

Los Roques...Venezuela's Prized Archipelago

By Marcie Connelly-Lynn

Archipiélago Los Roques is comprised of about 40 named islands and another 250 unnamed islets, sandbars and cays. In 1972, it was established as a Venezuelan National Park. We'd heard of Los Roques long before we arrived there. It seems every cruiser coming east had stopped there and raved about this glorious group of islands. We missed their New Year's Eve Party that is said to rival any in the Caribbean. Many cruisers had visited several times and had nothing but positive to report. It was a "must stop" place on the way to or from Bonaire.

We set the sails as we left our anchorage in La Tortuga, pointed the boat in the right direction, shut off the engine and sailed the 85nm for 16 hours straight without an adjustment. What a delight! The entrance at Boca de Sebastopol, marked by a lighthouse, is narrow and certainly required our attention. We found that reading the water, however, was fairly straightforward with such vivid and distinct color variations between the deep water and the reefs and shallows, it was hard not to find your way.



A national park sign welcoming us to Los Roques.

The huge coral reefs and mangrove islands provide ample opportunity to explore and tuck in. We were tired and dropped the hook just west of Buchiyaco. It was so peaceful and calm there, we never left the boat the first day and stayed a second just to explore the little reef that encompasses the island. The windward shore had a wonderful collection of jetsam to explore as well as a white cross marker

for "Jorge". We aptly named an artistic upright grouping of coral and shells the "Moai of Buchiyaco". We had a grand time in the middle of a nowhere reef.

All of the islands are close here and an hour or two places you in a whole new neighborhood. We moved on to El Gran Roque, the largest settlement in the Roques with a population of about 1200. It is very distinctive on approach with its large 380' hills contrasting its low-lying neighbors and the sea. The Guardacosta is located here as well as the Inparques Nacional (National Park) office. Since we are "in transit" to Bonaire, we opted to bypass the check-in process, fully aware that we might have to alter this approach if requested.

Our anchorage was just off the waterfront in about 10' of clear water. We could see the sandy bottom and watch as the anchor caught. Colorful large fishing boats with names like "Carmen del Valle" were anchored near us and served as the local gas stations, dispensing fuel via hand pumps from 55-gallon drums.



View of Gran Roque from the lighthouse 380' above.

There are three lighthouses on the island that we could see as we drew near. We trekked up a well-worn path to the oldest of the three, simply named "faro holandés" (Dutch lighthouse). Though the lighthouse itself wasn't particularly remarkable, the view from the hilltop was stupendous allowing a first hand 360° glimpse of the island and its environs.

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Gran Roque is a colorful little town. We wandered through a warren of sand streets lined with brightly colored houses and shops. There are an unbelievable number of posadas (little bed/breakfast inns) aptly named "Casa Cabellita" (Seahorse House) and "Estrella del Mar" (Star of the Sea); the establishment names carved on impressive hanging signs. There are no vehicles other than golf carts. Diesel-driven generators produce electricity. We read that this was the Caribbean of 30 years ago, but the presence of an airstrip and the ATM machine nixed this notion.



Colorful houses and shops line the sandy streets of El Gran Roque.

We left Gran Roque and headed to Sarqui, an uninhabited little island just a few miles away. Sarqui has a long, white sand beach that just beckons you to walk it. As usual, nature thrives on these isolated, arid islands though we wonder how. There have reportedly been 92 species of birds sighted here in the Roques, lizards abound and the only native mammal is a fish-eating bat. All the Turk's Head cacti we never found in Grand Turk were resident here. We found some interesting shells including a West India Star we hadn't seen before. We came upon a pair of black lizards that appeared to have a fascination with an odd piece of painted wood lying in the sand. They were involved in a mating ritual and our presence went unnoticed.

From Sarqui, we moved on to Dos Mosquises,

which was considered to be a sacred island in times gone by. The first inhabitants of the Roques (roquenos) came to fish and hunt turtle as early as the 1300's. Now there is a turtle-breeding station there, part of a scientific foundation associated with the University of Caracas, which studies the ecosystem. We were welcomed ashore and given a tour of the facility. A small poster-filled kiosk provided interesting information about the archeological dig which had been conducted here that had rendered significant pre-Colombian relics and artifacts.

We had our first "boarding" by the Venezuelan Coast Guard while anchored at Dos Mosquises. They pulled up beside us in a motor launch and requested permission to board...all seven of them! They asked to see our boat documentation and "zarpe" and then conducted a safety inspection which consisted of them naming an item in Spanish, us guessing what it might be and David doing a scavenger hunt aboard to come up with the item...like fire extinguishers, medical kit, flares, etc. They recorded all the information on a very official form and found that the carbon paper was in backwards...so we waited as they recopied everything onto another form. They were extremely polite and friendly. We told them how long we had been in the Roques and how much longer we expected to stay. They answered, "No problema" and offered us any assistance they could provide.

Cayo Elbert is a quick 5 miles away. Many of the islands are fairly similar in their appearance...sand dunes and long, sweeping white beaches edged by green-blue water. However, on Cayo Elbert there was a booby nesting area where we found hundreds of fuzzy, white baby boobies in different stages of development from eggs, to hatchlings, to those in flight training. The nests were depressions in the purslane-covered ground, lined with twigs and grass. The Spanish named them "bobo" (stupid) because they showed no fear and were easy to catch. As advertised, the birds were not timid at all.

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We spent the better part of a day photographing them, edging to within a few feet to guarantee some fabulous pictures.



Baby Booby –Fuzzy white baby boobies show no fear as we approached to take photographs.

We've heard that "time waits for no man", but we could have easily stayed here for weeks without blinking an eye. The natural beauty and pristine remoteness of these islands is a magic of its own and time doesn't matter. But the next set of islands beckoned and we listened and moved on.