

Heavenly Honduras

The Bay Islands of Honduras are something of a forgotten paradise for cruising. Jenevora Swann lifts the lid on this sailors' playground

Sailing up the coast of Central America and discovering the Bay Islands of Honduras (Islas de la Bahia) was a complete joy. The main islands of Guanaja, Roatán and Utila promise white-sand beaches, lush greenery, spectacular marine life and safe anchorages; however, they each differ in personality, which is immensely refreshing.

This group of eight islands and 53 cays spreads across 70 nautical miles and lies between 10nm and 30nm off the northern coast of Honduras. While sailing close to the mainland is best avoided due to security issues, the Bay Islands remain perfectly safe to travel around.

We visited as part of an Ocean Cruising Club (OCC) rally, and were meant to stay just a couple of weeks. But we were enjoying it too much, so slowed the pace down and spent time getting to know the islands.

In Guanaja, there's very little tourism, despite the incredible natural beauty, waterfalls and hiking. Roatán is the polar opposite. A renowned cruise ship port, it caters to the masses, offering a wealth of attractions, nightlife and diverse diving. Utila, frequented by backpackers and trainee divers,



is charming and very laid-back. And then there's the Bay Islands' hidden secret – the lesser-known but amazingly beautiful Cayos Cochinos (Hog Islands), which are surrounded by a national marine park where the beauty lies as much below the water as above it.

The Bay Islands are part of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef – the second largest barrier reef system in the world – so it's no surprise they boast incredible diving and snorkelling. The warm Caribbean Sea is a myriad of blues and plays host to an abundance of tropical fish, sea turtles, sharks and whales, which are found among the vibrant coral reefs. At the right time of year, it's one of the best places to see giant whale sharks.

Cruising between the islands is an easy daysail. There's a natural circuit if arriving from the east. From Guanaja, head downwind to Roatán; then a reach across

to Cayos Cochinos and on to Utila. It is worth noting that the further north and east you are, the prevailing trade winds are stronger. So it could be blowing 35 knots on Guanaja, a gentle breeze on Utila and barely a ripple at Cayo Grande.

Guanaja

We started in Guanaja, the easternmost of the Bay Islands. Off the beaten track, this island is relaxed, simple and with an abundance of magnificent pine trees. With a peak rising to 1,400

ABOVE
Two Drifters anchored off Fantasy Island

BELOW
The anchorage at El Bight, Guanaja





Two Drifters

**Lagoon 440 Catamaran
Owners Version 2008**
LOA: 13.6m (44ft 7in)
Beam: 7.7m (25ft 3in)
Draught: 1.3m (4ft 3in)

PHOTOS: JENEVORA SWANN

feet, it's the most mountainous of the Bay Islands and, at 11 miles long and three miles wide, it's the second largest.

Guanaja offers an easy entry port into the Bay Islands with the port captain and immigration close together, although a local guide may be required to find them as the offices are hidden down a labyrinth of narrow walkways in the main town of Bonacca. An amazing town and well worth wandering around, Bonacca lies half a mile off Guanaja and is built on its own cay. It's heavily



populated, with buildings spilling off the cay on stilts over the water.

We enjoyed the anchorage at El Bight, Guanaja's most well-protected bay. Within dinghy distance of Bonacca, it's a great place from which to explore the island. There are numerous hikes through the pine trees, with waterfalls to cool down in and spectacular views across bay.

Around El Bight, there's a fun Tiki Hut Bar for a sundowner, which also offers excellent pizzas. While for fine dining and superb views, climb the coloured steps to Mi Casa Too, a hidden restaurant in the hills, serving the best food on the island.

We took a fascinating 30-minute dinghy ride to Michael's Point on the west coast. Crossing the island by a canal cut for small craft, which divides the north and south, we found exemplary snorkelling, rugged beaches and pristine, clear water. Anchoring is also possible here in the right weather conditions.

An alternative anchorage is at Graham's Cay (also known as Josh's Cay), a private island resort surrounded by aquamarine water. There's plenty of room to anchor, but strong winds can make for a rolly night.

ABOVE
The view anchored at Graham's Cay

BELOW
(left) An inhabitant of Roatán's Iguana sanctuary
(right) West End bar Happy Harry's Hideaway

From El Bight, Guanaja to Jonesville Bight, Roatán, it's a 30-mile sail in often boisterous trade wind conditions. While there are anchorages available before Jonesville Bight, this cut is well marked and can be passed safely in overcast conditions.

Roatán

The largest island in the chain at 32 miles long and two miles wide, Roatán offers a variety of bays and marinas, with the most sheltered anchorages on the island's south and west coast.

We stopped at Jonesville Bight, a deep mangrove creek that offers great holding and protection in almost any weather. There's also a small marina here and a helpful yachting community if you require parts or services.

A little further south, in French Harbour, there are two great anchorages behind the reef, French Cay and Fantasy Island, where we found fabulous marine life when snorkelling and diving – but the cut should only be attempted in good light and with local waypoints.

West End Bay, managed by the Roatán Marine Park, is the most



Cruising ~ Honduras

popular anchorage. There are laid moorings, which yachts are encouraged to use to help protect the turtle grass. The beaches are some of the best on Roatán and the shore plays host to countless bars, restaurants, and dive centres.

Sophisticated Roatán is immensely popular with holidaymakers – it's busy, brash and buzzing, especially on cruise ship days, when up to three ships can be in port at the same time.

It pays to keep an eye on the cruise ship schedules as visiting the beaches, attractions and dive sites are so much quieter on a non-cruise ship day, as we found when anchored in French Cay. We visited an Iguana sanctuary and one of the private island resorts, and barely saw a soul. It was blissful.

On land, there's lots going on, from horse-riding to touring animal sanctuaries, ogling sloths, monkeys, iguanas and even tigers. It's the best place in the Bay Islands to provision, with well-stocked supermarkets and hardware stores.

Roatán excels in the underwater world. The coastline is fringed by a diverse coral reef teeming with tropical fish, making it a real pleasure to snorkel and dive the reefs and wrecks. Our favourites sites included 'Hole In The Wall', 'Canyons' and 'Mary's Place'.

From West End, Roatán to Turtle Bay, Cayo Grande, it's a 20-mile sail with the wind usually on the beam. Due to its proximity to Honduras, the wind is normally lighter at Cayos Cochinos than Roatán.



Cayos Cochinos

Very rarely visited by yachts, Cayos Cochinos comprises two small islands and 13 tiny white sand cays, some of which are inhabited. Situated just 10 miles off the coast of Honduras, it's a national marine park where there's room for just five boats on mooring buoys off the main island of Cayo Grande. While we were there, just three buoys were operational, but we understand that anchoring is also possible if the buoys are full. We paid \$92 (€70) for a month's pass, and could come and go as we pleased.

Occasional tripper boats visit from the mainland and Roatán, taking in the beautiful white-sand beaches and lunch at one of the local restaurants, also hoping to see the infamous pink boa constrictors. They don't stop for more than an hour or so in any one place.

The beauty is the serenity and the scenery, with views across to the

ABOVE
(left and right) the bar at Pelican Point, Cayos Cochinos

BOTTOM
(left and right) differing views on Utila



Jenevora Swann and her husband Fergus Dunipace have been liveaboards on their catamaran *Two Drifters* since 2014. They sailed around Europe before crossing the Atlantic in 2016. Having explored the Caribbean and the East Coast of the USA, they are now sailing in Central America. Facebook.com/TwoDriftersTravel

vast mountain range of Honduras. The water is gin-clear and the diving and snorkelling some of the best in the Bay Islands, with an out-of-this-world underwater landscape. The pristine reef wall at Pelican Point is possibly the best wall dive we have ever done.

From Turtle Bay, Cayo Grande to East Harbour, Utila it's a relaxed 25-mile sail downwind.

Utila

Laid-back Utila is one of the smaller islands, roughly seven miles long and a couple of miles wide. East Harbour is the main anchorage on the southeast side. The holding is good once through the turtle grass and there's plenty of room.

It's a popular destination for backpackers and those learning to dive or expanding their diving skills, so the vibe here is much younger. Getting around is via golf cart, motorbike or tuk-tuk taxis, and there's a diverse range of bars and restaurants to enjoy from the legendary Skid Row to the more sophisticated Manga Tango.

It came as a complete surprise that we enjoyed the most delicious selection of food while on this charming island. Our taste buds were tempted by freshly made thin-crust pizza, eggs benedict, tasty tapas and tacos. It was so good we had to return to the island twice – there's no doubt that for us, Utila is the culinary capital of the Bay Islands!

Taking time to slowly explore the Bay Islands of Honduras was so special for *Two Drifters*. This stunning group of islands is one of our highlights of sailing in Central America.

Useful website: The Honduran Bay Islands Cruisers Net on Facebook [✦](#)

