



Carry on Colombia

It wasn't so long ago that the South American country was shunned by most cruisers. Times have thankfully changed, as Jenevora Swann discovered

It was such a calm morning as we left Aruba that we briefly debated putting the gennaker up. The two reefs in the main seemed like overkill as our Lagoon 440 catamaran Two Drifters sailed smoothly at 6kt. And then the wind began to build and the sea with it. We were soon sailing at over 8kt and hitting double figures as we sped down large waves. Then my husband let slip that this 268nm passage from Aruba to Santa Marta in Colombia had a fearsome reputation among sailors and the potential to be one of our most treacherous sails yet. My heart skipped a beat.

I was very grateful to be part of a group of 40 boats on an organised Ocean Cruising Club (OCC) rally, travelling together through such interesting waters. We were a mixture of nine multihulls and the rest monohulls, sailing at



various angles and speeds, and keeping in contact via VHF; the camaraderie was wonderful.

With the wind between 20kt and 30kt and sailing dead downwind, the day was lively but uneventful, aside from reeling in a 5ft wahoo. Our mainsail was double-reefed and the genoa goose-winged; both rigged with preventers to avoid accidental gybes. With the winds building off Colombia, we kept the same

sail set at night. Taking a five-hour shift each, it was a serene sail at 8kt underneath an exceptional starry sky.

About 130nm into the journey we rounded Cabo de la Vela, the most northern point of Colombia. The forecast was for heavier seas the following day so, along with

ABOVE
On approach to Santa Marta, sailing with the Sierra Nevada mountains in the background (top left); Isla Grande beach (main image); chilling out in the Colombian mountains (above left)

OPPOSITE PAGE
Cartagena at dawn (top); Two Drifters in action (bottom)





the four boats we were sailing closely with, we decided to pull in to a welcome anchorage. Here we discovered our first rural Colombian gem in the bay of Ensanada Huaritcheru, which hosts a small town with great character and a host of kite-surfing schools.

While we hadn't yet checked in to Colombia, the Colombian Navy were aware of us as yachts in transit en route to Santa Marta. We sat at a bar, greedily using the wi-fi, and watched as the local Wayúu women stitched bags and bracelets in front of us. We later learned more of the fascinating culture and lifestyle of the indigenous people of Colombia.



On approach to Santa Marta

Continuing our journey south, we carefully planned to sail past the awe-inspiring Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta mountain range at sunrise, when the wind would be at its weakest and the seas lighter. It was a jaw-dropping moment and fabulous experience. This breathtakingly beautiful area has the potential to create some very dangerous sailing conditions, with katabatic winds that scream down from the 18,000ft peaks and out to sea. It was another invigorating sail in 35kt of wind and 3m seas.

Our catamaran coped with the seas perfectly, passing steadily through the waves like a Land Rover. Looking across, the monohulls were swaying heavily in the rollers and it's not the first time I've been more than grateful for being on a catamaran.

Arriving at Santa Marta, for security and peace of mind we chose to go into the marina rather than use the anchorage, as we'd planned a few day trips to explore the bustling city and surrounding areas. Marina Santa Marta is modern, well-located and the staff speak excellent English. They handled our check-in formalities and, in our welcome pack was a →



Two Drifters

Lagoon 440 catamaran
Owner's version 2008

LOA: 44ft 9in (13.61m)

Beam: 25ft 3in (7.7m)

Draught: 4ft 3in (1.3m)



'The forecast for winds up to 40kt did not disappoint. It was a very spicy sail!'

free Cruising Guide to Colombia, containing detailed charts and useful tourist information, which proved invaluable.

Rural, rugged and real

Santa Marta is an excellent gateway to explore rural, rugged and real Colombia but choosing from the many excursions available was difficult. However, what we chose was nothing short of spectacular.

In a small group of 10 people plus two dogs, we opted for a private guided 4x4 trip, off-roading in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, where we learned more about the amazing history of Colombia.

This is a country that until 2016 had been at civil war for more than 50 years and one that is synonymous with drug cartels. It's only in the last few years that it has opened its

doors to tourism and is actively encouraging visiting yachts.

We explored this beautiful, undiscovered side of Colombia, at times on very dicey terrain and navigating past landslides, enormous pot holes and gravity-defying drops. After hearing stories of the drug cartels, it was no surprise to learn that the Toyota Land Cruiser we were in was lead-lined and had bulletproof windows. We wondered who its former owner might have been.

Taking a step back in time and history, we were privileged to visit some tribespeople and at one point we even swam across a raging river to reach one of their settlements. There are currently about 30,000 indigenous people of the ethnic groups Arhuaco, Kankuamo, Kogui and Wiwa living in the area. Their traditions, culture

ABOVE
An indigenous village (left); a swim across a powerful river in the interior (centre); local villagers (right)

BELOW
Mountain views (left); sunrise in Cartagena (right)

and way of life are fascinating and nothing much has changed since pre-Hispanic times. While they are very private, some were happy to share their stories and allow photos to be taken. It was an extraordinary day and an amazing experience.

Santa Marta to Cartagena

Leaving Santa Marta, it's a 118nm downwind sail to Cartagena. We broke the journey halfway at Puerto Velero and the forecast for winds up to 40kt did not disappoint. It was a very spicy sail!

Sadly, the wind had died completely the next day, so we had to motorsail to Cartagena; watching in awe as the immense skyline of skyscrapers came into view. Cartagena is a charming city with a huge personality. It's the Hollywood star of Colombia: pretty and versatile, vibrant and loud, a mixture of old and new, and it's buzzing 24 hours a day. There's even a chance to see wild monkeys and sloths in a park outside the city →





walls. It's a popular place for boats to stop prior to making their way to the Panama Canal and offers a very good anchorage and two excellent marinas.

Island hopping

Having exhausted city life and fully provisioned for our onward journey, we headed out to the Islas del Rosario, a group of beautiful islands 18nm south of Cartagena.

The National Park at Isla Grande is another gem; the water is clear and clean and great for swimming, snorkelling and diving, and the anchorage is calm. Exploring the interior of the island was a delight; well-trod paths lead to tiny hamlets, there's an abundance of tall palm trees, a village square, a few hostels and a choice of bars and restaurants. It's totally charming.

We enjoyed some of our best food in Colombia at Isla Grande, tasting simple but made-to-order dishes such as arepa de huevos (fried eggs

with cheese in a batter). The fish is freshly caught and served with fried plantains and extremely tasty rice. So simple, so cheap and so local.

As we neared the end of our tour of Colombia, we had a similar captivating experience exploring Isla Fuerte, a small island 55nm south of Isla Grande. This island is rarely visited by yachts, as the anchorage is only tenable in very settled conditions; even though we had no wind we found the roll in the bay unpleasant. However, the friendliness of the local people was heart-warming and it was fascinating to see its infamous Walking Tree (known locally as el arbol que camina) a strangler fig which is reputedly 2,500 years old and spreads over 1,000 square metres.

Our few weeks of sailing around Colombia with the Ocean Cruising Club rally was spectacular, special and totally unique. With so many destinations to see, the rally naturally split into smaller groups and the

ABOVE
The view from the anchorage at Isla Grande (left); gifts from the youngsters of Isla Grande (top right); fresh fish on sale on the beach

BELOW
Eating out at Isla Grande (left); sunrise at anchor



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. www.facebook.com/twodrifterstravel

Colombian Navy – the Armada Nacional – kept a very close eye on us and placed coastguard vessels in the various anchorages that rally members used. They even sent personal WhatsApp messages to check if we needed anything as we sailed down the Colombian coastline ahead of the rally.

We felt completely safe and were made very welcome. The Armada Nacional are committed to doing what they can to protect their waters and the safety of those sailing them and they are delighted there's a return of sailing tourism to Colombia. Being well south of the hurricane zone, hopefully the numbers of visiting yachts will continue to grow. ✦

For more information on cruising in Colombia or to ask questions from sailors who have visited, there are two excellent forums on Facebook: Santa Marta Cruisers and Colombia Cruisers.

