

Laguna Grande...A Touch of the Surreal

By Marcie Connelly-Lynn

After over a month of cruising and exploring the out islands of Venezuela, we began a short, but circuitous trek, from Isla Margarita to the mainland port of Puerto La Cruz. Several cruiser friends had shouted the praises of the Golfo de Cariaco along the way, so we decided to include a stop there in our itinerary.

We had been warned that some areas of the Golfo, especially near the entrance, might be better traveled during the day, but further in posed less threats, so we planned to enter accordingly in early morning.

The Golfo de Cariaco is 35 miles long and never more than 8 miles wide. It is bordered on the north by the hills of Peninsula de Araya and to the south by mainland Venezuela. Both sides of the gulf offer spectacular scenery, wonderful anchorages and delightful gunkholing opportunities. Since our time was limited, we chose Laguna Grande as a starting point, thinking we'd day sail and drop the hook in a different spot each night.



The water was so clear and calm, I could easily photograph dolphins underwater as they cruised by.

The very best part of sailing in the Golfo de Cariaco itself was seeing dolphins...lots of them. First we saw one, then two, then there were dozens of them. They played in our bow wake, glided under the boat, coasted along side and danced all around us. The water was so clear and calm, I was able to take photos of dolphins not only right beside the boat, but some actually underwater! Smaller than the usual gray-blue dolphin we were used to seeing all along the Atlantic coast, they

appeared to be the most joyous, sociable group we had ever come across. It was sheer joy just watching them. We stood in awe at the bow as we watched six and eight and ten of them jump in unison in front of us. Their timing was so perfect, it appeared as if this aquatic troupe had choreographed their intricate water ballet performance in an effort to wow us and that they did.



Laguna Grande viewed from top of a nearby hill

The panoramic entrance into Laguna Grande sets the stage for an almost surreal setting. The hills are bright red clay contrasting sharply with a shore outlined in bright green mangroves and dazzling azure water. A crisp blue sky with lazy white clouds overhead completed a perfect picture. The colors were so vivid and the water so calm and clear that the reflection in the water was just as brilliant as the real thing and multiplied our sense of awe times two.

Our first morning there was spent in the cockpit, silently sipping coffee and gazing appreciatively at the lush ambiance in which we found ourselves. We saw only one other sailboat anchored further down the lagoon that first day, but it soon departed, leaving us alone for the next three days (we could easily have spent a month here). We saw a couple of local pangas pass by, fishing and hunting iguanas in the mangroves. We gave one boat some water and crackers. Otherwise, we savored the quiet, the tranquility and each other.

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The rusty red hills rise rather dramatically from the water to about 600 feet. We dinked ashore and decided to climb to the top of one. The climb was somewhat arduous, fairly steep with lots of shale and cactus to negotiate. We stopped frequently, ostensibly to take pictures, but, truth be told, I was really just catching my breath. The climb was well worth the effort; the views from the top were incredible. Laguna Grande is quite large and there are several little bays, inlets and islands, all hidden from the anchorage, but clearly visible from our vantage point on the top of the hill. A cairn, built atop the hill by previous explorers assured us we weren't the first, nor the last, to make this trek. From the top, we could barely make out "Nine of Cups" peacefully at anchor in our little mangrove-fringed bay. To the left and right sprawled the numerous other bays, nooks and crannies of Laguna Grande. The entrance to the lagoon, directly in front of us, appeared much wider than it did when we entered. The hazy coast of the mainland appeared a shadow in the distance.



Nine of Cups at anchor at Laguna Grande

After a quick, scramble back down, we took a dip to cool off. On shore and in the shallow water, we discovered scallops and clams to be harvested and noticed oysters clinging stubbornly to the mangrove roots. David scavenged for an evening appetizer, while I collected shells. I was most enthralled with the number of sea urchin shells lying haphazardly along the shore. We'd seen many in our travels, but not in this abundance.

Here there were tens of them tinted pink, lavender, green, white and yellow. Some were vibrantly patterned in dark greens and whites reminding me of a Navajo geometric basket design. As I collected several to take back to the boat, I couldn't help but wonder how these fragile shells had made it to shore unscathed, while I would have problems making it to the dinghy and back to the boat without smashing at least one.



Our shell collection increased substantially.

We took the opportunity to gunkhole the entire lagoon with the dinghy one day. The scenery throughout the entire area was candy to the eyes and unlike everything else we'd seen in Venezuela. Tiny islets and deserted sand beaches were waiting to be explored. Huge flocks of pelicans perched precariously atop cacti would watch us approach then suddenly take flight as we passed some invisible threat boundary. Sometimes we went ashore or waded in the shallows, but in other areas the cacti were so thick, landing and hiking didn't seem prudent options.

After four days, the rest of the gulf gone unexplored, we left Laguna Grande just after dawn. It was calm and cool, no wind. The water was like glass as we glided out of the lagoon into the gulf then cruised along in the morning haze. The dolphins were there to greet us again and followed along for miles as we made our way out of the gulf and began the short passage back to reality.

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David scavenging for the evening appetizer