

A Month in Santa Marta

Constance Elson

So the question is: how should one sail from Curacao to Cartagena? In the past the standard solution was to launch from Curacao or Aruba and sail the 350 or 400 miles in one straight shot, hoping the weather stayed manageable. If it didn't, it could be a rough trip. Then a number of cruisers, mostly based in Curacao, began stopping at and exploring numerous places along the northern Colombian coast. A nice set of cruising notes about the entire coast of Colombia (also Curacao and Aruba) was written up by Lourae and Randy on s/y Pizzazz; they are happy to send copies on request (sy_pizazz@yahoo.com). And most recently the new IGY-affiliated Marina Santa Marta opened its docks in Summer 2010. Suddenly there are many options for cruising the Caribbean coast of Colombia with a number of intermediate stops available.

In November 2010 we left Curacao on s/v Tashtego, our Lord Nelson 41, and arrived in Santa Marta, Colombia, after making stops in Los Monjes and Cabo de Vela and lucking into a breath-taking passage along the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta 30 miles north of Santa Marta. The serendipitous timing (just before dawn) and location (about 15 miles offshore) meant that we could see the 18,000' peaks with their amazing snowfields (just 11 degrees north of the equator!) rising directly up from the sea. Everything disappeared into haze once the sun rose.



(Santa Marta 1: foothills at lower left are 4000' high)

We were among the first sailboats to arrive in the marina and found everyone eager to be of assistance, if not exactly sure what our needs might be. The marina developers knew their anchorage would be safe during hurricane season and they initially envisioned a primarily South American clientele who would berth sport fishing boats and yachts long term. What they did not realize was how much their location will simplify the trip from the ABCs to Cartagena or the San Blas for hundreds of sailors every year. In any event, it is now the case that when it comes to the long-distance cruisers' needs, the

marina and the community are on a fast learning curve. There has been a big investment of money and effort in making this marina safe and beautiful. Laborers are working 12 hours a day on the bathhouse (completion in mid January 2011) and the fuel and water infrastructure for the service dock (estimated completion: spring 2011). After that nautical and tourism shops and two restaurants are planned.

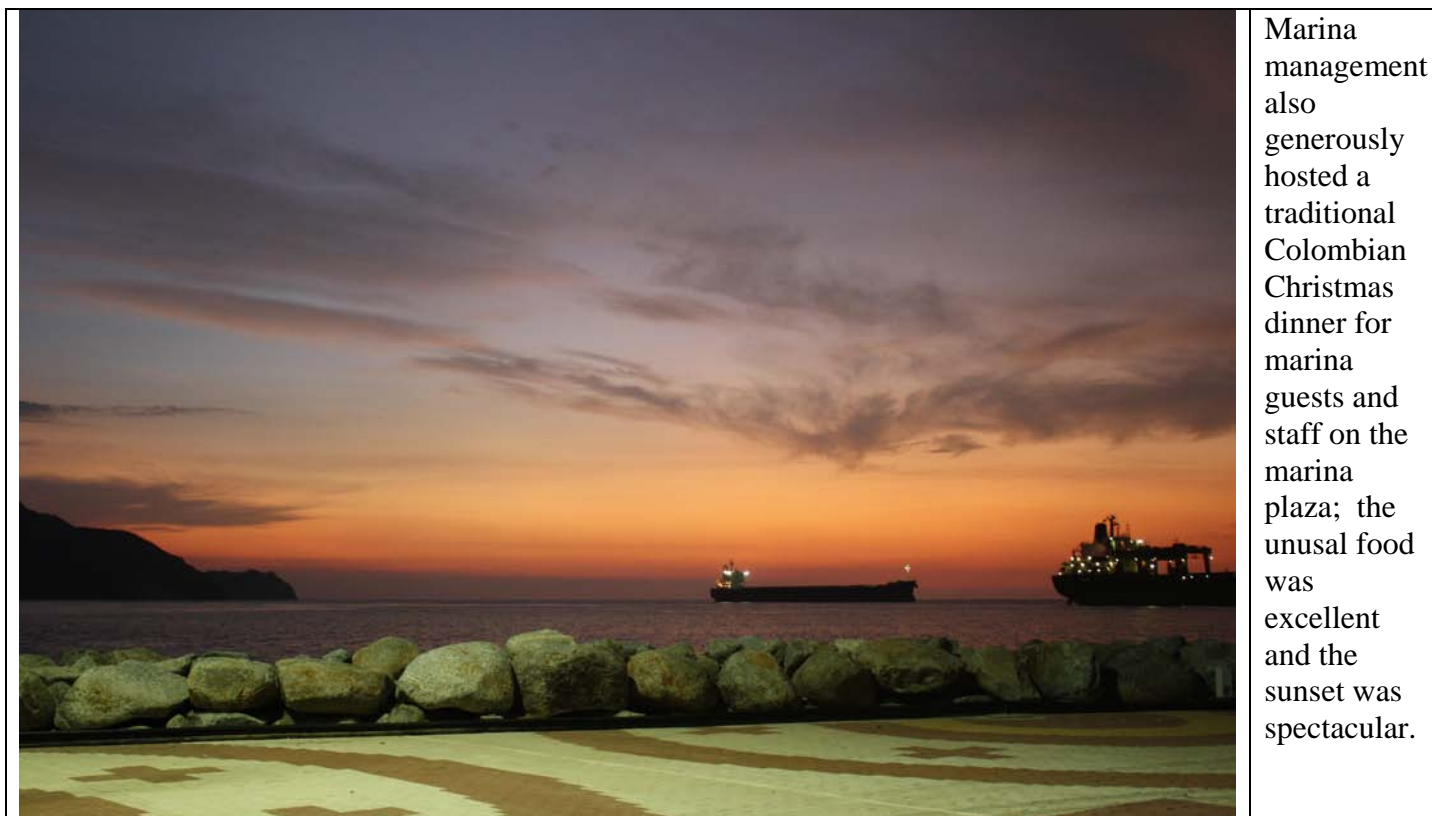


The marina has been very welcoming: all the cruisers on the docks were invited to the opening event, a sport fishing tournament. Hospitality featured complimentary Chivas on ice and an upscale elegant social area -- white canvas canopies, white leather ottomans and sofas, hundreds of plants, all installed overnight!



The entertainment for the fishing tournament included a charity fashion show. The logic of this escaped me until the swimsuit section. Then it all made perfect sense. . .

I preferred admiring the fashionistas in attendance.



Marina management also generously hosted a traditional Colombian Christmas dinner for marina guests and staff on the marina plaza; the unusual food was excellent and the sunset was spectacular.

Here is accurate information about the Marina Santa Marta (www.marinasantamarta.com.co/bienvenidos_ingles.html). There are over 250 slips on new high-quality docks with heavy-duty cleats, electricity (110 and 220v, 50 and 60 cycle) and water. The water is labeled potable and is certainly safe for dishwashing and cooking. Drinking water might be a judgment call. Dock A has only a 6' water depth, Dock B has 9' and depth increases to 12' at the outermost docks. Marina rates are shown on the marina website ¹. Discounts are being offered to guests during the construction period. Advance notice of intended arrival is appreciated. There is excellent security – the affluent in Latin America know how to protect their property—with one or more guards on duty at the entrance 24 hours per day and three Coast Guard boats based in the marina. More importantly the city of Santa Marta is tranquil and peaceful. The marina was constructed at the southern end of the seaside promenade; this means that all of the town attractions are an easy walk. Compared with Cartagena and Spanish Waters, the seawater in the marina is fairly clean except after rainstorms. Colombia endured record-breaking rains and flooding all through December. Santa Marta was not strongly affected but in mid-December after 40 hours of very high waves from the west the marina seawall showed some damage. Repairs and some re-design were underway within ten days. The weather has returned to normal, which is to say lovely: sunny, dry, very warm in the afternoon and cool all evening, night and morning.

¹ An easy and useful way to estimate dollars from Colombian pesos is to drop the last 3 digits and divide the remaining number in half.



Santa Marta 4

A big concern for potential Colombian cruisers are the entry procedures. The process is murky indeed and exact details seem to depend on who you speak with. Everyone agrees that a) you are required by Colombian law to use an official maritime agent who collects your passports, zarpe and boat papers and presents them to the authorities to do their thing; b) when you leave port, your agent fee includes the zarpe for your next destination in Colombia or Panama or wherever; c) if any official has to visit your boat, your agent will be present.

If you enter Colombia at Santa Marta, here is the entry process as laid out by our agent Sr. Edgar Romero (www.Romovela.Ltda@hotmail.com) . If you will be in Colombian waters fewer than 15 days the only payment required is \$30 US for the Temporary Importation permit (aka DIAN) and this is included in your Santa Marta agent fee of \$100. If you will be staying in Colombian waters longer than 15 days you need the 60-day Certificate of Permanence (aka DIMAR) which will cost you \$80 US. The Certificate of Permanence is paid only in one port, either Santa Marta or Cartagena. We are making sure that this is the case by using the same agency in both ports (for an additional \$70). If you will be using separate agencies in the two ports, you should check how the Certificate will be handled. All payments are cash only, US dollars or Colombian pesos; they do not need to be made on the day of arrival. Cruisers can remain in Colombian waters longer than 60 days by applying and paying for the appropriate extensions. Details omitted.

IMPORTANT: IF YOU INTEND TO STOP IN SANTA MARTA, BE SURE YOUR ARRIVAL ZARPE SAYS SANTA MARTA, NOT CARTAGENA. If you don't do this, it will cost you aggravation and money.

It is possible to anchor in the bay outside the marina, although there is less room than one might think because the ship channel for the very busy commercial port takes up most of the space. Be warned that the anchorage is untenable if there is a strong wind from the west. For boats at anchor the marina provides a dinghy dock on the innermost slip of Dock A. There is a small weekly fee for the dinghy dock which includes disposal of garbage. Services provided to marina guests for a fee are also available to outside boats, however the bathhouse showers are not.

To date two groups of boaters have obtained propane and the supplier is working out the kinks to expedite the process. The price is good and the tanks come back very full. Until the service dock is completed, fuel has to be arranged through the marina office; a tanker will drive to the service dock and supply gasoline or 8% biodiesel. Clean those fuel tanks and carry fuel filters, spare hoses and gaskets! Everywhere in Colombia all diesel is biodiesel. A chandlery and fully developed recreational marine industry lie in the future but it is quite amazing how many repairs, supplies and services cruisers have ferreted out in the local community already.

Other amenities like phone calls and phone cards, grocery stores, DHL, laundry and newspapers are all less than a 7 minute walk away. Taxis and (crowded) minibuses are present everywhere and are really cheap. The marina intends to offer wifi internet access at reasonable rates. For now, Tashtego is enjoying the luxury of an unlocked router somewhere nearby. Tim's Café, 50m south of the marina entrance, offers cruisers free wifi, a bookswap, morning yoga and breakfast, lunch or just a cup of coffee.

The town of Santa Marta is absolutely delightful. Founded in 1525 it is the oldest city in South America. The population is about 600,000 and the principle industries are the commercial port and local tourism. The seafront avenue features "modern" hotels of indifferent architecture but directly behind them is an extensive historic district full of classic Spanish colonial buildings, many beautifully restored, others undergoing restoration and even a few fixer-uppers for sale – bargain of a lifetime. For travel-loving Colombians, Santa Marta and environs have long been a tourist destination so there are many attractive pocket hotels and a wide variety of affordable restaurants and quiet bars. Be warned: international tourism is new here and very few people speak English. This linguistic inconvenience will doubtless improve considerably within a year or two.



Cathedral at night

Local attractions include venerable churches with beautiful altars and several interesting museums. The Museo de Oro and San Pedro Alejandrino, a well-maintained country estate where Simon Bolivar died in 1830, are particularly worth visiting and offer written explanations in Spanish and English. For beach time you can join the throngs at Rodadero Beach or enjoy quirkier and quieter Taganga, each a 60-cent bus ride away. Taganga has several dive shops. Or take your boat for the day to one of the Five Bays. Tour buses will take you to local areas to enjoy “la naturaleza” and Tayrona National Park offers serious backpacking, including a 6-day hike to Ciudad Perdida. Outside the park, solo backpacking in the Sierra Nevada is not a good idea. We rented a car for one day but compared to other Caribbean locations, it was more expensive and definitely more hair-raising. In the future we will leave the driving to the professionals.

The town of Santa Marta feels very safe and the people are friendly and helpful. After two days of getting my bearings, I began walking alone everywhere in the historic district and shopping areas, completely at ease even into the early evening. “Samarios” as local residents call themselves greet you politely and do not treat you as a walking dollar bill. There are two big police stations (state and local) one block away from the marina and yellow-vested policia every block or two. This heavy-firepower presence is a legacy from the violence of past decades but no doubt contributes to the calm and order that prevails.

Perhaps the greatest delight that Santa Marta offers is the evening paseo: after sunset everyone strolls along the handsome seaside promenade -- grandmothers, children, families and lovers. Low-key party sounds of people chatting, children laughing, a few street musicians playing are in the air. Vendors are mellow and only inquire once. You sit at one of the outdoor bar/cafes across the street sipping a beer or mojito, totally content to be exactly where you are at that moment.

Already I am thinking -- Santa Marta might be the perfect place to spend hurricane season . . .