

s/v *Hawk*

47' Van De Stadt Samoa, 7' draft

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Subject/Area: Pacific coast of Costa Rica from the Nicaraguan border to the Golfo de Nicoyo

We have spent the last two months in Costa Rica. The country is in a state of flux and undergoing major changes. Much of the information from earlier bulletins is no longer accurate, and so we wanted to send in an update. We are writing this from the Golfo de Nicoyo, about halfway along the coast, and we'll send another update when we get to Golfito before we cross into Panama if we have more to report.

The country has been enjoying great economic prosperity and growing rapidly based on ecotourism but even more on a real estate boom. American developers are building massive condo and housing developments for ex-pats along the country's still mostly pristine shores, and paying fortunes by Costa Rican standards for land and for putting up buildings. The result is that the Ticos (as the Costa Ricans call themselves) are doing well economically, so well that they now have an illegal immigration problem as poor Nicaraguans and Panamanians flood into the country to try to get jobs. Unfortunately, the rapid growth has outstripped the country's infrastructure and the huge influx of money has attracted thieves and thugs from as far away as Argentina. Roads, water systems, sewage systems and electrical systems can not begin to keep up with the demands from the increasing population, and the police force, all of 5,000 people a few months ago when the new president came into office, cannot begin to keep up with the rampant crime, crime that now includes regular violence against ex-pats.

Costa Rica has no military, which has probably saved it from the insurgencies that have plagued many of its neighbors. But strict military control in most countries in Latin and South America where we have spent time meant that, while we might have been uncomfortable with the political situation, as visitors we generally felt safe. The same cannot be said for Costa Rica. While most of the crime we have heard about has been non-violent thefts, usually of the pickpocket or rifling the backpack on the bus variety, there has been violence. Lucky, the owner of the Oasis del Pacifico resort in Golf de Nicoyo, a long-time friend of cruisers frequently mentioned in SSCA letters, was murdered in the resort two years ago. A friend of ours living on his powerboat in Golfito was beaten up and robbed aboard his boat a bit over a year ago. When we arrived, the papers were carrying a story about an American homeowner being beaten to death in his home a few months ago and the fact that the police did not even respond to the call until several days later.

The country is fighting back, however, and the new president has doubled the police force since he came into office and plans to double it again in the next year. Whether or not that will stem the tide of crime sweeping the country remains to be seen.

Should that keep you from visiting Costa Rica? We think not, for the country is beautiful, the wildlife abundant, the harbors almost empty, and most people very friendly and welcoming. But we also believe that much more prudence is required here than in most places we have visited.

Overview. The dry season runs from December to April, and the wet season from May to November, but these are relative terms. Total annual rainfall averages 60 inches on the border with Nicaragua and increases to 220 inches near the border with Panama. Guanacaste, the state that borders Nicaragua, is characterized by what is called "dry tropical forest" – when we arrived there in May, it looked like early spring in New England with bare trees just starting to bud. From the Golfo de Nicoyo in the center of the country to Panama, the tropical rain forests we had

been expecting predominate; Costa Rica's legendary "cloud forests" can only be found in the highlands along the spine of mountains running through the middle of the country.

Light NE trades predominate during the dry season, these alternate with SE trades during the wet season as the ITCZ oscillates north and south. When the trade winds are blowing most strongly in the Caribbean, they manage to cross the isthmus from Guatemala to the northern half of Costa Rica where they are not blocked by the mountain ranges. The result are strong NE winds known as *papagayos* which can come anytime from December to March, but occur most frequently in January and February when they can blow at gale force for up to 3 or 4 days. In late April when we arrived in Costa Rica, we had a three-day papagayo with winds up to 30 knots, so they can and do occur even later in the year.

Costa Rica is centered around 10°N, close enough to the equator that it does not get hurricanes though it can get tropical depressions that may become hurricanes as they move north. As a result, it can be cruised year round. Most people visit Costa Rica as they head down the west coast to Panama, either with the intention of going through the Canal to the Caribbean or of sailing west into the Pacific. In either case, their longer-range plans dictate that they be through the country by sometime between March and May, which means that most people cruise Costa Rica during the dry season when the papagayos blow.

Most cruisers avoid Costa Rica during the rainy season, not just because of the rain but also because of the fierce lightning storms along the coast. We arrived in Costa Rica at the end of the dry season and are now well into the rainy season, but we're only halfway down the coast and have not yet reached the wettest part of the country. So far, clouds build into thunderstorms over the land almost every afternoon, bringing rain and lightning at dusk. The lightning has stayed over the land, and we have rarely even hear thunder. On most days it clears overnight and most mornings we wake to bright blue skies and have until 2:00 or 3:00 in the afternoon without any rain. However, on the two occasions when the ITCZ has been overhead, rain has come down in a deluge that lasted for several days, and this may well be a foretaste of the weather further down the coast.

Bahia Santa Elena. The only clearance port in the north of the country is Playa del Coco, also known as El Coco or just Coco, which lies about fifty miles from the border with Nicaragua. North of that is one of the best anchorages in all of Costa Rica: Bahia Santa Elena which cuts into Peninsula Santa Elena, a national park with all sorts of birdlife including an array of parrots. The authorities really do not care if you stop before clearing in – one cruiser was talking about spending a week in this bay while clearing in and they didn't seem to mind at all. So spend some time in this lovely bay and enjoy the evening and morning parrot flights and get some fresh fish from the local fishermen before heading further south. The best anchorage in papagayo winds would be at about 10°55.44'N 085°47.67'W, but look around to see where you can get the best shelter as the wind tends to funnel over the hills in different ways when it blows from different directions. When you leave, expect some wind as you come around the peninsula of Santa Elena, especially if a papagayo is blowing. Quite a few people had 30 knots or more for a stretch.

El Coco. Though the authorities don't mind you visiting the harbors in the north before clearing in, once you get to the area of Bahia Culebra and El Coco they want you to get the paperwork out of the way. Bahia Culebra has several excellent anchorages just a few miles before Coco, while the harbor at Coco is an open roadstead subject to swell. Still you must take the boat to Coco to clear in – cruisers that left their boats in Bahia Culebra and took a bus or taxi to Coco were threatened with fines of \$500 or more.

To clear in, go first to the Port Captain's office, which is still located where it is shown in *Charlie's Charts*, just behind the police station which lies opposite the bus stop on the street paralleling the beach. You will need to have at least three copies of your boat's documentation, your passports, a crew list in Spanish (you can base this on the Mexican crew lists), and your clearance papers from your last port. Since the power is unreliable in Coco, with outages almost daily, and since the bank in Coco is a nightmare, having these copies in hand when you arrive will save you a good deal of time and frustration. The Port Captain will have you fill out a form for Customs which will then be faxed to them in Liberia (the main town about 30 miles north of Coco) so they can prepare the temporary import document for your boat. You will then be sent to Immigration, which is no longer where is shown in *Charlie's*, but can now be found about 100 yards further along the road to Liberia, in a wooden house with a front porch as you're going out of town. It's just before a medical center and pharmacy, the first building on the right hand side you will come to that is set well back from the road with a lawn in front of it. There, they will contact San Jose to make sure you're not wanted internationally, and then you'll be issued with a tourist visa that's good for three months.

When you go back to the Port Captain's office, they'll tell you when Customs will arrive, and you'll need to meet the official at that time at the Port Captain's office. Customs will give you a printed import document that allows you to keep the boat in the country for three months. The whole process took us most of a day. There are no fees, and no one who cleared in when we were in the country had their boat inspected. Before leaving Coco, you must get a national zarpe (cruising permit), even if you only intend to go around the corner to the anchorages in Bahia Culebra. The zarpe will be issued to the next port with a Port Captain where you intend to call – Puntarenas, Quepos or Golfito. There you will have to get another internal zarpe from the Port Captain or an international zarpe to leave the country. The process only took about 15 minutes and, for leaving Coco, did not require any additional documentation or copies.

While almost everyone in Coco takes American dollars, further south they prefer the local currency, colones, especially for inexpensive items like bus fares and ferry tickets. The bank is on the right side of the road to Liberia as you are leaving town in a small cluster of commercial buildings a couple hundred yards beyond the Immigration office. There is no ATM at the bank in Coco. There will be a long line when it opens at 9:00, and you will need to take a number. They seem to make it through about 10 numbers an hour in the morning, so you can wait for hours. We took a number and came back two hours later, and our number came up fifteen minutes after that. Things go faster in the afternoon, but you will still need to wait for an hour or more. Alternatively, there is an ATM at the "Papagayo Do-It Center" about a fifteen minute (~\$8 each way) taxi ride from Coco. You can get dollars or colones from the ATM and the hardware store there is an American-type "superstore" where you can find anything you need, so you may want to go there anyway. The "Do-It Center" also has a GNC, a pharmacy, and a gourmet supermarket.

There is a gourmet supermarket with American goodies at more than American prices next to the Coco Palms Hotel if you've run out of Newmann's Own or Betty Crocker. Behind the bank, you'll find the supermarket where the locals shop which also has quite a range of American-made goods and just about everything else you might need. The vegetables have all been refrigerated at very cold temperatures and don't last more than a few days unrefrigerated. If you have a chance, try to buy from the truck that comes into town on Monday afternoons – the produce is much fresher.

There are several direct flights to the US from the airport in Liberia each day, so it is the airport of choice if you're having friends join you or you need to change crew. Liberia has much larger

supermarkets as well as quite a few American outlet stores. Buses run frequently between Liberia and Coco and cost next to nothing. Taxis are outrageously expensive but may be necessary if you plan to do a major provisioning or if you're picking up someone from the airport. A roundtrip taxi ride from Coco to the airport (about 5 miles before Liberia) or to Liberia is supposed to cost US\$80-90. The red taxis have set rates, but you can negotiate with the gypsy cabs and you should be able to bargain them down to \$50 or so. [Note: We were told by the gypsy taxi drivers in Coco NEVER to pick up a gypsy taxi in the capital, San Jose, as people have been kidnapped, robbed and murdered by the drivers.]

There is a woman who does laundry in an octagonal building tucked into the handicraft market. You'll see the sign on the right on your way to Immigration. We had not been going to use it because of complaints we had heard about lost laundry and poor service, but the business seemed to be under new ownership with all new machines and a very personable woman in charge. While expensive (about \$1 per pound), our laundry was washed, dried and folded within a few hours as promised, and it was all very clean with nothing missing. If the power goes out, you may have to wait until the next day to get your laundry back again.

There are quite a few Internet cafés, some of which offer reasonably-priced calls to the US (15 cents per minute). The cheapest we found for both internet and international calls was "Pillis." As you walk to Immigration, you will see the large sign on the sidewalk across the street from you at the three-way intersection where the road to Liberia begins (a long block up from the Port Captain's office). It was on the second story above some stores and was even air-conditioned! When we were there at the end of the dry season, the power was being cut for several hours each day, so be prepared to be interrupted.

Leave absolutely NOTHING unlocked in Coco. Lock your boat and dog all hatches when you leave (kids swam out and got through a hatch on one boat and stole a camera), and clear the decks of anything that might be vaguely useful. Lock your dinghy and outboard and oars. Our oars were stolen the first day we went in – at the time we had no way to lock them. Not that big a deal, but the surf on the beach made it tough to get back to the boat without them. No one who lives here was the least surprised that our oars had gotten stolen, and they told us that we were lucky it hadn't been the dinghy. We took that as fair warning and have kept the dinghy empty and locked to the boat or to something solid ashore throughout our time in Costa Rica. Coco, Tamarindo, Puntarenas and Golfito have the worst reputations when it comes to crime, but people have had things stolen off their boats even in remote anchorages, so it pays to keep everything secured.

The harbor at Coco is subject to swell, which usually builds with the breeze through the day. You can get on the beach easily enough in the morning, but returning to your boat in the afternoon you will be trying to make it out through surf that can be three or four feet high. Make sure everything in the dinghy is waterproofed, and wear clothes that you don't mind getting soaked on the return run. As soon as you have finished clearing in and taking care of the normal errands, you'll want to leave Coco and head around the corner to the better anchorages in Bahia Culebra (since culebra means snake in Spanish, the developers are trying to rename it Papagayo).

Bahia Culebra (Papagayo). There are several good anchorages in this large bay. The best depends on the season and the wind conditions. Playa Iguanita (10°37.49'N 085°37.88'W) at the head of the bay would provide the best shelter in papagayo winds. Playa Panama (10°35.46'N 085°39.56'W), also known as Playa Congreho, is the calmest in an onshore breeze when a swell is working into the bay. Mata de Caña, opposite Playa Panama, is also very good when the rest of the bay is swelly.

Restaurant Congreho mentioned in *Charlie's Charts* and in earlier SSCA letters in **Playa Panama** has been sold and is now called the Beach Club. The new manager did not mind us being around and arranged for us to get diesel (expensive – \$4 per gallon including the taxi fare). He organized a day tour for us up to the canopy. He's not a yachtie, but he's willing to help if he can. There is no internet or laundry service at the Beach Club any more. They were happy to let us fill jerry cans with water, but with the afternoon rain we had more water than we needed. This might be more useful for yachts passing through during the dry season.

Playa Panama still tends to be the anchorage of choice because it has the least swell most of the time, and because the tourist police housed in a building just off the beach seem to do a good job of discouraging theft. But transportation from Playa Panama to Coco is problematic. There is a bus from Playa Panama to Liberia but no direct bus to Coco. You can get a bus to Playa Hermosa where there is a small store. It's all but impossible to get a taxi from Playa Panama unless you have the restaurant call you one, but they don't open until noon. We collected phone numbers from taxi drivers and called them from the payphone by the tourist police station, but it often took an hour to find someone and have them come and get us, and it cost about \$10 each way.

Bahia Portero. Between Bahia Culebra and the Golfo de Nicoyo, all the anchorages are open roadsteads. Many of these are fine during the winter months, especially when the papagayos are blowing, but most are too swelly to be of any use once the rainy season gets underway. Bahia Portero used to be a favored stop because of the marina located there, Marina Flamingo. The marina has been abandoned for a number of years, but several syndicates are bidding for the right to reopen it. The consultant hired to decide on the winning bid just resigned due to a conflict of interest, so the project doesn't seem likely to get moving any time soon. We learned that there are 17 marina projects underway in Costa Rica, but many are mired in this sort of bureaucratic hassle. The only existing marina, Los Sueños, located in Bahia Herradura at the eastern side of the entrance to Golfo de Nicoyo, is full of superyachts and huge sportfishing boats. They were asking \$3.25 per foot per night for a 50-foot slip (\$33.25 per foot per month), and charging \$30 per day to use their dinghy dock.

Golfo de Nicoyo. This large estuary cuts inland for about thirty miles and is home to a half dozen good anchorages as well as the large town of Puntarenas. About eight rivers empty into it, and these wash a great deal of logs, garbage, mud and other debris into the gulf during the rainy season. That means you need to keep a good eye out when navigating, but it also means that the waters of the gulf are not very appetizing for swimming as visibility can be measured in inches.

Not too surprising then that the resorts in the Golfo de Nicoyo seem to be losing out to competition with the new, elegant, five-star resorts that have been built along the coast. Resort Bahia Luminosa in **Bahia Luminosa** has been very yacht friendly, but the place seems on the verge of collapse. George Perrochet still owns it, but his two yachts are now aground and rotting away on the beach in front of it. Beware – his third yacht (an Islander 42) lies on the bottom below the mooring that's closest to the beach, but he did offer us the other mooring if we wanted to use it. Ex-cruiser Finn still runs the resort, and he still has his monkey, Pancho, but George's family was the only visitors in the ten days we were anchored off. Still, you can get a meal (moderately expensive), swim in the pool (\$5 if they feel like charging you), and have laundry done (very inexpensive), though the laundry has to be dried on a line so make sure to pick a sunny day. There is a book exchange and a large selection of (mostly dated) sailing magazines, and Finn and George are both happy to take you to the local pulperia if they are going anyway. They normally have internet, but it had been down for several weeks when we were there. Don't

be put off when you go ashore by the overgrown jungle and dusty cars. Keep following the trails and you will come to the resort buildings which are still being maintained pretty well.

As I mentioned above, the owner of the Oasis del Pacific resort at **Playa Naranjo**, Lucky, was murdered, and his wife, Agatha, has just sold the resort. The new owners seem to be investing a lot of money into it, trying to get the buildings, pools and grounds back into shape, but they are not yet up and running. They did not mind us landing on their beach and leaving the dinghy chained to their dock while we took the ferry into Puntarenas. The ferry runs several times per day and costs about \$1.50 per person each way.

Cruisers used to leave their boats at Playa Naranjo or Bahia Luminosa while making trips inland, but with both resorts out of commission, the only option is **Puntarenas**. If there are no cruisers to watch the boat, you may want to hire someone. If you don't plan to make an inland trip, we'd recommend just taking the ferry to Puntarenas because of the shallow channel that can be difficult to navigate and because of the theft along the waterfront. The town itself is not at all touristy with a fairly nice town center a mile from the ferry terminal set around a Catholic church where you can find Internet cafés, banks, grocery stores and even a marine store.

The cleanest water in the Golfo de Nicoyo can be found at **Isla Tortuga**. The anchorage is a bit rolly and very crowded on the weekends with tour boats, but it can be pleasant during the week. The water's clean enough to swim and the visibility good enough that you can see a few feet, enough to clean the bottom or the propeller.

Final notes. If you need to have **spares** sent in to Costa Rica, DHL is the only carrier to consider. There is a DHL office in Liberia, and we had good luck getting a part shipped in. The package was marked "Yacht in Transit" and we were not charged any duties or taxes, just a \$22 fee for Customs in San Jose to inspect the contents (worth about \$900). A DHL office was opening in Coco just as we left which will make things much easier. The only other DHL office that is easily accessible by boat is in Quepos. There are currently no offices in Puntarenas and Golfito, though it is clear that DHL is rapidly expanding their network.

The only place where you can tie up to a fuel dock and take on **fuel** between the Nicaraguan border and the Golfo de Nicoyo is in Los Sueños marina in Bahia Herradura at the eastern side of the entrance to Golfo de Nicoyo. Otherwise, you have to hire a van or taxi to take your jerry cans to a gas station, as we did at Playa Panama. The management at Los Sueños prefers that you telephone a day ahead so they can be sure to have enough fuel for your needs (506-643-8941). When approaching the marina, you can contact them on Channel 16.