitada agency (romovela Ltda@hotmail.com) in advance, paid Edgar Romero \$100 and were completely satisfied with the efficient and trouble-free service he gave us. Because we decided to visit Cartagena by land, leaving the boat in Santa Marta, we entered and exited Colombia from Santa Marta. Our exit zarpe for Panama stated “*y puntos intermedios*”, which allowed us to make the short stays along the Colombian coast described in these notes, all the way to Puerto Obaldia. Cartagena, of course, can’t be claimed an “intermediate point” but we got away with yellow-flagging it for just one night on our way south, just in order to experience sailing into historic Cartagena Bay.

In summary, it is fair to say that in the area of governmental regulations, some of Colombia’s bad rap is self-inflicted. There is a need for careful, informed restructuring of regulations and fees to bring them into line with neighboring (and competing) countries, for accessible publication of the regulations in a simple and clear format, and for consistent and transparent enforcement of the rules. Such reforms will greatly reduce cruiser anxiety about coming to Colombia. I hope that this guide will also reduce anxiety about visiting this wonderful, vibrant country.

Sources of information.

Sailing the coast of Colombia is not a trip that you lay out in detail months before you do it. In the absence of a comprehensive guide, it works better to let your plans evolve as you travel, using information gained from various sources, especially other cruisers who have sailed these waters. Here are the resources we used for our trip and others I learned about subsequently.

“Pizazz Cruising Guide for Coast of Colombia.” Contact Lourae and Randy Kenoffel, sy_pizazz@yahoo.com.

“Log of Jarandeb, 1994-95 circumnavigation of Caribbean.” Contact Dick and Jane Rogavin, jarandeb2@yahoo.com

In 2006 -7, cruisers based in Curacao put together extensive information for Cartagena, Curacao and San Blas. It was assembled and written up by Rija on s/v Queen of Hearts, qoh06@hetnet.nl.

There are many good sources of information and trip descriptions on the Internet.

“Cruisers_Network_Online” (www.yahooGroups.com) is a **great** resource with up-to-date firsthand information from a variety of cruiser perspectives.

The Bernon essays, especially Logs 16 and 17, are thoughtful and relevant:

www.BoatUS.com/cruising.

I have written more informal commentary about portions of our trip in

www.sailblogs.com/member/tashtego

Finally I thank the many many cruisers from Trinidad to Panama who freely shared information and advice based on their experiences in southwestern Caribbean waters. This article is an attempt to pass it on.