

GUATEMALA'S HURRICANE HIDEAWAY

Where can you leave your boat in the Caribbean
where it will be safe and not break the bank?
Jenevora Swann has a tempting option



Cruising – Guatemala

of marinas, mooring facilities and active liveboard community. The cost of boat maintenance is significantly lower than the rest of the Caribbean and skilled labour is also inexpensive and surprisingly good.

Rio Dulce wasn't on our radar until our insurance company refused to cover us for any named windstorms in the Caribbean or North America. Investigating online forums, we weren't alone in our plight, many others had similar issues; all looking for alternative hurricane holes to store or moor their boat.

When friends we were sailing with told us about Rio Dulce and its popularity, we didn't hesitate in booking into a marina. Not knowing anything about Guatemala, we were in for a real treat.

All bar one

Reaching this safe-haven involves crossing a half-mile wide moving sand bar at the mouth of Rio Dulce at Livingston which can be a challenge. The deepest route each season is a hotly debated topic, with waypoints analysed, cross-referenced and shared. It's fine for shallow draught vessels, but boats drawing 1.82m (6ft) should cross on a rising tide, while those with a 2.13m (7ft) draught are advised to choose the highest tide of the month and may require careening by a local boat to get across the bar safely.

Clearing in to Guatemala at Livingston is an easy process, especially using the services of a local agent, such as Raul Valiz at Servamar. However, the currents and wind in the anchorage are often opposing, so it's advisable to leave someone on board.

Our motor up the river was spectacular; we felt like we'd stepped into a Spielberg movie as we passed dense hanging jungle, 300ft-high canyon walls, hot springs and Mayan villages. →

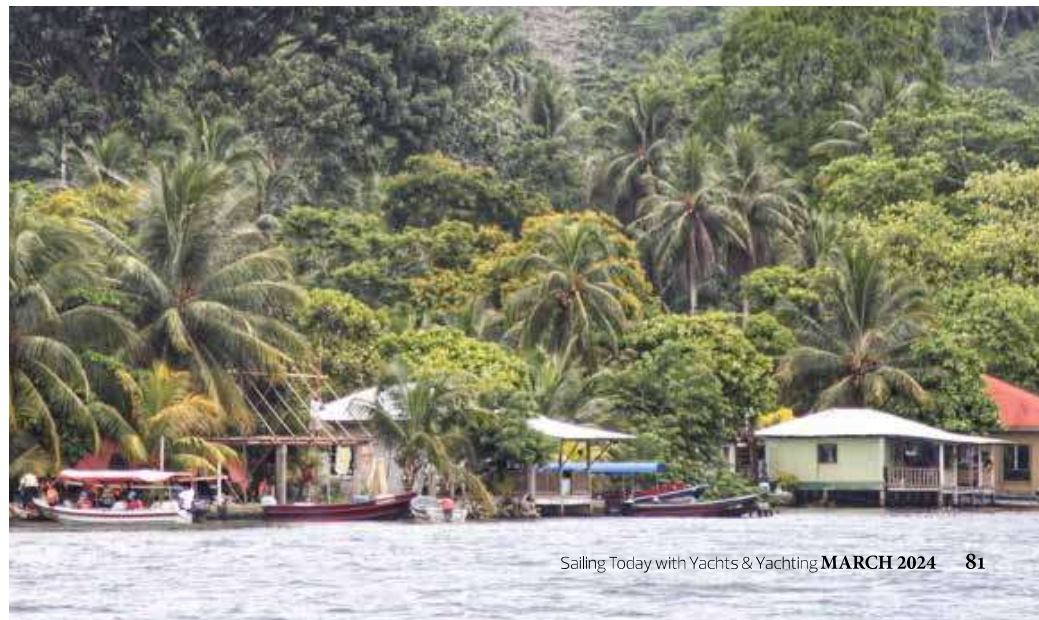


Rio Dulce in Guatemala has an impressive reputation for being hurricane-free. Even the US Coast Guard says it's the safest place in the western Caribbean for boats during hurricane season.

The marinas and anchorages are situated at the juncture between two lakes, 20 - miles from the sea as the crow flies. This distance keeps the area protected from tidal surge and the mountains along the northern Honduran coast make it almost impossible for hurricane winds to enter.

This was the case in November 2020, when Hurricanes Eta and Iota pummeled most of Central America causing flooding and catastrophic landslides and mudflows. The boats hiding out in Rio Dulce remained well-protected from the winds, it was just a rise in the river level from unusually heavy rains that caused minor damage to a few boats when flood waters rose above the pontoons.

Many cruisers return to Guatemala each season to enjoy Rio Dulce's fresh-water river with its extensive selection





Rio Dulce

Most yachts head first for the anchorages at Cayo Quemado and El Golfete Bay, half-way to Rio Dulce. Ten miles further, there's a large bridge, separating Rio Dulce with Lake Izabal – Guatemala's largest lake. This is where the majority of marinas and anchorages are located.

Our first visit into Rio Dulce town (also known as Fronteras), was an assault on the senses as we found the main road awash with cars, tuk-tuks, juggernauts, motorbikes, food stalls and shops that sell virtually everything.

Pavements are nowhere in sight, so you take your chances walking down the street. Yet, amid the chaos, there's something rather likeable about this busy, brash riverside town. The local produce is fresh and affordable and easily purchased from street vendors; and almost any electrical or mechanical item can be found, fixed or ordered.

Twice a week a boat, raising money for a children's orphanage, acts as a mobile shop as it cruises between the marinas and anchored boats selling fruit, veggies, meat, cheese and other goods at reasonable prices.

PREVIOUS PAGE
(main image) Aerial view of the marinas and anchorage (bottom right) Views of a Mayan Village while sailing up the Rio Dulce

ABOVE LEFT
A local fish man throwing his nets

ABOVE RIGHT
The main road through town

BELOW
Two Drifters is the middle catamaran facing forward at Nanajuana Marina

With over 1,000 boats in the area, the liveboard community in Rio Dulce is huge. Just listening to the daily VHF net is extremely informative with restaurant offers, social events, advice on local services and organised activities such as jungle hikes, zip-lining and shopping trips.

Choosing a marina

In addition to three boatyards offering hardstanding, there are over 15 marinas in Rio Dulce, catering for all tastes, sizes and budgets. If staying on your boat for any length of time, items to consider when choosing a marina include, its proximity to town; is it child-friendly; pet-friendly; and does it have potable water, a swimming pool and a bar or restaurant?

To get over the issue of potable water, we rigged up a rain-catcher with filters. The materials were easy to get from town and, as May to October is rainy season, it was an easy way to collect plenty of fresh, clean water.

Our boat, *Two Drifters*, occupied one of the 80 berths at Nanajuana Hotel Marina & Boatyard for four months. Being keen swimmers, the hotel's 25m pool ticked a huge box for us when choosing where to stay, in addition to it being a short-dinghy ride to town. There's also a covered palapa area, exclusively for sailors, with tables and chairs.

Two Drifters

Lagoon 440 catamaran owners' version 2008
LOA: 13.61m (44.65ft)
Beam: 7.70m (25.26ft)
Draught: 1.30m (4.27ft)





We hauled out at Nanajuana's boatyard to do our antifouling and used the skilled local labour to assist, which was very reasonable. There's space in the boatyard for 160 vessels and the boat lift can haul a monohull up to 55ft and a catamaran to 63ft.

As marina guests, we were immensely grateful for a special cruisers' rate at their 38-room hotel, which alleviated the need to stay on the boat while it was in the yard. Both the marina and hotel are pet-friendly.

Since our visit, excited by the increase in boat traffic to Rio Dulce, Nanajuana has recently undergone an extensive expansion plan and now offers a yacht club with an additional swimming pool, bar area, outdoor gym, yoga area, pickleball court, volleyball court and BBQ area. A new restaurant will open shortly and there's further plans to expand the boatyard.

Alternative facilities for haul out and storage is offered at RAM Marina and Abel's Boat Yard.

ABOVE
Standing on the viewing platform above the pools of Semuc Champey

ABOVE RIGHT
Tikal - Temple

BELOW LEFT
Local Guatemalan bus

BELOW RIGHT
Lake Atitlan - Volcan San Pedro at sunset



Jenevora Swann and her husband Fergus Dunipace were liveaboards on their catamaran *Two Drifters* for eight years. They sailed halfway around the world from Greece to Australia before pausing their circumnavigation in 2022. www.Facebook.com/TwoDriftersTravel/www.twodrifterstravel.com

Exploring gorgeous Guatemala

With 37 volcanoes and over 3,500 Mayan sites, the sheer beauty, culture and diversity of Guatemala is not to be missed. With the boat safely in the marina – and a guardian service appointed to open it up during the humid weather – we set off on an inland adventure.

Driving through the interior of northern Guatemala, on a bus packed with locals, the countryside seemed lush, green and uninhabited. Rain forest merged into jungle, with occasional fields of maize on the lower levels and coffee plants and cashew trees as we travelled into the hills.

We explored Tikal, the legendary Mayan city in the jungle and Guatemala's most famous tourist attraction. Spread over 222 sq. miles, it's one of the largest ancient cities ever created in the Mayan kingdom. Its neighbour, Yaxha, is also well worth visiting; it's less touristy, with a more authentic and mystical feel.

Next was the colourful colonial city of La Antigua Guatemala. Its cobblestone streets, crumbling ruins, pretty churches and volcanic views were entrancing. From here, we joined an organised trip climbing the active Pacaya Volcano. It was a tough half-day hike, but well worth the experience as, from just short of the summit, we saw the top of Pacaya smoking away and red lava pouring down the volcano.

Other highlights included a visit to Semuc Champey, tipped as one of the most beautiful places in Guatemala. A hike into the jungle gave us a fabulous bird's-eye view of the turquoise blue naturally-tiered swimming pools, which we didn't hesitate in getting into as soon as we could!

Our land adventure culminated at San Marcos on the beautiful Lake Atitlan in Guatemala's southwestern highlands. Covering 50 sq. miles, Lake Atitlan is the deepest lake in Central America with an average depth of 220m. From our waterfront apartment, we enjoyed breathtaking and mesmerising views of the majestic volcanoes across the lake. It was simply stunning.

Our hurricane season spent in Guatemala remains one of the highlights of our sailing adventure.

