

# Sailing the Northern Coast of Colombia

In these blogs, I haven't written much about the actual sailing needed to move from island to island. Partly this is because the first two years we spent sailing on the lee side of the Leeward and Windward Islands was never particularly noteworthy, although we certainly learned a great deal about cruising sailing doing it. The Lesser Antilles are each about 50 miles apart and as a day cruiser you get to choose the weather and wave size. The sailing is usually upwind or reaching, occasionally with the wind on the quarter but almost never downwind. Things became more challenging last spring when we left Trinidad and began cruising west, along the northern coast of South America. Downwind sailing. Not our strongest suit. When we arrived in Curacao last May I knew the trip from Curacao to Cartagena would be a major test of our hard-won skills. These waters, under the all-too-frequent "right" conditions, are characterized by very strong winds and high steep seas, especially when the winter trade winds blow. So this blog will give an account of our trip in November, which was a true sailing adventure and was not hard, thanks to a little skill and a lot of luck.

While in Curacao for hurricane season we prepared for the trip:

1. We replaced our worn-out 150% Doyle genoa (which we had almost never fully unfurled in 2½ years in the Caribbean) with a new 100% Doyle yankee (a high-cut genoa) -- for 1/2 the price I had been quoted in Massachusetts. Yay. (Thank you, Doyle Curacao.)
2. We rigged 2'-long eyed stainless steel cables shackled to the chainplates to hold preventer blocks and buying more preventer lines. We now have dual preventers that can be rigged simultaneously and mostly managed from the cockpit. Pushing our big boom out for a downwind run is now a MUCH less tense affair. (Thank you, Virgo's Child, for design and Curacao Rigging for execution).
3. We had our spinnaker pole shipped from Winthrop MA, where we had left it 3 years earlier. Don't ask. Then we learned how to rig and deploy it as a downwind pole -- i.e. on the leeward, not windward side. (Thank you Chris!).
4. We had many conversations with Curacao-based cruisers and read e-mails, logs and blogs from friends who had made the trip once or several times. I should explain that there is no Doyle's Guide to Colombia (yet) and many sailors choose to just make the 450-mi trip in one straight, frequently difficult shot. But thanks to the experiences of Pizzazz and other boats, and greatly improved security in Colombia -- "la violencia" is largely a thing of the past -- the option of stopping at several locations along the Colombian coast between Curacao and Cartagena was attractive.
5. After 3 years of kibitzing we finally became a sponsoring vessel of CaribWX so we could get good individualized weather advice on Chris Parker's morning SSB broadcast when internet weather was unavailable.

## ♠ Curacao to Cabo de Vela.

Our final preparations the last 10 days before the trip included checking every mechanical boat system, filling fuel and water tanks, replacing corroded zincs, provisioning, clearing out and finally at our last Tuesday night happy hour at Asiento buying everyone whose face we knew a beer -- and I also kissed Angelo, the handsome bartender, goodbye in the Dutch manner.

I had been watching the weather forecasting sites carefully for over 2 weeks, especially [www.PassageWeather.com](http://www.PassageWeather.com). Their charts showed the tradewinds FINALLY returning to the ABCs on Tuesday, 16 Nov, after having vanished for 2 months thanks to the conditions that spawned Tropical Storm Tomas, his precursors and successors. The winds were forecast to stay light just off the Colombian coast for several days, and the whole south-central Caribbean would see very strong winds

by the weekend. Of course, the utility of a forecast drops to near zero about 72 hours out, but it looked good and I dreaded lingering in Spanish Waters so long that we would have to deal with the fully re-established winter trade winds and the rough sailing for which the Colombian coast is famous.

We left Wednesday morning, 17 Nov 2010, a little short of sleep thanks to our farewells the previous evening. Inspired by Pizzazz ([www.sailblogs.com/member/pizzazz](http://www.sailblogs.com/member/pizzazz)) we intended to stop at Los Monjes for 1 night, Cabo de Vela for 1-2 nights, Santa Marta for 1-2 weeks, both in the new marina and at anchor, and make the final dash to Cartagena whenever the early December weather looked good. We did not intend to stop in Aruba, having sailed there in August with our friends Dave and Tiger on Bijou Vert in order to extend our immigration permits in Curacao. (Blog-in-progress: "Aruba and Curacao: Tweaking Paradise").

We reached Los Monjes (120 mi) about 9 am Nov 18 without incident. Tashtego had started out from Spanish Waters with the newly rigged downwind pole but a more northerly wind direction and an apparent wind angle less than  $120^\circ$  meant we would do better just broad reaching on the jib, so we replaced the pole on the mast. (We were not yet confident how much we could respond to sudden changes with that damn thing out there.) As we passed between Aruba and Cape Roman, VZ the confused seas that bedevil those waters took their toll and I became just as seasick as I had on my August sail in those waters. Which was bad news because once I start vomiting, I keep it up at intervals until I am either on shore or 48 hours have passed and my system has given up and decided to start sailing. Dehydration is the big concern and 12 hours of intermittent dry heaves does leave one feeling like dogshit. Fortunately, the sailing was easy, with most of the freighter traffic passing in daylight hours and an almost full moon after dark. One eerie thing was a completely dark, long, low freighter-sized ship of some kind that passed between us and the lights of Aruba with only one small stern light showing after it passed. What do you suppose its cargo was? . . . Three nights later we passed another one just north of Puerto Bolivar, CO. These unlighted ghost ships pose new hazard to an already daunting trip. The only other incident of the night was realizing at 4 am that I had set the chartplotter to the waypoint at Monjes del Norte and the anchorage was at Monjes del Sur. The full course correction would put us more than  $150^\circ$  downwind and the jib would flog. And no way was I in shape to rig the downwind pole. So we did a partial course correction until dawn and then resorted to finishing the last 6 mi on the motor. As we approached, we were asked to identify ourselves on Ch. 16. My first VHF transmission in Spanish -- I could have used English but practice is good.

Los Monjes del Sur consists of two solid rocks that look like loaves of bread rising over 80m straight out of the sea. At some point a harbor was created by gouging tons and tons of rock from one of the bread loaves and dumping them into the sea until a dam about 10m high and 80m long connected the two rocks. If the wind is from the northeast (it usually is), the harbor on the leeward side is protected; a 2" polyester line has been strung between the two rocks and visiting boats can moor on that line. We were dubious about this arrangement but after surging back and forth along the dock we had first tied to, we tried the polyester line and enjoyed a lovely quiet day moored to it. I nursed my stomach slowly back to health and decided that another day at Los Monjes was called for so that in the morning I could climb to the lighthouse topping the larger bread loaf.



The VZ Costa Guardia who took our details consisted of two young men, one with an ancient automatic weapon. They accepted fruit juice while they filled the forms designed for commercial, not recreational, mariners, gave us lovely smiles, and left us to enjoy the peace. In early afternoon a fishing boat arrived, tied to the dock with BIG spring lines and held the boat away from the rough dock using a line to the big polyester line. They had clearly been there before. I went back to the dock to retrieve the lines we had left and chatted with them, ending up with a red snapper for our refrigerator. The boat was a rusty fishing boat but the deck was clean and organized; there were 8 men aboard, shirtless, wearing long loose pants (one had Nike athletic warm-ups), relaxing in the shade on deck, waiting to shower or just having showered. It occurred to me that these men on the rusty boat were actually working-class, not “poor” fishermen. They said they went out usually for 10 day trips and their primary catch was red snapper.

Toward sunset, two more fishing boats and two French yachts arrived (below) and tucked themselves in.

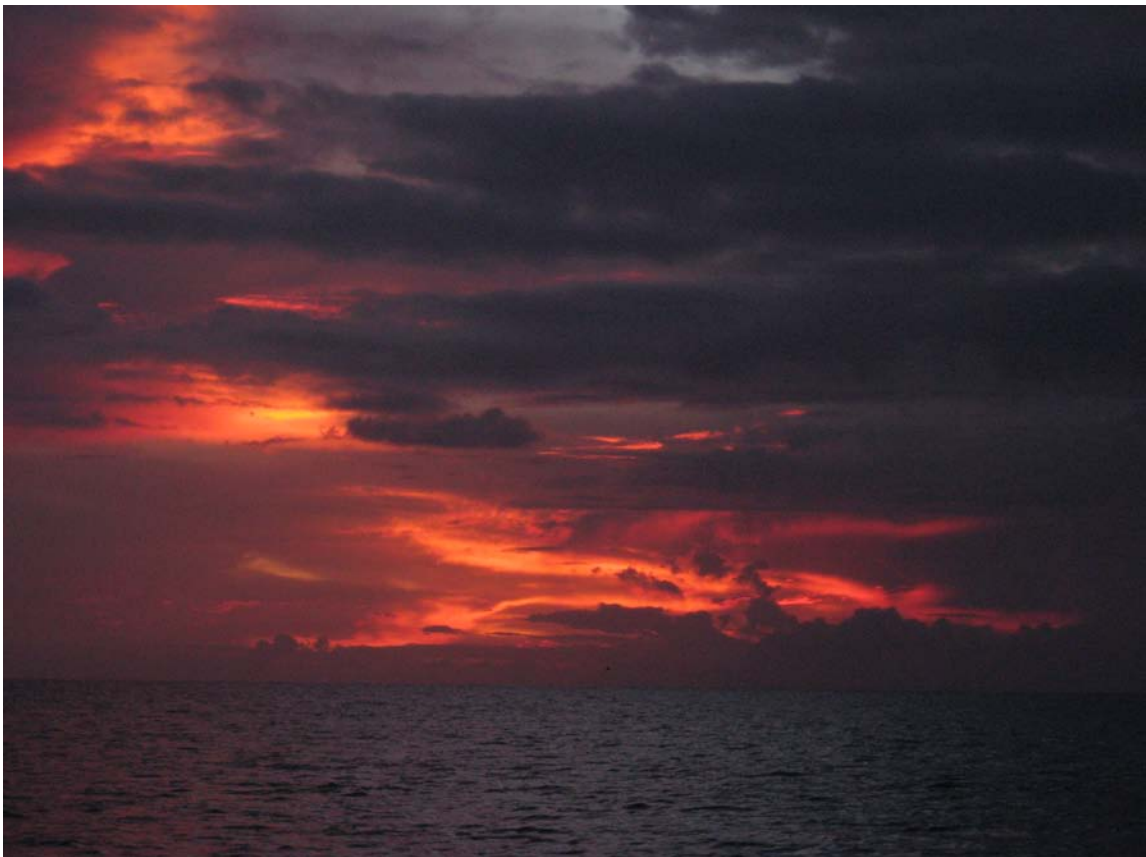


About 8 pm I came up on deck and realized that there was now had a light southerly wind blowing and since we had not been smart enough to set a stern anchor (65' of water), we were side-to the polyester line. In fact, as I watch in horror, we drifted over the big polyester line (our full keel is rounded in front) and lay stern-to the rock dam BEHIND the mooring line. I hollered at Fred and the fishermen on the boat nearest us were alerted. Our last purchase at Budget Marine in Curacao had been two 80' nylon 1" docking lines. I threw one to the fishing boat and they pulled our stern back to the big mooring line, then one fisherman (Jesus) jumped in and pushed the big line below the water far enough that we arrived on the "proper" side of it. The fishermen tied our stern line to their boat for the night. I rowed our dinghy over and gave Jesus \$15 US with big thanks and determined that they would leave at 5 am. I then rowed over to the two French boats who seemed to have turned in for the night and alerted them to the changed wind. (By morning we found one boat nicely Med-moored to the line with the bow out and the other with a stern anchor out; clearly we still have a lot to learn).

Awaking at 0130 on 19 Nov with the wind still SW or W, I realized we were going to have to leave when the fishermen left. I got up, did dishes, got the inside of the boat prepped for going to sea again, took an ibuprofen, and slept until 0540. The fishermen towed our stern away from the mooring line as they left, I pulled that line in, Fred retrieved our own mooring line, I put the engine in reverse and we backed out of that anchorage decisively. It actually was amazingly smoothly done. ! Then we spent 1½ hours drifting and motoring at the harbor mouth while we got the dinghy back on deck and tied down and finished remaining preparations for going back to sea. The wind was now N and gusty at 17 kts; the skies were ominous. So we raised the staysail and put the the 2<sup>nd</sup> reef in the mainsail. ***The biggest lesson I have learned about cruising sailing is that it is okay to be a wuss. Macho sailing does not appeal; comfort and safety are usually more important to us than speed.*** We set off, either headed to Cabo de Vela (80 nm) if I did not get seasick or straight to Santa Marta (200 nm) if I did. But now we were on a broad reach and I felt wonderful. Before the day was over we had 9-10' swells, but the seas were from just one direction, not confused, and Tashtego is sea-kindly. I got my confidence back about not getting seasick. We stayed 10-15 mi offshore, sailing along the boundary of



two weathers: partly sunny billowy clouds on our port side and to starboard, low grey drizzly clouds in front of darker clouds. Winds remained about 16 kts with occasional gusts above 25 and we were making 5.5-6 kts with our reduced and worry-free sails. At one point I pulled out a bit of jib -- the combination of small main, staysail, and jib is Tashtego's favorite -- , and we jumped up to 7.5 kts. However a gust of 28 kts soon after made us douse the jib. By mid-afternoon as we rounded the top of the Guajira Peninsula the wind again was too far astern to carry the jib without the pole and with 9' swells, we were not about to both get up on deck, Fred at the mast and me at the bowsprit, to set the pole. We doused the staysail and sailed downwind on the main, worry-free with our new preventers. Were we 10 years younger, we probably would have rigged the pole and run downwind with the jib, but hell, we are late-middle-aged. Toward evening the winds grew very light and muddled and the sunset was blood-red. "Red at night, sailor's delight" is not always true: the conditions were due an approaching trough as I found out from Chris Parker the next morning.



So we motorsailed on engine and main the last 6 hours to Cabo de Vela in gradually subsiding swells. A full moon barely outran big, dark heavy clouds to the NE of us all evening but we were clearly having a pussy-cat trip around this dreaded peninsula. We passed the spread-out lights of Puerto Bolivar about 9 pm. The coast from there to Cabo de Vela was dark, beautiful, and absolutely without any light whatsoever. I found myself wondering how many places in the Caribbean had 30 miles of coast with no people along it and mirabile dictu! no developers. I delighted in the solitude, the kindness of the sea, and our good boat.

Normally we would not try to anchor at night, but with the moonlight, the chartplotter, the depth sounder and the coordinates where Pizzazz had anchored, we rounded the cape, moved cautiously to the location and dropped the anchor at 0010 Saturday 20 Nov.. Three minutes later, the moon was swallowed by cloud and lightning flashed. It was windy but as advertised, the water was calm.

In the morning we heard from Chris Parker that a big trough across the central Caribbean was easing south and that we were going to be staying in Cabo de Vela until Monday or Tuesday because it was

going to be NASTY offshore all weekend. We moved the boat in to even quieter waters closer to the main beach and re-anchored in sand in 12' of water, just outside the maze of fishing nets marked with coke bottles. We tucked in for a couple of lazy days, snug as bugs and GLAD to be exactly where we were.

Our incident with the mooring line at Los Monjes proved to be very good luck: without it we would have remained there an extra day that would have turned into 3 days or more in a very iffy anchorage, followed by a rough sail around the Guajira Peninsula.

But in addition to luck, I think reaching Cabo de Vela before the bad weather reached us was also a little bit due to skill: the weather was very close to what was predicted except that the strong winds turned into an actual trough. I made a pretty good call about our departure date and we sailed sensibly here. We are getting more competent. It only took 3 years.

### ♠ Cabo de Vela and the Wayu

About mid-afternoon Saturday I came up to the cockpit and watched a solitary fisherman in a dugout canoe deploying a line of net or traps. It was blowing hard and drizzling.



I waved and when he had his net set, he paddled over to us, wet and shivering. He spoke Spanish so we invited him aboard, left his dripping shirt in the cockpit, gave him a towel and a beer and enjoyed a conversation in the salon. His name was Wancho (? Juan Cho?), one of the Wayu Indians who occupy this part of the Guajira Indigenous Reserve. His canoe was hollowed out of a single tree trunk; he called the tree *hoayacan* and Fred guessed it was mahogany. He does not read or write, is 46 years old, with an "18-year-old" wife (number 2) and 8 children, oldest age 7. (I know those numbers don't make sense. I didn't push it). His children will go to school to learn to read and write. The reason he was setting a line in such filthy weather was because there was no food in the house. Wancho was pleasant, direct and interesting. He left with a bottle of cooking oil, 10 potatoes, some 1/4" line and a spare poncho we had. We warned him there would be no more gifts (in the absence of shared cultural signals, directness seemed the best bet) and invited him to return when he liked.



Figuring out the snaps on the poncho.



Wancho did return the next day with two fishing partners. Only one spoke Spanish. Since it was still morning and still raining, we offered hot coffee rather than beer. Offer gratefully accepted. We inquired about the wooden buildings along the shore, which seemed almost completely unoccupied, and were surprised to learn that two of the more substantial clusters were built as guest houses for the Colombian adventure tourists that come there. At night we had seen about 10 lights along the near shore and heard one or two generators running. They also said that a (very small) de-sal plant was being built there to provide water for tourism.

On Monday, when the weather broke, we went ashore in the dinghy to explore the buildings, perhaps see where Wancho lived, and I might try to walk up to the light house on the tip of the cape. We first went to the only two-story building along the shore. It was a guest house and the first inkling that we were in for a surprise was the sign: it might have been weathered but the graphical image for Posada Jareena was definitely sophisticated. The restaurant was not open because the owner, a Wayu woman named Remedios Fajardo Gomez, was at work in a town about 40 mi away. However the caretaker asked if we would like to see it. We politely said yes. The interior was dynamite: vibrant colors and surreal images, presumably drawing on local tales, covered walls and tables, all done by Sra. Fajardo. We saw one of the guest quarters and were amazed that this palm-roofed cabana had a real bathroom with toilet and shower in it (didn't check if there was water). There were other interesting places on shore, but nothing to match Posada Jareena.





Later I did climb to the lighthouse – LOVED being in desert country where you could just bushwhack wherever you felt like. Here is Tashtego and the bay at Cabo de Vela as seen from the lighthouse.





## ♣ Cabo de Vela to Santa Marta

On Tuesday 23 Nov we set off on the 120 nm leg to the new Marina at Santa Marta. There is less to report about the sail. The rhum line course kept us 20-25 mi off the coast for much of the day. We used the downwind pole on the port side while the wind stayed NNE, then raised and sailed on the main alone after the wind went ENE. We had discovered before setting out in the morning that while dousing the jib on day 2 brief severe flogging had frayed the starboard jib sheet badly; it could not be trusted. So when the wind dropped below 8 knots we motorsailed and when it was 9 kts or more we sailed. Given the repertoire of the conditions on this coast, we had no complaints about motorsailing. In spite of the generally light winds the swell again built to 9 feet but the motion was easy.

On Wed during my 0300-0600 watch, just as the first light was putting the stars out, I was aware of looming dark to our port side and wondered if we were in for squally weather. But then I realized that the edge of the dark area was sharp, not cloudlike. I was looking at a high mountain range. Then I rubbed my eyes in disbelief: either the entire top of the range was white marble or it was covered in SNOW. I grabbed the camera and woke Fred up to see: snow-covered mountains at 11° N latitude!! As Fred said: "Fucking unbelievable." I hoped to get a good shot of sunlight hitting the snowfields but as the sun rose, the light bounced off all the moist air and the mountains faded into mist. Here are the best two shots I got. You are looking at the top peaks of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, elevation 17,900'. I have since been told that it is very difficult to get pictures of these mountains unless you are in an airplane so enjoy these. I increased contrast a bit on them to make details like the 4000' "foothills" in the lower left more apparent.





In early afternoon Wed Nov 24 we arrived in Santa Marta, were warmly welcomed at the Marina and invited to take our pick of the new docks. For the next 3 days it blew 20-35 knots in the marina. Close. . .

The last leg of this trip isn't going to happen right away. We like it here in Santa Marta.



But that's another blog. It's gestating.

**Postscript:** In spite of all my self-satisfaction about our easy trip, honesty requires me to note one serious error I made. When I notified our two sisters, who are our land contacts, about our departure from Curacao, I estimated our arrival day in Santa Marta much too tightly – no doubt a reflection of my own anxiety about the trip. Our extra 2 days in Cabo de Vela meant that we arrived in Santa Marta 2 days after expected. This led to conversations between Fred's sister, the US Coast Guard, the US Embassy in Bogota and the Colombian Navy. Fortunately the professionals didn't do more than put us on a watch list but we really did cause unnecessary worry on the home front. One funny note: the Coast Guard asked Fred's sister Jean if we had enough food on board. Knowing Fred she assured him that we did.