



DESTINATIONS

The Insiders' Gulf of Cariaco

by Diane St.-Hilaire and Claude Bérubé

We didn't find much information on the Gulf of Cariaco before our first Venezuelan cruise, and we wrote this in the hope that fellow boaters will discover and enjoy this area as we did.

Laguna Grande

Many sailboat captains agree that Laguna Grande, at the entrance to the Gulf of Cariaco, is one of the finest anchorages they have visited in the entire Caribbean. Chris Doyle and Jeff Fisher, in their excellent and useful guide to Venezuela say, "This colossal bay is breathtakingly beautiful with an endless variety of contrasting hills in white and glowing reds. It is a timeless desert landscape, outstandingly colorful and decorative. It must rate high among the Caribbean's hidden treasures and only a few people stop by." Arriving at the entrance of Laguna Grande, between two gray hills, we suddenly saw the multicolored landscape of mountains that surround this giant bay and its many small snug coves. We visited all of them before choosing the perfect anchorage. What spectacular sightseeing! As we could anchor anywhere, we chose a lonely site, in 21 feet of water, where we had a panoramic view of the astonishing mountains, and where we were well ventilated against flying insects. We saw three American boats in one cove, two English in another, and four French boats in a third.

We had planned to stop there for only one day, but we stayed three days to videotape the most beautiful sights. The sunrise and sunset pictures are real masterpieces. Every moment brings a new scene under the varying shades of light, with glowing reds, grays, blacks and some spots of green vegetation. It looks like the desert decor of a western movie, with cactus and palo verde. Mangroves cling to the shore. The dryness of the ground tells us that there is little rain here. Strong winds pick up in the afternoon.

The only inhabitants are pelicans, frigate birds, a few iguanas, bees and bugs, eagles and goats. The water is painted a pretty but milky green. You can see through it in some spots, and some visitors found coquilles St.-Jacques (scallops) and conchas (an oval shell with a tasty red meat).

It was not easy to climb the mountains, but it allowed us to discover some rocky woods, and many kinds of rocks with layers by which you can count millions of years. Travelling all around the bay is a fun trip to enjoy with the dinghy. Laguna Grande must absolutely be seen as the wonderful beginning of a journey in the Gulf of Cariaco. But let's backtrack for a moment to put it in perspective.

Margarita to the Gulf of Cariaco

Only a few days prior to immersing ourselves in this wonderland, we had been in Porlamar, Margarita, upset with the constant watch against robbers and horrified by an act of piracy that happened in nearby Coche. A deep feeling of insecurity had invaded us. So we decided to leave there for a stay in the Gulf of Cariaco, well known for its secure atmosphere. The "Golfo", 35 miles long and 8 miles wide, is full of quiet anchorages and small fishing settlements to stop by and visit. You can imagine how we looked forward to not lifting the dinghy every night, and not becoming fearful whenever a fisherman's boat came by.

Leaving our interim stop of Cubagua at 6AM, we were at the entrance around 11AM, well before the strong winds of the afternoon pick up in this part of the Gulf. We stayed over a month in the Gulf of Cariaco, but it could have been longer. We stopped first in Puerto Real, a nice, well-protected anchorage close to a picturesque fishing village, located one mile east of Merito. Next was the fantastic Laguna Grande. For security reasons, we didn't anchor in the front of the peninsula of Araya or the city of Cumaná (although we heard that Marina Cumanagoto is secure).

Medregal-Village Hotel

Then, as many boaters do, we anchored in front of Medregal-Village Hotel, built by a Belgian-Frenchman, Jean-Marc Plessy, and his Venezuelan mate, Yoleida. They make you so welcome there that the stay is wonderful. Boaters can use - free - all the hotel facilities, including the huge swimming pool. The anchorage is in good holding, well protected in 15 feet, and there are two dinghy docks, one at each end of the area. Once a week, sometimes twice, without any apparent reason, the wind changes to the west in the Gulf, and brings western waves during the afternoon that cause a small chop but no roll.

Every Saturday morning, Jean-Marc brings boaters to the Cariaco Village market for provisioning, a 20 kilometer trip. Stops for fresh vegetables, quality meats and the internet café are scheduled. On the route taxis called porpuestos, we also went to Carúpano for a first class doctor's visit. When the crowd is big enough, Jean-Marc organizes a barbecue. Boaters are allowed to arrange their own pot lucks on Wednesday nights. We met boaters who had stayed there over a month.

The Guaracho Cave

To make this excursion, take the porpuesto that leaves at around 7AM from the village of El Muelle, located at the end of the Gulf. It's a one and one-half hour trip across wonderful mountain scenery, with many typical spreading villages. This trip is worth the entire tour. "Guaracho" is the name of a bird that spends all day in a cave and goes out at night to eat fruit. There are 14,000 guarachos in the cave that is located just a few kilometers from the town of Caripe.

The Guaracho Cave is just one of a network of the biggest caves in the Americas. There are well organized sidewalks for a distance of over 1200 meters, where you can walk for an hour and a half. At the beginning are a reception office and a museum. Because the cave must be kept dark for the guarachos, the guide (obligatory for everyone) brings with him or her a propane lamp. The first surprise is the noise of the calls of thousands of guarachos that are flying near the ceiling of the cave like bats. There is no danger at all and we quickly become comfortable. The cave is millions of years old and there are many stalagmites and stalactites that still drip. The guide had fun

naming the many shadows caused by the rocks' silhouettes. The ground is full of peanut shells brought by the birds. A very small stream holds tiny fish. Small crabs and insects live here in the dark. The low-power lamps of the guides give sufficient light for some small, skinny plants to grow. Fossils appear on walls. This visit takes you back to a very ancient period.

The Red Ibis and the Boca del Rio

At the anchorage of El Muelle, around five o'clock is the nightly arrival time for the thousands of Red Ibis, a beautiful bird. And a bird-watching dinghy ride to the small Boca del Rio, at the end of the Gulf, will be enjoyed by everybody.

Pirogues to the Orinoco Delta

There is an excursion that we expect to do next time. One can visit the deltas of the Orinoco aboard pirogues with Indian guides. With enough people, a hotel keeper in the village of San Juan de Goldones village will arrange the trip. This village is located on the Paria peninsula between Ensenada Medina and Cabo San Francisco. (Editor's note: It is currently recommended that yachts avoid the area between Ensenada Medina and Cabo Tres Puntas, after an armed boarding there in January.) From there, you cross the Peninsula by porpuesto (two hours) to reach the Gulf of Paria, where the guides are waiting. A jungle expedition with crocodiles, parrots, monkeys and snakes is on the schedule. During your absence of three or four days, the boat is safe at the Medregal-Village Hotel.

OVERVIEW OF ANCHORAGES

Chris Doyle and Jeff Fisher give good descriptions and charts of these anchorages in their guide to Venezuela. It is 35 nautical miles between Merito and El Muelle, the villages at each end of this area., and you can sail north-south and south-north, zig-zagging from one end to the other.

NORTH COAST

Merito (10.34.7N-64.08W) There is a small school of tourism here, managed by nuns, and the students speak English. They will be honored by your presence and will offer you a coffee and a visit to the small fishing village. This anchorage is not well protected, so it is better to visit in the morning before the strong afternoon winds, then go on to Puerto Real, a mile away.

Puerto Real (10.33.8N-64.07.6W) This is a well protected anchorage, 10 to 16 feet (3 to 5m) deep. There is a picturesque small fishing village with a windy basketball court.

Laguna Chica (10.34N-64.04.06W) The name means small lake. It has good shelter and good holding. There are many places to anchor. Its inhabitants, peñero (fishingboat) builders, will be proud to explain to you the advantages of different techniques.

Laguna Grande (10.34.5N-64.03W) This really is one of the best anchorages in the Caribbean. The scenery is breathtakingly unique, with many bays well protected from all directions, and you anchor in 15 to 25 feet (5 to 8m) of water.

Langoleta This is the windiest baseball diamond in the world, and the inhabitants will offer to play baseball against you. It's the main settlement of Laguna Chica.

Juanacuna (10.34.7N-64.00W) This small bay is the home of the Cangrejo Yacht Club. Anchor in 10 to 15 feet (3 to 5m) of water. There are a friendly bar, restaurant and rooms for rent.

Los Platitos (10.34.5N-63.59.6W) Located next to Juanacuna, this pleasant anchorage has snorkeling around a small island. It looks like a beautiful underwater flower garden.

El Cedro is the "end of end world" village. There is no water available, and the only electricity is from small generators and solar panels.

Los Cachicatos (10.33N-53.48.5W) This is the fiesta village, where half of the houses are for holidays. Enjoy its special atmosphere and do not miss the Virgin's feast days in September. You will find old-fashioned fishermen and craftsmen, and a small market. There is a restaurant and bar where Saturday nights are very lively. The anchorage is good.

Medregal-Village Hotel (10.32N-63.48W) Between Los Cachicatos and Guacarapo, you will find several sailboats in a good-holding anchorage in front of the Medregal-Village Hotel.

Guacarapo (10.29.7N-63.48.5W) At this fishing village begins the more developed area of the bay, with paved roads, local public phones, and water. There is a small grocery, and there are taxis or porpuestos to Cariaco.

Chiguana Almost at the bottom of the Gulf, this is a good place to leave the boat and visit the small river, Boca del Rio, and its birds, especially the Red Ibis at sunset (see El Muelle de Cariaco below).

SOUTH COAST

On the south coast of the Gulf of Cariaco, the lee side, it's harder to find good anchorages because of the constant waves and the deep underwater wall in front of the mountains. However, the following anchorages are good.

El Muelle de Cariaco (10.28.50N- 63.40.5W) It is an interesting place because it is close to the end of the Gulf and the Boca del Rio bird habitat. You anchor in 15 feet (5 m). The population of this small fishing village is friendly and welcoming. It is the departure terminal for the communal taxis (porpuestos) that visit the Guaracho Cave, and you can leave your boat anchored here without a problem. There is a small grocery, a bar, a small restaurant, and a pharmacy. There is a good dinghy dock, but you should put out a stern anchor to keep the dinghy away from children who play on the dock.

Pericantal (10.27.6n-63.45.5W) This is a quiet, small anchorage, well protected, and on a beach. You anchor in 16 to 25 feet (5 to 8m) of water, and it is very relaxing.

Cachamaure (10.26.7N-63.49.2W) This is a large, well protected anchorage with 30 to 35 foot (9-11m) depths. There are palm and banana trees and fishermen's houses on a pretty beach. The fishermen may ask you to move if you are in the way of their work. This anchorage is close to San Antonio city.

Mariguitar (10.27.3N-63.54.5W) There are palm trees on a beach, and you anchor in 30 feet (10m) of water. You will be in front of Maguilida Club Hotel and close to the road. On the other side of the peninsula is a small village with a mini-market every morning. There are also boutiques and internet access.

Cumaná (10.28.9N-64.11.2W) This is the first town founded in South America and the capital of the state. Anchoring near the city is not recommended, but there is a safe marina, Cumanagoto, currently under reconstruction. It will have a large and luxurious commercial center where you will find services such as doctors, dentists and an internet café. The Navimca shipyard, well-known for its prices, is here also.

We hope that this information will permit you to discover and appreciate as we did the magnificent Golfo De Cariaco in Venezuela. For