

PACIFIC COAST OF COLOMBIA

A Guide to the Lesser Known Coast.



Written by Eric Baicy & Sherrell Watson

s/v **SARANA**

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Planning to Cruise Central America?

Take a look at our e-books that we have been working on since 2007 and updating every year!

The most comprehensive guides ever written about cruising the Pacific coast of Central America from Mexico to the Panama Canal. In a two part set, these books provide over 325 GPS way points, over 112 charts and city maps, detailed weather descriptions, forecasting information and surfing locations. These books highlight dozens of anchorages not in other books and tons of local information that sailors care about. Also included are detailed procedures for clearing into and out of the Central American countries as well as Ecuador, the Galapagos and Mexico.

[Http://www.sailsarana.com/guide](http://www.sailsarana.com/guide)

Introduction

This book is free. Because this book is free, unlike our guidebooks for Central America, the satellite images are from Google Earth and are of rough quality with the latitude and longitude displayed haphazardly as Google Earth does. There is also only brief information confined mostly to navigation.

We spent many months (6 - 8), under constant daily work, creating each of our Central American guidebooks and are continuously maintaining them to provide up-to-date information and a high level of quality. This type of work is difficult and time consuming, and is therefore not offered for free.

We know that only the few adventurous types will cruise Pacific Colombia, so it doesn't make sense to put the time and effort into creating a detailed complex guide. However, we feel Colombia deserves a chance and to that end we are publishing this information for the widest possible circulation by making it free.

As for our Central America guides, please pay for them. We worked very hard on these, yet still offer them for a very low price. If someone offers you a copy for free, please visit our site and pay for it. It costs less than a typical dinner and it allows us to make other guides like this possible.

<http://www.sailsarana.com/guide>

The Idea Became Reality -- Cruising Colombia

Our trip along the Pacific Coast of Colombia was a culmination of a 3 year long idea. I had been researching current events on Colombia and President Uribe's progress in controlling the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia or, in English, Colombia's Armed Revolutionary Force), and drug trafficking. Uribe has done a good job of cracking down on the FARC and some of Colombia's serious security problems. His progress has made operations for narco-traffickers and the FARC much more difficult, and according to a BBC article, their dwindling numbers are starting to move out of Colombia and into Ecuador, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela (to the detriment of those countries). Colombians were so happy with Uribe in 2010 they tried to extend the term limit for him, but the courts ruled against this as unconstitutional and Uribe stepped aside without an argument. The current president Juan Manuel Santos has continued Uribe's policies and the country continues to remain stable.

I spent a lot of time thinking about the idea and searching for other people who had visited the coast. I also spent a lot of time trying to find some concrete information about the security of the Pacific Coast. After talking to dozens of people who had traveled by backpack, we started to get a sense that Colombia really had started to change for the better. Additional investigations led us to a few sailors who had stopped along the coast in a few spots, encouraging us further. After contacting around 15-20 officials in various offices in Colombia

and I eventually hit upon someone who knew Colombia's Pacific Naval Surface Fleet Commander for the Pacific. This was the breakthrough that we needed. We finally had some solid military information about the current state of the Pacific coast of Colombia.

The Naval Commander was surprisingly helpful and encouraging. I have consolidated his presentation into a PDF, along with other information and translations, which can be found at the bottom of our guidebook web page at: http://www.sailsarana.com/free_guides.php#COL.

With this information at hand, other cruisers became more interested in my idea of cruising Colombia and eventually the trip became a reality with four boats cruising the coast in 2008, probably an all-time record. Each year we hear back from a handful of boats that have either visited Mal Pelo or sailed the Pacific Coast of Colombia and have enjoyed the rare experience.

Colombia

There is a lot of varied information about Colombia. Much of it focuses on the darker side, however dig deeper and you'll find a number of people who have been seduced by the rich jungles and friendly people.



Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela were all born out of Grand Colombia in 1830. They have been fighting ever since. Much of the fighting has been on the decline since 2002 and other paramilitary groups like United Self Defense Force (AUC) have collapsed. Colombia's increased efforts to stop these organizations have forced some of the violence to spill out of their borders and into neighboring countries.

At slightly twice the size of Texas with much of the country inaccessible, eradicating these groups is a difficult task.

Colombia does have natural resources like petroleum, natural gas, coal, iron ore, nickel and gold. But they have very little arable land at only 2%. So for a population of 45 million people there isn't much space for traditional open farming. On the plus side, this means that much of Colombia is beautiful, lush,

and green - just watch out for those mosquitoes which may carry malaria, dengue fever, and yellow fever. Only yellow fever has an inoculation and malaria is often best treated quickly when detected rather than taking continuous prophylactics.

Colombia's economy has been growing and they are actively pursuing a Free Trade Agreement with the U.S. About 45% of the country is in poverty and unemployment is near 11.2%. With the U.S. being Colombia's biggest export partner they are hopeful that improved trade will help their country overall. In addition, since President Uribe took power in 2002-2010 and the security of the country has steadily improved, the Colombian people are hopeful the tourism industry will continue to grow.

Foreigners in Colombia

This part of the world is currently undergoing difficult growing pains. Most Colombians we met had a positive view of Americans, and were thankful for the American government's heavy involvement in reducing the drug trafficking problems. However, they were also quick to point out that if it wasn't for the American, Canadian, and European demand for drugs in the first place, drug trafficking in their country wouldn't be an issue (very little of the drugs are consumed within Colombia, or South America in general). Colombia produces about 75% of the world's cocaine supply. As you can imagine it is a complicated issue which sometimes involves life and death consequences for innocent Colombians.

The political situation aside, everyone we met was very friendly. Super friendly might be an exaggeration, but compared to their neighboring countries, Colombians were ecstatic to meet us and find out our story. I met one guy who had never seen a sailboat before and he was beside himself just looking at all the lines and wires. There are probably still people telling their friends and neighbors stories of the sailboats, with cats on board no less, who once came to visit. One tour group even came on board (with our permission) so they could take pictures of each other standing on the bow (yes, a la *Titanic*). They couldn't have been happier.

Security Issues

Security in Colombia has improved steadily over the 2006-2008 time-frame; however, greed, corruption, drugs, and guerrillas all have their own ways of stirring up trouble. It is best to keep an eye on the latest political climate and the narco-trafficking/FARC information prior to entering Colombia.

As recent as 2011 Colombia has maintained their stabilization of their country and the tourism industry continues to grow as people discover the beauty and warm hearts in Colombia. Crime is still a problem, but it is mostly confined to the large cities.

FARC



In the past, the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) was quite active in kidnapping people they felt would garner the world's attention. Contrary to popular belief, they

were not holding hostages for ransom. Labeled a terrorist organization by Colombia, USA, Canada, and the EU, they were trying to be recognized as a "Belligerent Force" under the Geneva Conventions. Apparently, one of the main stipulations for achieving this status (among many others), is to claim the possession of a certain number of Prisoners of War. Once considered a Belligerent Force, they would be allowed a host of internationally recognized rights as an autonomous political group with their ultimate goal being independence from Colombia.

The FARC fights the Colombian and American military with money and arms gained from drug trafficking. While not all drug running is FARC related, a large portion is. Colombia has been fighting their drug trafficking and kidnapping activities with a very heavy hand since 2002 and has been quite successful in shutting down major operations and freeing hostages.

In general, all of the military folks we talked with on our trip believe the FARC has been mostly pushed off the coastline and deeper into the mountains. The local people also seem to agree with the assessment that the FARC should not be an issue for boats transiting the coast, however this was not a guarantee.

NARCO-TRAFFICKERS

Most cruisers navigating the waters near Colombia are concerned about encountering drug runners. What a lot of people don't realize is that, according to the CIA website, almost 50% of the drugs originating in Colombia, cross the Ecuador border by land, and are then run off the coast of Ecuador as well. We have yet to hear of cruisers encountering drug traffickers off Ecuador and yet many boats transit this coast fairly closely every year. The drug trafficker's primary goal is to get their multi-million dollar drugs to the desired destination quickly and without detection - they, and their big bosses, don't get paid if the drugs don't arrive and they are sitting in jail. In other words, they will do everything possible to avoid you, as much as you want to avoid them.

Everyone we talked to about the narco-traffickers echoed the same theme: If they spot you they are going to go in the other direction.

The narco-trafficking vessels come in three basic flavors: GO-FASTS, SEMI-SUBMERSIBLES and FULLY-SUBMERSIBLE. The go-fasts are self-explanatory: Boats with three or four 250 hp outboards that fly across the water. The Semi-submersibles are a strange mix of stealth and sealed up pangas. They ride low in the water, have baffles to try to hide the heat from their exhaust, and are enclosed inside. They are usually steered by one person sitting practically on top of the engine and packed in with cocaine and/or heroin. The third type of craft is completely new. In a recent development a rogue Russian engineer has assisted in the construction of fully-submersible smuggling boat capably of diving underwater.

The first two types of boats have been known to exchange gunfire with the military, but most often the semi-submersibles try to sink their boats to avoid capture of the cargo and hope the military picks them up out of the water. Go-fasts are often disabled by helicopter gunfire or other types of high speed craft, and then boarded.

Much of this information we learned first hand in 2008 from the military. However this information has become more widely available and today you can even read a well put together Wikipedia page.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narco_submarine

Thugs

Some of the poor coastal sections of Colombia, many of which are not accessible by land, can be dangerous to foreigners. The people in these areas are probably the biggest threat to cruisers. They are an unknown entity. They could be “sleeper-FARC”, ex-FARC, anti-foreigner, or just plain desperate. Having white skin automatically marks you as rich and you’re a beacon to these types. Avoid being alone in the poorer sections of towns, especially at night, and if you are unsure of the safety of an area get in a taxi and quiz them as they drive you away. Your agent is also a good resource for learning places to avoid and the state of current events in the area.

Security Ideas

While I don’t think these suggestions are definitive, I do think they are worth considering, and not just for Colombia, but for your travels in general.

- ◆ Have a way to lock yourself in the boat at night, while retaining the ability to shoot flares or pepper spray safely outside.
- ◆ Have some “sacrificial” cash or equipment out for them to grab, and hide the rest including passports and credit cards.
- ◆ Cover up or hide expensive items like laptops and navigation equipment so it would take effort and time to find them and steal them. A sacrificial GPS just sitting there is a lot more tempting of a score than having to unbolt something or rummage around for your computer.

- ◆ Have spotlights, horns, flares, pepper spray, etc. at the ready and maybe even practice getting them out in the dark of the night.
- ◆ Travel with other boats and anchor close to each other. There is truth to safety in numbers and the boat that isn't under attack can make a lot of noise and call for help.
- ◆ Install an alarm with a pressure pad or a trip line to alert you of anyone sneaking on board.
- ◆ Carrying a gun is only good if you are prepared (i.e. trained) to use it in combat. It immediately elevates the situation to a life-and-death fight from just a robbery, but many people feel safer with a firearm. Sometimes the gun has been discovered by the thieves and used against the victims and sometimes people get shot trying to defend themselves and sometimes the bad guys die. This is a personal choice, but bear in mind that in some countries just having a gun is illegal and can mean instant jail.

Colombia's Military

Colombia's military has the latest gear and some of the best equipment I have ever seen, and they have A LOT of it. They take their coastal security very seriously and will request at times for you to identify yourself along with a host of other bits of information. Something that you will probably witness are black helicopters flying low over the water, and circling your vessel. Their goal is two-fold: stop drug trafficking and insure your safety.

Colombia also has several warships which patrol specific sectors of coastline. You might hear or see these boats patrolling the northern waters: *ARC Jaime Cardenas* or *ARC Monzon*. In the middle section you might see *ARC Cabo Corrientes* and there are one or two others covering the southern coast. By the way ARC is pronounced "ah-erhey-say" and stands for Armada Republica de Colombia.

U.S. Military

You will occasionally hear VHF traffic in English saying strange things and using names like *Equalizer* or *Enforcer*. Odds are good you won't see them or understand what they are talking about which is what they want.

Danger Spots

Stay away from the mangrove areas in southern Colombia from Buenaventura all the way to the border of Ecuador with exceptions of Isla Gorgona and Tumaco. I was told that Guapi was a safe spot (south of Gorgona) however the U.S. charts are too poor for that area so we did not attempt it. Also avoid the area of coast between Buenaventura and Cabo Corrientes to the North. This includes the estuary north of Buenaventura - I was told by several people that it is a very bad spot and you are certain to encounter trouble. Also, Buenaventura itself is not recommended as a place to stop as it has a bad criminal element, where a lot of theft takes place.

Strategy for Navigating the Coast

At this point in time Colombia is not your normal cruising area. There is risk of encountering thugs or guerrillas. You have to decide for yourself if the current events have changed and if you are willing to put yourself at risk.

That said, we also found the places we visited to be secured by military 24 hours a day. Also, 5 - 20 miles offshore we encountered extremely few boats. Most of the fishing seems to be done either closer inshore by canoe and small panga, or 50+ miles offshore by large vessels and adventurous pangas.

We interviewed probably a dozen boat captains and several naval officers and the common consensus was 15-20 miles off the coast was a safe distance to navigate the undesirable areas. They agreed that if you were to be close inshore you might raise the interest of the wrong type of people. However, we know other cruising boats which traversed the coast only 5 or so miles offshore without incident.

Here's a short list of things you can do to lower your profile.

- ◆ Don't discuss your plans with anyone who doesn't need to know. People will be very curious to talk to you about your sailing lifestyle and it is only natural for them to ask where you have been, where you are going and when you're leaving. You can tell them you're going direct to Peru or Panama and that you don't know when you're leaving. Most people are eager for you to see their country and want to know what you think and their questions are innocent, however caution should be taken to prevent the wrong person from learning your plans.
- ◆ When you depart an anchorage (except for those to the North of Cabo Corrientes) head straight offshore about 15-20 miles before turning. This isn't a strict rule, especially if you are only going on a short hop, but will help make you seem less accessible.
- ◆ At night run with the deck lights and keep the masthead lights off. This will reduce your visibility from any shore-side creeps or any random thugs. Some people choose just to use a small white light, however make sure you stand a very good watch because there are some fishing boats and commercial traffic. And too much stealth might also draw the military's attention.
- ◆ Keep a flare gun and any other sort of protective device within reach to ward off any approaching boats. Don't be afraid to be on the defensive side. Just keep in mind many of these people have never seen a sailboat under sail and are simply fascinated to watch you go by.
- ◆ Hail "Guardacosta" on VHF16 on high power if you need help.

Internet On-line Information

There are some helpful groups of people online who can also answer your questions.

<http://www.ssca.org>

Great discussion board and members of SSCA have access to lots of additional info.

http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Southbound_group

Informal email group of people planning on cruising or are actively cruising the South Eastern Pacific Coast.

<http://colombiareports.com/>

Current events and news from Colombia.

<http://bogotafreeplanet.com/>

More local news from Bogota.

<http://www.elcolombiano.net/>

News in Spanish with small English section from Medellin.

<http://www.latinamericanpost.com/>

News covering Colombia and other areas around Latin America.

Charts of Colombia

The U.S. charts are poor but usable. If possible locate the Colombia charts made by the Colombians. One naval captain invited us aboard his gunboat to talk about the security issues and our navigational questions about Colombia. He then immediately dug through his chart set and gave us a spare copy of one of his charts. They were much more detailed and on better scales. The Colombian charts begin with the letters COL followed by a number. For example, the detailed chart of Bahia Solano is COL 116.

Navigation Aids

The lights marked on all the charts appeared to work as advertised unlike Colombia's neighbors. The buoyed channels (in Tumaco) were accurate, lit and correct. We had the definite impression that navigation equipment was taken seriously.

Weather and Current

During latter months of the dry season (Nov. to May) the winds tend to blow from the N, but they will usually be light, switching to the S the further south you travel. During the rest of the year the winds tend to blow from the S to WSW and occasionally SSE.

Currents tend to run strongly most of the year from the south up to Pase Caballos at 02°27'N and 078°35'W where the Humbolt Current meets up with the counter equatorial current. Things can be choppy and confused. The current will continue to flow northwards until about Cabo Corrientes (05°30'N

and 077°34'W) where it can sometimes reverse and flow south. Sometimes during January, February and April the current directions become less predictable and have even reported to reverse.

Money Money Money

Colombia uses Pesos (COP) and the rate (8/2011) is about 1788:1 USD. A quick way to calculate a low estimate is to double the dollars and add 3 zeros. The reverse to get to dollars is to drop three zeros and divide by two.

Entry/Exit Officialdom

Your Zarpe should have the name of the port you plan to enter. If you're going to Bahia Solano, your Zarpe from your departing country should say Bahia Solano, Colombia. The same is true for Tumaco, Colombia. The officials like things to be neat and tidy. They will check the authenticity of your papers and contact your port of departure if they have any concerns. Tumaco in particular is very careful to make sure you are traveling legally and not doing anything suspicious. If your Zarpe has another port or country listed this will cause some headaches for the officials and extra paperwork. You can do it, but be prepared for some sour faces.

You are required to use an agent in Colombia, there is no way around it. They absorb all the costs (if there are any) into their fee and they will handle any issues or paperwork problems with the officials.

The only two ports of entry I recommend are Bahia Solano in the North and Tumaco in the South. Buenaventura is also a port of entry, however the port is a danger filled place with not much to offer the casual visitor. In an emergency Buenaventura is a safe and may be a viable option for entry and getting repairs, however it is a sketchy city.

Summary of Anchorages in Colombia

Moving north to south the following list contains the places we visited and/or were recommended through research and conversations as safe spots.

Bahia Cupica - 85 miles SE of Bahia Pinas, Panama. We didn't stop here, but were told by many it was safe. It is open to the south so is best visited during the dry season or when the winds are coming from the North.

Bahia Solano - 95 miles SE of Bahia Pinas, Panama. This is a port of entry where there is a military base, a port captain and immigration. The town is remote and receives produce by boat so supplies are variable. There is a great hike up the river and some good restaurants.

Ensenada Utria - National park with a park fee and anchoring fee. There is a small military force stationed here to watch the coast. The locals can be seen

here in dugouts fishing for dinner. The natural protection offered by the bay is incredible as is the scenery. There are several hikes around the area and guides to help you find all the critters.

Nuqui - a tourist town about 15 miles south of Utria. Not well protected, we stayed at Coqui.

Bahia Coqui - around the corner south from Nuqui. We only spent a night there and moved on another 15 miles to Ensenada Utria.

Isla Gorgona - National Park run by a private company, Aviatur. We spent a lot of time here including hiking and swimming. The company is charging a lot of money to arrive there by your own boat.

Tumaco - a port of entry and a good sized city. The anchorage is separated from the hustle and noise of the city by an island. A military base overlooks your anchored boat making this spot very secure.

Isla Malpelo - located far offshore (3°58.5'N and 081°34.5'W) Malpelo is like a mini Cocos island without the tourists or the high fees. Large pelagic fish swim in crystal clear water here. A small military camp keeps the island under observation.

Bahia Cupica

Just north of Bahia Solano is Bahia Cupica. This is not a port of entry, however the Solano Port Captain gave us permission to stop there on our way north into Panama. Hopefully the reverse would hold true and the Port Captain wouldn't mind if you stopped there first on the way south. In either case this bay is exposed to the south and is probably a better spot to visit when the winds are calm or not blowing from the south.

Due to the weather conditions we were unable to stop here and investigate the area.

Approaching

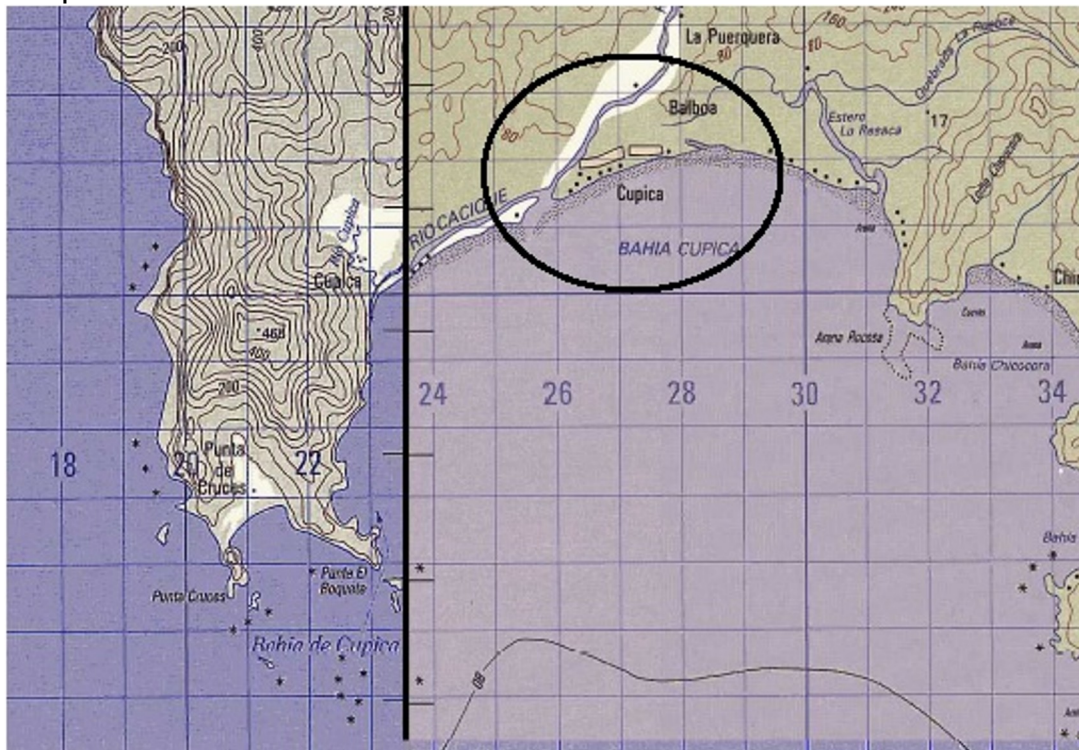
Be very careful of Punta Cupica. Rocks can be found as far as two miles off the land.

Anchor

We did not try to anchor here so we don't have a recommended location. But remember the tidal range here is a little over 10'.

Around the Bay

There is a small town here, some nice beaches and probably good snorkeling by the point and the rocks.



Bahia Solano

A small tourist town with a happy vibe and well worth a visit if you want to clear out of Panama (about 95 miles south of Bahia Piña) for a while or want to do something completely different. There is a great hike up a river to a powerful waterfall.

Approaching

Keep more than 2 miles off Punta Solano because of off lying rocks. We observed a breaking wave about 2 miles off the point near where the chart shows 7 meters.

Approach Offshore 032

➤ 06° 20.262'N and 077° 28.877'W ◀

Approach Bay 033

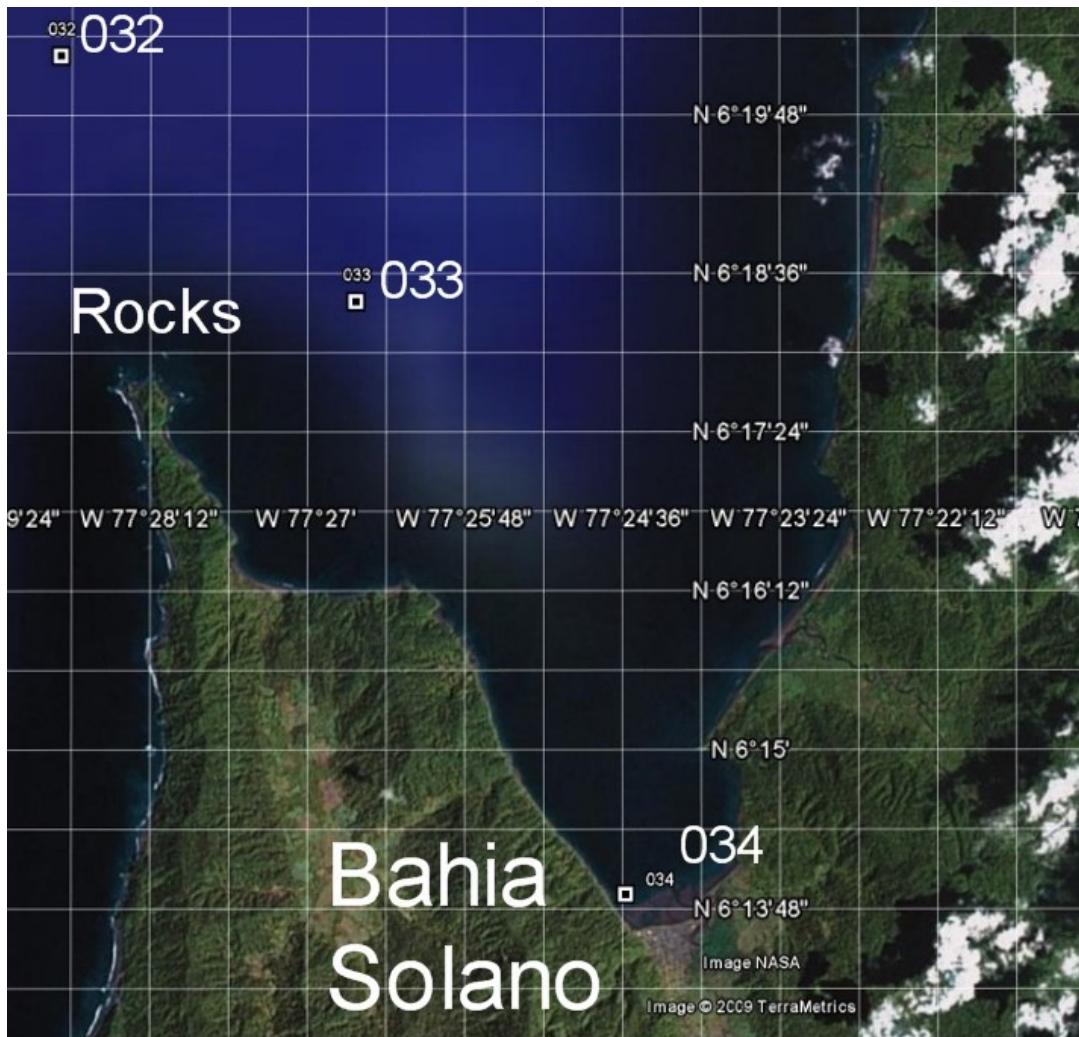
➤ 06° 18.396'N and 077°26.623'W ◀

Anchor

The best anchor spot is not far past the small military outpost and near the little bar where the ferry pier is located. Anchor in about 60' in uneven mud which will rapidly shoal towards the land. While you are exploring the anchorage, be careful not to go too far beyond 40', as it shallows fast due to the runoff from the rain. Remember the tidal range here is a little over 10'.

Anchor Waypoint 034

➤ 06°13.920'N and 077°24.568'W ◀



Weather

Most of the time the winds and waves are from the south. If it starts to blow from the north it could become uncomfortable, as the deep bay could build up some chop. Normally the bay is very protected and just a little surge and some wave movement reaches inside. Squalls can bring in northerly winds so use caution if you see thunder cells approaching.

Officials

Visas for Americans are free for 30 days. You can get more time on your visa but you might be asked to prove solvency through a bank statement.

You need an agent for clearing into Colombia. Juan Carlos Soto from Trans Bahia did a great job for \$50 covering both the entry and exit paperwork. Recent reports from 2010 indicate the costs are now \$30.

Juan Carlos Soto

Located next to the Port Captain's office (no longer at #19 on map)

Cell Phone: 313-746-8124 and 314-606-2670

Email: transbahialtd@yahoo.com.mx

Dinghy Landing

On the west side of the bay is a pier and a small bar and the Muelle de Esso. The best spot to land on shore is on the south side of the bar. We didn't lock our motorless fiberglass dinghy, but it is probably a good idea to lock your dinghy to one of the pilings. They have a small outdoor shower for rinsing and they have cold beer.

Around the Bay

The produce is dependant on the weather and the arrival of ships. This area has too much rain to cultivate produce. If they have produce, stock up as there are no other places to get veggies until Tumaco or Isla Contadora (or deep in the Darien) in Panama.

There is a bank with an ATM. You can get diesel and gasoline in town by jerry jug at about double the going rate in Colombia. You can also get propane if you have a hose to fill from one of their tanks into your tank and you don't mind paying for 15 gallons.

Several restaurants have good food and nice atmospheres, but the prices in town are a bit higher than other parts of Colombia because everything is shipped in.



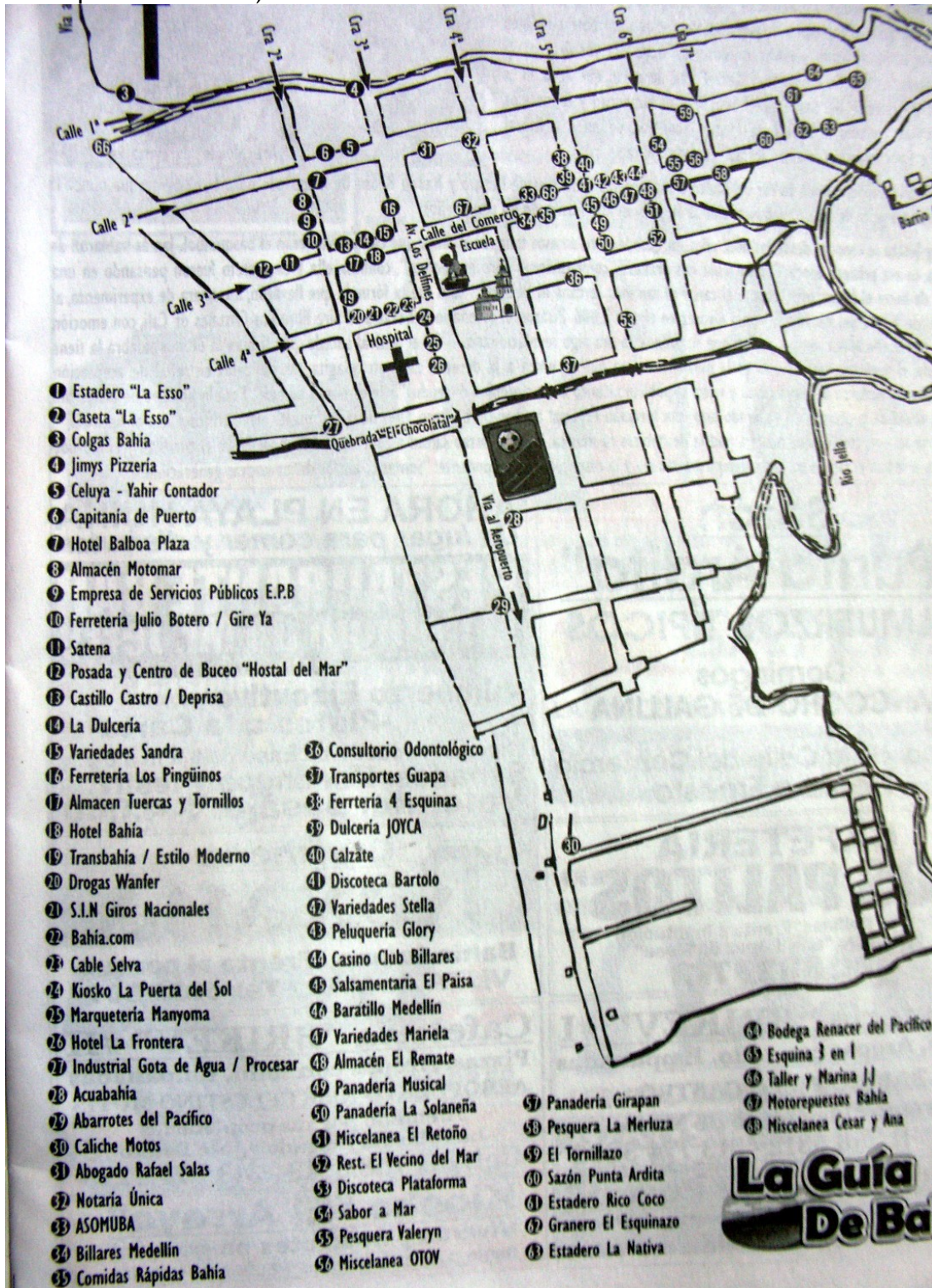
There is a great hike up the river to a waterfall. Don't try this hike if there is a chance of heavy rain because the river might quickly flood with logs and debris. Walk southwest along the road leading from the dinghy landing, and turn right when you reach the river. Follow the trail along the river and sometimes the river itself (scrambling over rocks) until you reach the waterfall pictured above. If you lose your way, all of the locals can point you in the right direction.

The guide: *La Guia de Bahia* is full of attractive advertisements that have been a bit over modified with photo editors. Some aren't in business anymore and some are only open seasonally, usually peaking in August when the whales pass by Colombia. But it's the best guide available and has a free map.

There is a big festival on August 1 in Bahia Solano to celebrate life and the bay. They have parades in town, boat parades in the bay and parties all night long. Photos from the event of costumes and dancers often adorn the town's tourist brochures.

Map of Bahia Solano

(The anchorage is at the top left of this north-up map and the squiggly line at the top is the beach.)



Ensenada Utria

This fjord-like cove protects you from the ocean swell, lulls you with the sound of waterfalls and relaxes you with fragrant jungle smells. The park which contains Utria is very big and most of it is mountains and estuaries. A large waterfall pours down the hill into the bay (see the cover photo on the right).

The park officials will take you on a walking tour into the mangroves at low tide to point out the different plants and animals. They are friendly and fun people. We saw squirrel monkeys and ospreys around the park. Long and short hikes are also available with a required guide.

Approach

Upon our approach, a panga raced out to meet us. They didn't want the bottoms of our boats to damage their coral reef (very thoughtful of them) on the eastside of the channel. The rangers were quick to guide us into the bay and direct us to spots to anchor in front of their office and the military housing.

Approach 25

➤ 05° 58.275'N and 077°20.597'W ◀

Approach 26

➤ 05° 58.800'N and 077°20.400'W ◀

Approach 27

➤ 06° 00.186'N and 077°20.945'W ◀

Approach 28

➤ 06° 00.615'N and 077°21.091'W ◀

Approach 29

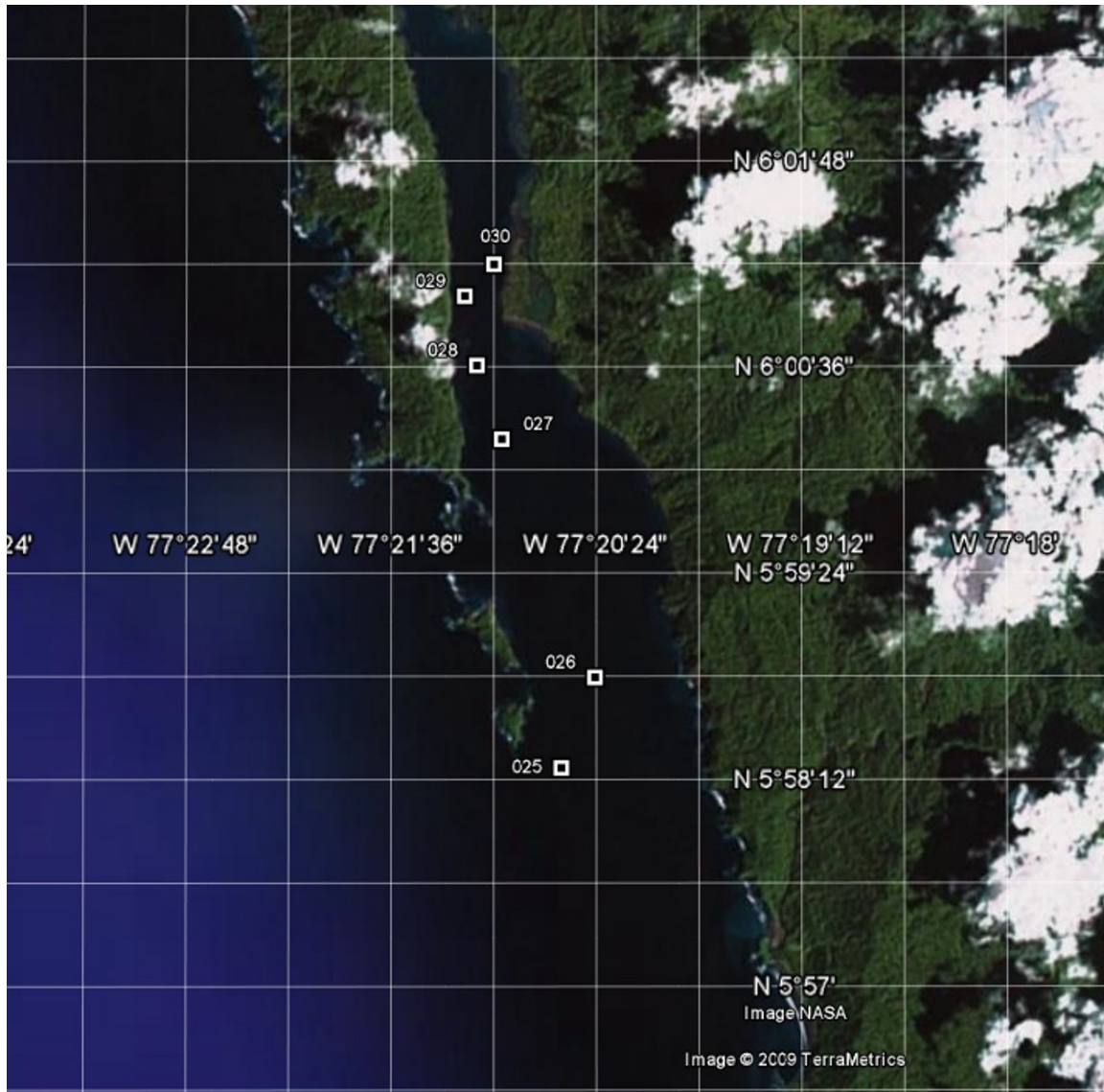
➤ 06° 01.019'N and 077°21.162'W ◀

Anchor

Anchor in front of the buildings where the guards can see you anchor in about 45' in thick mud. The little buoy marks a sunken metal boat that the navy drug into the bay. If you want to snorkel down to it at low tide you'll find hundreds of fish which have adopted it as a new home.

Anchor Waypoint 30

➤ 06° 01.204'N and 077°20.991'W ◀



Weather

You're protected from all directions so relax and enjoy.

Officials

The park charges 25,000 pesos (~\$12) per person to enter the park. They then tacked on a surprise one-time anchoring fee of 7,000 pesos (~\$4) for anchoring. Despite our repeated requests we couldn't get a receipt for the anchoring fee and we suspected that we were donating to the local economy.

Around the Bay

There are two main hikes you can take with a guide. The first is to the outside of the peninsula where there is a good place to snorkel. It's a nice short hike of 45 minutes. The second is a long hike to El Valle where the Utria staff get their supplies. Several people we met, even at other locations, told us there is

a spectacular waterfall and it is very pretty hike. The hike is long so it is best to get started early.

You can also snorkel off the beach and look at the coral reef that is growing. Make sure you don't touch the coral!

Nuqui

South of Utria is the resort town of Nuqui. Because the wind, waves, and swell were rolling into this anchorage at the time we were there, we didn't get to explore it. However the people we met from there, in pangas at Coqui and Utria, were friendly and there is a growing tourist industry (Colombian city dwellers out to see nature).

Approach

Enter the bay making sure to give either the southern or northern points plenty of room. You will probably see some small boats out fishing or transiting the bay with passengers or cargo.

Approach Waypoint

➤ 05° 43.3'N and 077°17.0'W ◀

Anchor

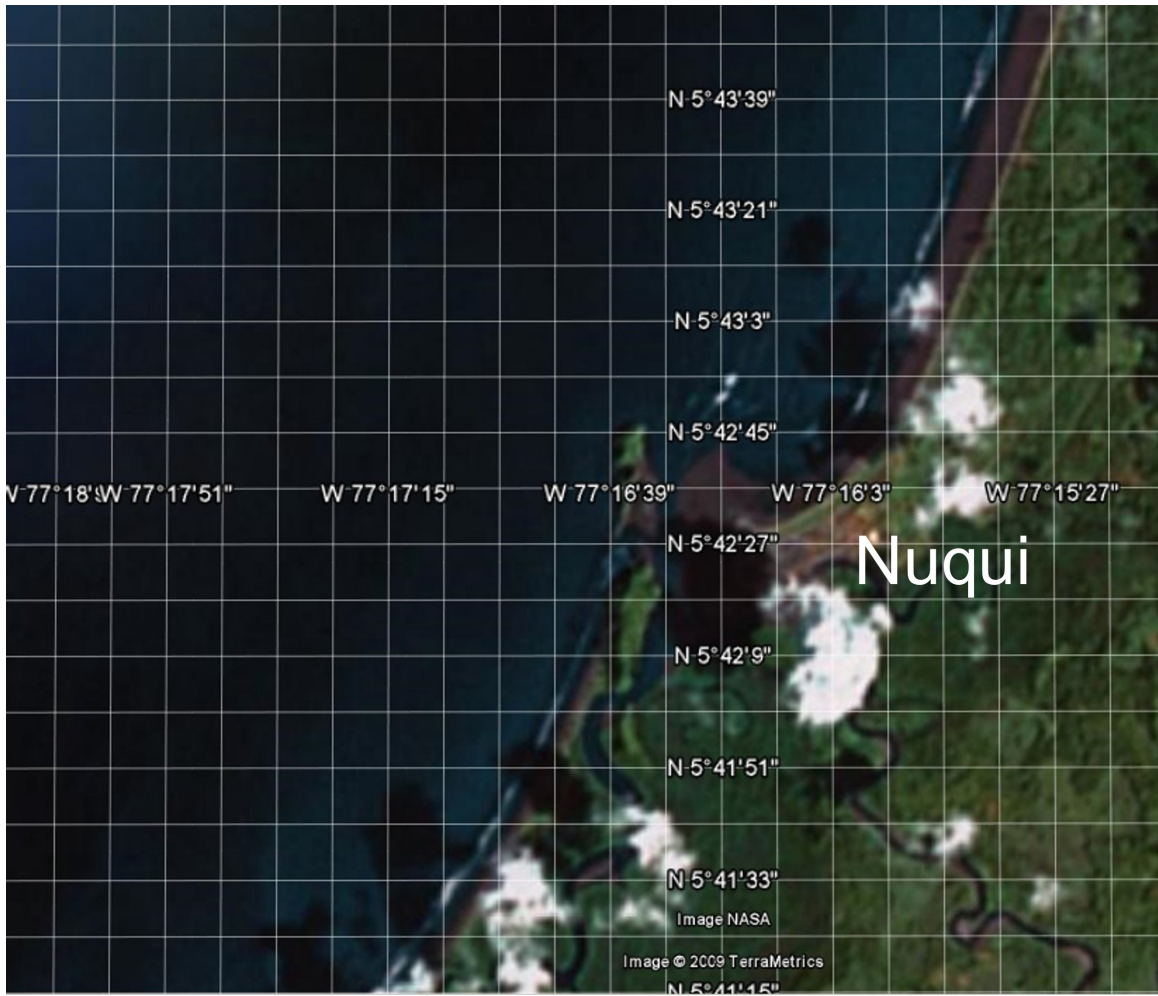
Not having anchored here we can't recommend a position.

Weather

This bay gets some southerly swells wrapping into it. If the swell is big it will probably be very rolly in the bay.

Officials

None.



Bahia Coqui

We stopped here because the entrance to Utria was so poorly marked on our charts that we wanted to go in during bright daylight. Nuqui was the recommended anchorage from the Navy, however this little bay about 4 miles southwest of Nuqui was very calm and protected. There are a couple small “resorts” visible on shore, however, we didn’t launch the dinghy as this was just an overnight stop for us. A tour operator passed by and informed us the area was safe, but there is no military presence, so we cannot speak for the safety of walking the long beaches (though we did see a few Colombian tourists doing just this). This is a great place to stop to get out of any southerly weather.

Approach

If coming from the south, give the point about a mile of room to avoid any offshore rocks. Then use the following waypoint to approach the bay.

Approach Waypoint 024

➤ 05° 41.0’N and 077°24.0’W ◀

Anchor

Anchor in 27' with good solid mud.

Anchor Waypoint 031

➤ 05° 37.36’N and 077°22.62’W ◀

Weather

Winds from the south bend in around along the land, but the waves are small and the swell from the south is reduced dramatically. Wind or waves from the north would make this location very uncomfortable.

Officials

None.



Isla Gorgona

This Pacific island is another National Park of Colombia with a very unique ecosystem. There are several types of flora and fauna that exist only on Isla Gorgona. For example, the blue lizard on the cover is found only on this island. There is also some good diving with sharks and other large animals in clear warm water.

Like much of Colombia this area hasn't been "discovered" by foreign tourists. You can come here and explore a small slice of a rare and fleeting world before anyone else.

The history of Gorgona is quite interesting. As it has many natural water sources, native Colombians inhabited this island for centuries. It was also used as a spot for sailing vessels to restock their water supplies from the continuously running streams. Much later the Colombian government built a prison here which was shutdown in 1984. Since then the jungle has retaken the structures in impressive force. Touring the jungle in action is worth the 15 minute walk through the old prison.

Whales visit this area from July to September, though we witnessed a mama humpback and her baby frolicking just off the anchorage in November. Migratory birds often stop at this island and you can see lots of monkeys and reptiles including some poisonous snakes around the island. The biodiversity of this island is impressive considering it is mostly a self-contained system.

While we were there we had a large whale shark with a calf circling and feeding around our boat in the evenings.

Approach

The reefs on the southern end are extensive and shallow. Give both the northern end and southern points on the island at least a mile of room. The lights on the island are functional and very visible at night.

Southern Approach Waypoint

➤ 02° 53.5'N and 078°18.8'W ◀

Northern Approach Waypoint

➤ 03° 02.8'N and 078°17.2'W ◀

Eastern Mid-Island Approach Waypoint A9

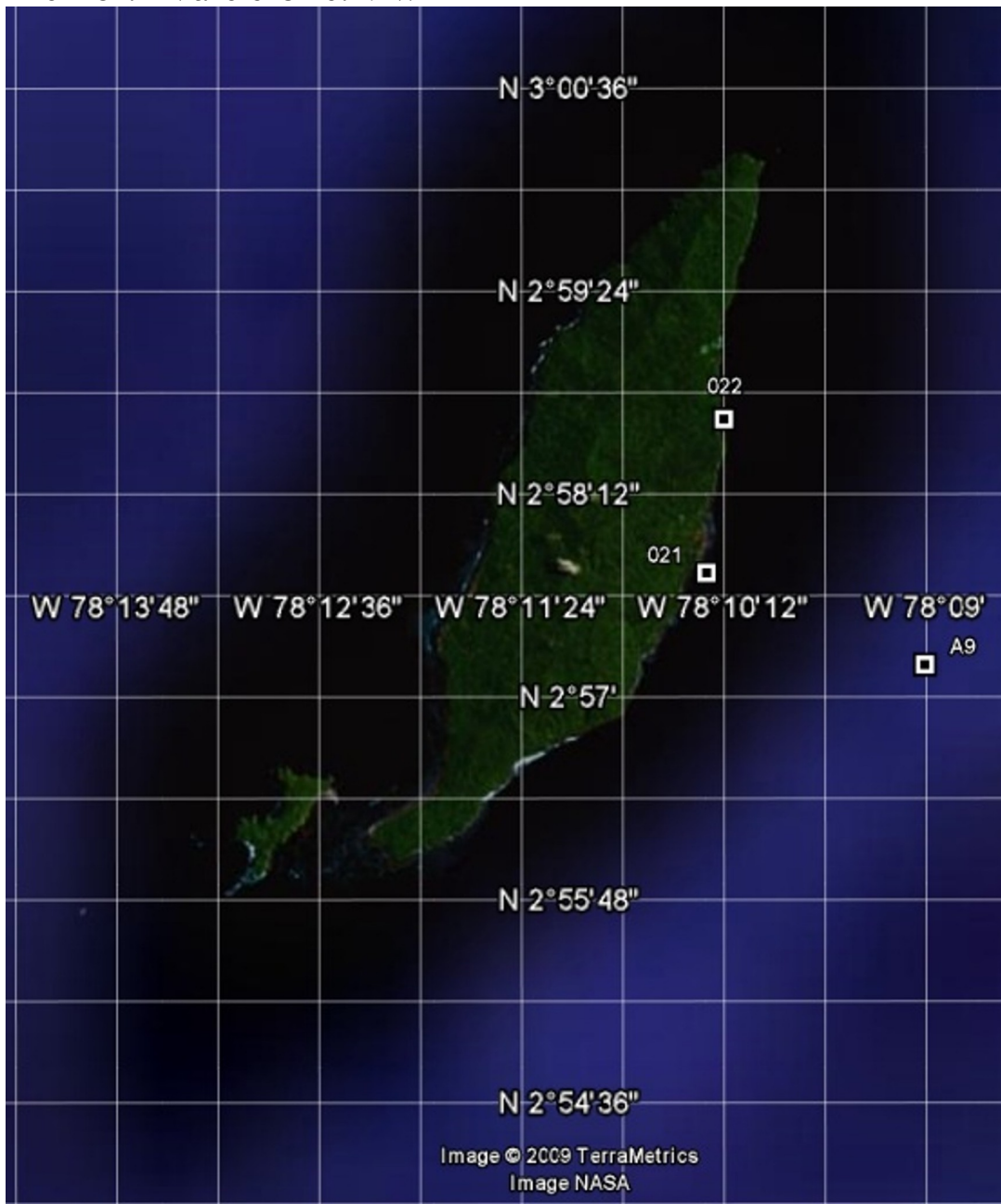
➤ 02° 02.95'N and 078°09.0'W ◀

Anchor

You can anchor, but they much prefer you to tie to one of the buoys. Despite its metal and ominous appearance we didn't bump the buoy once after tying up (just be very careful approaching it so it doesn't scrape the side). The north flowing current seems to keep the boat away from the buoy. The waypoint 022 was a position we recommended to the staff at Gorgona, for placing a new buoy which is more protected from the SW. Right now there is nothing in the bay which is out of view of the resort area's security.

Buoy Waypoint 021

➤ 02° 57.7'N and 078°10.29'W ◀



Weather

The chop can build up from strong southerly winds and make this area bouncy. It takes a pretty good wind to do this and we were told that much of the time the seas are calm. The buoys in the northern end are a little calmer when the chop comes in from the south.

Officials

There is an on-site police station and they might hail you over the radio. Just inform them you are going to visit the park. The park monitors VHF 16 as well.

The Aviatur people sadly want you to pay an astronomical fee of 50,000 pesos/person/night. That works out to be \$55 /night/couple to use their buoy or anchor. They seem to be under the false impression that people with private yachts have money to burn. In addition to the buoy fee there is a one-time park entry fee of \$34,000 pesos per person (~\$18 /person). If you want to take a hike with a guide and rent some boots the cost is about \$3 per person. Touring the prison is free and so is snorkeling.

There is a great dive center run separately from the resort with very friendly staff. They offer 1 tank dives for \$75 and \$90 USD for a two tank dive. This includes all the gear, lunch and the boat.

Tumaco

A large coastal town, Tumaco is a busy hub of Afro/South American culture. There are many wooden houses on stilts over the mangroves and a nice beach with a picturesque archway and jungle flora.

The anchorage is in an estuary off a pretty and quiet island connected to the town by a bridge. You'll have 24 hour military observation from the base located on the other side of the channel.

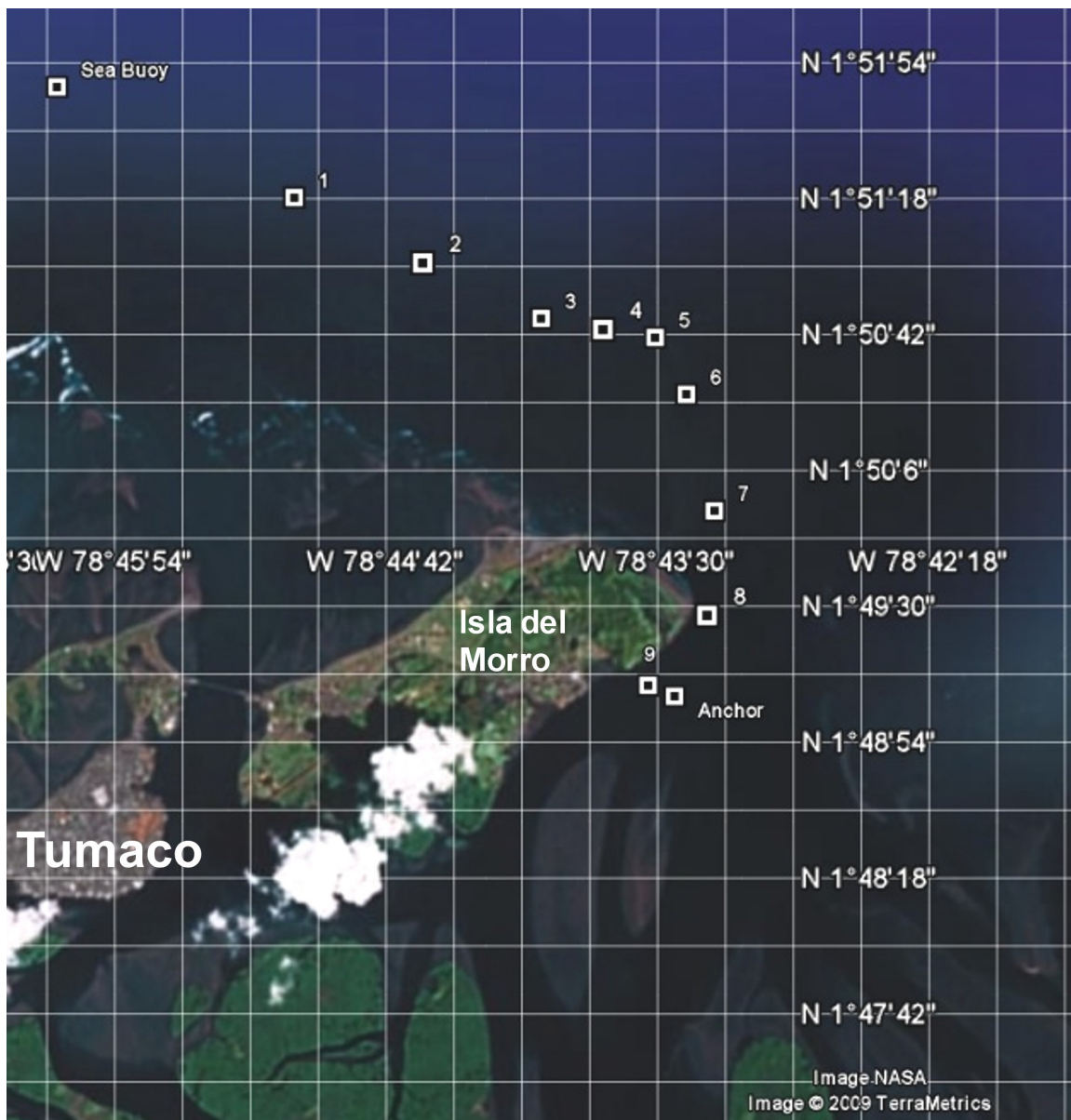
This place is worth seeing for yourself. The friendly people are warm and inviting. There are many restaurants and several places to get good supplies. Surprisingly there is a very large selection of outboards and generators, as good as in Panama.

Approach

The entrance to Tumaco is a controlled military channel. You have to call "Guardacosta" on channel 16 at the sea buoy. DO NOT proceed past the sea buoy until you have spoken with them and given them all your information and they have cleared you to enter. Have your boat papers ready as they might ask you lots of questions about your boat, Zarpe, crew, and passports. You can request the English translator if you can not effectively communicate in Spanish. At some point in the process they will want to know your zarpe number, origin, crew names and passport numbers, captain's name, boat registration number, cargo, amount of diesel and gas on board, length, width, and depth of your boat. They will also try to prepare the commercial dock for your arrival, which sounds much grander than reality. Tell them you plan to anchor and do not need the dock. Unless you have a steel boat, you probably won't want to be at the dock anyway.

Sea Buoy (Call Guardacosta Before Proceeding)

➤ 01° 51.80'N and 078°46.15'W ◀



Path through the buoys

Waypoint 1

➤ 01° 51.311'N and 078°45.100'W ◀

Waypoint 2

➤ 01° 51.023'N and 078°44.532'W ◀

Waypoint 3

➤ 01° 50.777'N and 078°44.009'W ◀

Waypoint 4

➤ 01° 50.729'N and 078°43.735'W ◀

Waypoint 5

➤ 01° 50.693'N and 078°43.505'W ◀

Waypoint 6

➤ 01° 50.442'N and 078°43.367'W ◀

Waypoint 7

➤ 01° 49.928'N and 078°43.243'W ◀

Waypoint 8

➤ 01° 49.467'N and 078°43.275'W ◀

Waypoint 9

➤ 01° 49.157'N and 078°43.536'W ◀

The lighted buoyed channel has a least depth of about 16' at low tide. Keep an eye out for traffic as there are a few spots where the channel is squeezed tight particularly Waypoints 4, 5 and 6. There are also strange cross currents so be mindful of your position and drift.

Anchor

When you first arrive you pass by the blue military dock for your inspection. Sometimes you can anchor here and sometimes they tell you to proceed to the main anchorage area listed below.

Military Dock Anchorage

➤ 01° 49.145'N and 078°43.728'W ◀

After the inspection and if you've managed to talk with your agent, they will want you to move out of the channel. Their recommendation is to anchor back out by the beach that was on your right on your way in. This area looked a little choppy to us and we preferred to be within sight of the military base. So after some searching we found a nice spot outside the channel by green buoy #17 in 12' at low tide.

Main Anchorage Area

➤ 01° 49.12'N and 078°43.52'W ◀

Weather

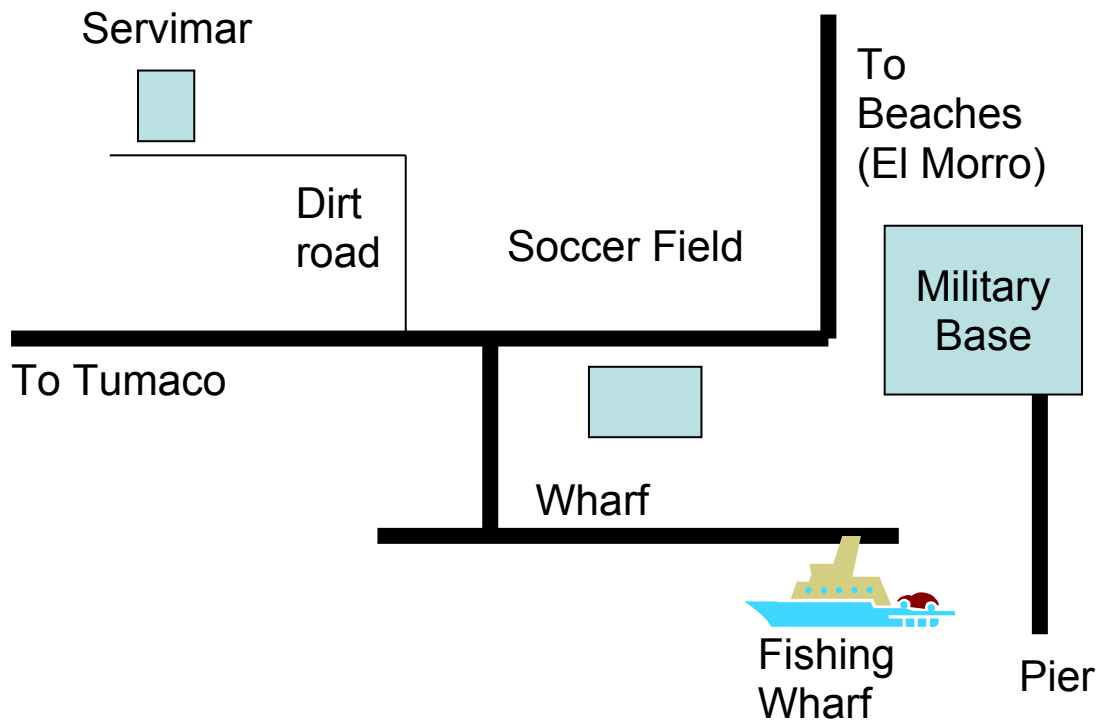
Tumaco can be wet at times, but in general it is a very nice place. The anchorage is very protected and you shouldn't have to worry about anything other than some light wind chop.

Officials

You are required to have an agent to check in or out of Tumaco. Your Zarpe should have Tumaco as the destination port.

There are two agents in Tumaco and you should negotiate your price with them. Considering Bahia Solano is \$50, try to use that as a starting point. Servimar is the closest agent to the anchorage. Several boats have reported paying between \$50-\$60 dollars in 2010/2011.

Contact Servimar over the VHF 16, or try your cell phone 315-491-7821 or serviadu@col2.telecom.com.co. You can also go ashore and just look for Servimar.



You can get to shore by talking with the owner of the Wharf. He is very friendly and is happy to let you climb the staircase to access his property and then exit his fence to reach the road. If you have a rope ladder, you can tie it to the wharf which makes climbing aboard much easier. He will also let you put your trash in his barrels. Washing water can be taken from their faucet if it is on, or from the bathroom sink at the guardhouse.

Recently the military base has started letting foreigners use their pier for landing which is much more convenient. Make sure you have permission first because they are very serious about security of their facility.

Around the Bay

You can get purified water delivered to the wharf, which you can then transfer to your jugs (at high tide) or carry them out to your boat. There is a delivery guy from Oasis called Pablo (317-792-0616) and you can usually catch him as he drives around bringing 5 gallon jugs of water to stores, houses and restaurants. There's a bus that runs into downtown Tumaco for less than \$0.20 or you can go the other way out to the beach. We usually walked the road to the beach.

Along the beach, you can get fast WiFi internet access (not free) upstairs in the restaurant of Hotel Barranquilla and they will also do your laundry if you want. El Red a few doors down has free WiFi. There are others around who are also willing to do your laundry, but keep in mind just about everyone dries them on a line. Check out the Archway and the many places to eat and drink along the beach.

In town there are numerous stores along Calle Comercial. There is a local market everyday in addition to a couple of nice grocery stores. You can find all sorts of hardware, outboards, generators and motors all around Tumaco, particularly on this Calle Comercial. Do be careful walking around outside of the main areas because there are some spots of Tumaco which may not be safe.



Climbing *El Contento* to get to the wharf



El Arco out on the beach

The Port Captain has expressed interest in opening a “Yacht Club” and has asked for suggestions. Of course the first on that list is having somewhere

decent to land the dinghy which is secure. We hope they will make some modifications to the wharf for easier access.

The “Big” City

It is wise to keep your boat locked any time you are away from it and to try to return to the boat by 6 pm. Also make sure you maintain an anchor light at night because of traffic running 24 hours.

Isla Malpelo

Malpelo is Colombia's barren version of Ecuador's Galapagos Islands. The bird life is similar to that of the Galapagos, and if you like to dive, then visiting Malpelo is something worth considering. The water is incredibly clear and the sea life is supersized. Hammerhead sharks, whale sharks, turtles, barracuda, humpback whales, white tip sharks and bull sharks all explore the deep waters. One of Malpelo's most famous residents is the Fine Spotted Moray Eel and they are everywhere swimming freely or hiding in cliff cracks. There are a lot of bird species who use this island as well, so non-divers can hike around and see their own type of wildlife.



Approach

There is a small naval base and this island is controlled by the port captain in Buenaventura (jefcp01@dimar.mil.com). A few people have had success in hailing the island on VHF 16 and just asking if they can stop. If there is no military boat or tour boat on the buoy you can usually stop and use the buoy. Anchoring is very difficult because it is in deep water.

The military outpost is remote and they are happy to have visitors. One cruiser even played a few games of soccer with them.

South of Island

➤ 03° 58.8'N and 081°36.4'W ◀

Anchoring

We haven't been to this island but it has been reported the deep waters are too difficult to anchor safely.

04° 04' 48" N
81° 43' 18" W

04° 04' 48" N
81° 28' 07" W





Additional Information

You can contact the Malepelo Foundation for more information on the park: Sandra Bessudo, sbessudo@fundacionmalpelo.org or visit <http://www.fundacionmalpelo.org/> where they have more information. You can also find scuba diving sites with information and pictures of Malpelo. There are a few tour groups which include Malpelo on their itineraries.

Acknowledgements

Many people have helped provide us information. John and Linda on *Nakia* who were there by our side throughout the trip and helped edit this guide. Lee Miles of <http://www.DestinationCartagena.com> who put us in touch with the Chief Operations of the Pacific Surface Fleet for Colombia in 2009: Capitan Gustavo Angel Sanin, whose help opened the door to Pacific Colombia. Ron and Diane on *Batwing* and Houston and Gale on *Blew Moon* provided support and additional information on Tumaco and Isla Gorgona, respectively. Last but not least, many Naval Officers and Boat Captains who took the time to talk about the coast, the weather, guerrillas (not gorillas) and good sites to see in Colombia.

Share Your Experience

If you choose to sail this coast, I would like to hear about your experiences (good or bad) to share them with others. Contact Sarana through our contact page: <http://www.sailsarana.com/feedback.htm>.

Thanks!

Eric & Sherrell (and our cat Jordan)
<http://www.sailsarana.com>