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# THE OTHER SAN BLAS



*When in San Blas, take a jungle cruise up the Estuario San Cristobal to see crocodiles (big crocodiles!).*

by Virginia Cross

Not to be confused with the islands of San Blas in the Caribbean off Panama, San Blas, Mexico, lies 85 miles south of Mazatlan and therefore is a convenient layover after crossing the Gulf of California from Baja or while on the cruising high-

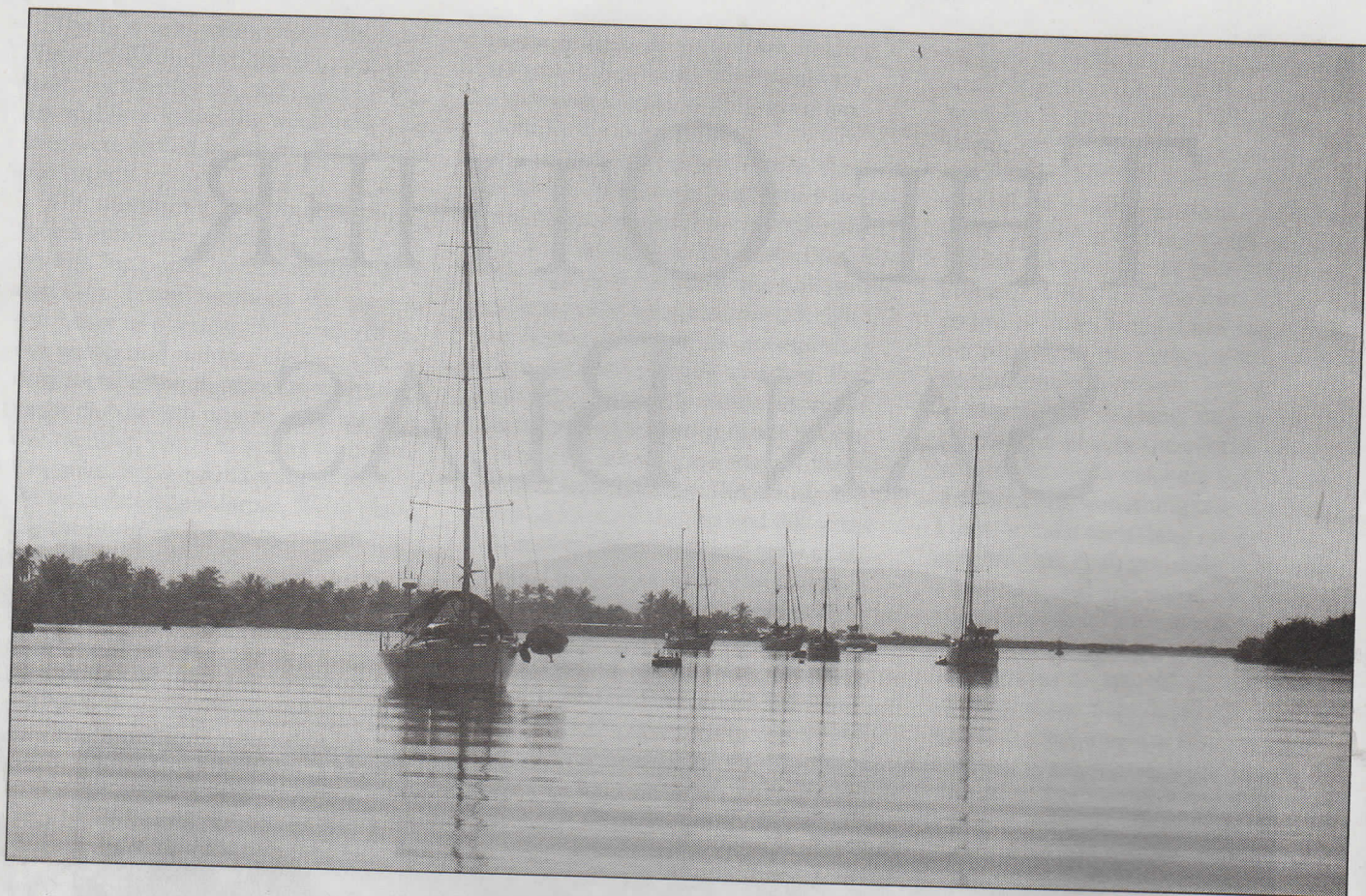
way south down the mainland from the Sea of Cortez.

In 1768 Father Junipero Serra set sail from the new port of San Blas at the start of his epic journey north to establish the California missions. The Spaniards were building their trading galleons along the broad estuaries, and

their customs house is today a museum and art gallery.

The town took a direct hit in October 2002 from the late season hurricane Kenna. The hard work and pride of the inhabitants of San Blas have since improved the town and services. We were waiting for a local bus into town from





our anchorage in Matanchen Bay, when a ride was offered by a delightful resident who sang unrestrainedly to us of the beauty and history of his town. He pointed out the colonial Spanish fort "La Contaduria" atop Serra San Basilio as well as the port captain's office, the market and grand plaza.

Matanchen Bay is often the first place cruisers anchor. It is wide and sweeping and lined with coconut and banana trees. A dizzying array of coconut palm-covered restaurants offer just-caught Sierra mackerel, grouper, sea bass, lobster and shrimp, which are smoked over aromatic mangrove wood and served with the local spicy, sweet sauce, fresh tortillas and lime. "El Chino," who owns Matanchen Restaurant, has a landing marked with buoys where cruisers may safely leave their dinghies on the beach while they venture into town for errands or sightseeing.

Have you read about the no-see-ums (biting midges) in San Blas? They should not dissuade you from visiting. Most cruisers going south do so in the winter months and except for the hour of dusk or extreme low tide, they are a



*When anchored in Matanchen Bay, you'll find nearby restaurants offering freshly caught mackerel, grouper, sea bass, lobster and shrimp. Life is good!*

minor annoyance. Beach-side restaurants use smoldering coconut husk as an effective deterrent.

After three days in Matanchen Bay we moved two miles north to enter the Estuario de Pozo. We anchored close to town in the company of seven other cruisers for the holiday festivities. Entering the estuary is a time for planning and

vigilance, as there is a shifting sand bar which is best avoided by entering during daylight and at the highest tide. Do not count on your chart plotter alone, as it will place your boat solidly downtown between the customs house and the medical clinic. No kidding! If you require some assistance with this entry Captain Norm Goldie is available as "Jama" on



Channel 22. He also hosts a morning Net and can point you in the right direction if you need repairs or supplies. He has been described as a polarizing figure in San Blas, but his 40 years in the town may be of use to some.

Certainly of use is the new marina, Escala Nautica San Blas, which opened for business in December 2008. It is run by the government agency Fonatur, and Arie Arazonez is the manager. They have 20 slips, a travel lift, dry storage, a swimming pool, Internet, shower and laundry facilities. Arie speaks some English and is a valuable resource for maintenance and repairs. This marina also offers a convenient diesel dock and water-filling station at competitive rates.

If you plan to see more of San Blas during your stay, there is a fascinating jungle cruise up the Estuario San Cristobal to La Tovar Springs. You will see extremely large crocodiles as well

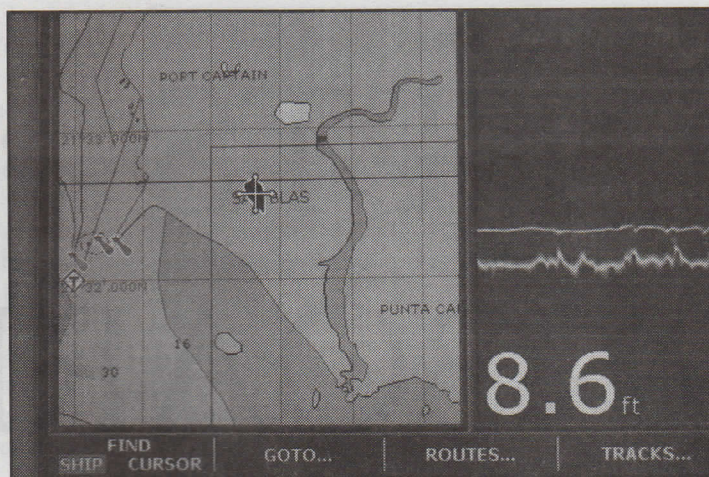
as iguanas, turtles and an extravaganza of tropical birds. Alternately, a visit up the 500-year-old El Camino Real to the coffee plantations is made sublime by guide and birder Mark Stackhouse (e-mail [mark@westwings.com](mailto:mark@westwings.com)) who for a half or full day will name and detail any bird that crosses your path while supplying some terrific local yarns as you hike through the lush tropical forest. The Huichol Indians make their homes high

in the mountains inland of San Blas, and although desperately poor, their beaded art and basketwork has become a sought-after investment. Colors are vibrant in their native clothing, and it is evident in their welcoming smiles and devotion to family that their lives are rich and fulfilling despite their isolation.

Unlike the Gringo hot spots of Mazatlan and Puerto Vallarta, San Blas is an authentic, vibrant fishing village that has not

changed very much in the last 20 years. It is full of hardworking Mexican families who have stayed for generations and passed on their livelihoods to their children and grandchildren.

Your time in San Blas will be well spent, whether you come for the fresh coconuts, the gooey banana bread, the history and romance of the ancient town or a serenade from a complete stranger.



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