

In the Outs...Enjoying the Eastern Out Islands of Venezuela

By Marcie Connelly-Lynn

In addition to an extensive coastline, Venezuela has 72 islands and hundreds of islets in the Caribbean...many only accessible by boat. We spent over a month and a half visiting the eastern out islands before ever heading to the mainland. Without exception, we found them to be a delight. The few inhabitants were friendly, welcoming and courteous. The politics of the mainland were never evident in these outlying areas and even the cosmopolitan island of Margarita showed little evidence of the political unrest apparent elsewhere in the country. Though each island and island group shared many traits, each had a personality all its own which we endeavored to discover and explore.

Our informal entrance to Venezuela was via Los Testigos (the Witnesses), a small island group about 95-nautical miles from Trinidad. This fishing village of 160 people boasts a school, a church and a Coast Guard station. The climate is dry, the breeze is constant and the cacti thrive. Great frigate birds circle the skies and dive for fish. The snorkeling is excellent right off the boat. Anchored in Balandra Bay off Testigo Grande, the anchorage was cool and calm with a gentle rock.

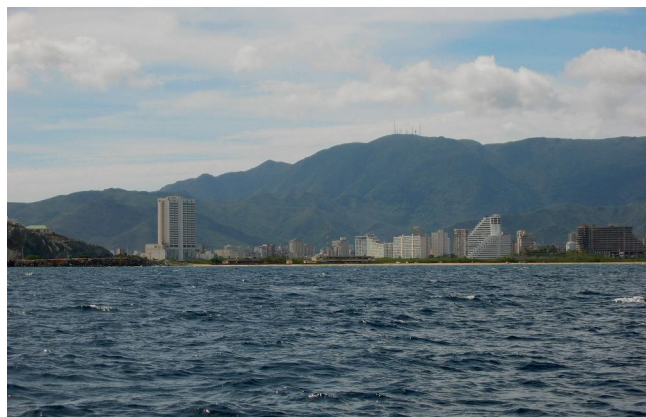


Los Testigos Cups and cacti – View of Nine of Cups taken from the sand dune

A quick dinghy ride gave us access to a small beach and blinding white sand dunes towered above us. Because the heat is so intense in the afternoon, we climbed in the early morning. The long, hot, steep climb up was made more

challenging by the soft, deep sand...good exercise for the legs and calf muscles! For every two steps forward, we slid one step back. The view from the top was stupendous and coupled with the quick, invigorating glissade back down, was ample reward for the previously expended sweat.

Sunsets are spectacular here. Every night is a show to rival the night before and even the elusive green flash made an appearance. After three months in Trinidad, it was a pleasure to dive off the boat for a swim or to sit quietly in the cockpit and just enjoy the solitude. The sky was bright and full of stars each night. Orion shone brightly, prominent among all the rest. The full moon, reflecting off the white dunes, was brilliant and provided a “moon path” from the shore to our bow.



The high rise skyline of Porlamar, Isla de Margarita.

Leaving Los Testigos, we sailed a quick 50 miles to Isla de Margarita, the largest and most populated of the off shore islands. Welcome to Venezuela...welcome back to civilization. Margarita is a popular recreation destination for Venezuelans as well as cruisers. It is not only beautiful, but also very accessible via plane and ferry and more importantly, a duty-free port. The main anchorage at Porlamar typifies its cosmopolitan nature with high-rise buildings, luxury hotels and classy gambling casinos visible from miles offshore and therein lies its uniqueness.

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Margarita is busy and hectic: customs clearance, provisioning to do, supplies to buy, friends to meet at Jak's; but it provided an excellent opportunity to provision less expensively than we had ever experienced before and we took advantage. We managed to fit in an island tour, but we craved the remoteness we had found previously and after two weeks of city-living, headed for Blanquilla about 50 miles northwest.



The palm trees noted on Doyle's chartlet

The chartlet of Blanquilla in Doyle's *Cruising Guide to Venezuela* shows an anchorage off Playa Yaque with two palm trees. I'll be darned...we spotted those two palm trees as easily as could be, but had a hard time concentrating on the task of anchoring because the scenery was so perfect. Picture in your mind a beautiful, deserted (almost) Caribbean island with palm trees swaying, cool breezes blowing, salt-white sandy beaches, crystal aquamarine water that allows you to view your anchor settling in 20 feet...that's Blanquilla. The 6 x 5 mile island is flat, low-lying and seemingly desolate...populated only by a Coast Guard station, a transient fish camp, shy wild donkeys, lizards and cacti.

We took several hikes across the island: one to the small outpost at Carenton Bay and another across the salt flats to view the natural arch bridge in Americano Bay. The paths are well worn and

lined with sand burrs and cacti, which David swears are magnetized and jump out to grab you without warning. Only the braying of elusive donkeys breaks the silence and though "road apples" provide evidence of their numbers, we caught only a fleeting glimpse of two in the distance keeping a wary eye on us, apparently resenting the intrusion. We stayed for a week without a plan. Blanquilla is an enjoyable place to just "be".

We decided on a circumnavigation of Margarita and anchored off the south coast at Isla Cubagua for a few days. Noted for its history of pearl diving and a tremendous earthquake and subsequent tidal wave in the 1541, we went ashore at the fishing camps on the northwest coast. Our welcome could not have been more spontaneous or delightful. Young children, some barely toddlers, rushed into the water to greet us. With a strong surge driving us into the shore, we were hard put to land the dinghy safely without knocking one of them down.



Bearer of the prized murex shell

An aged "abuela" appeared, assuring us we were welcome and could leave the dinghy without concern while we hiked to the ruins at Nueva Cadiz. In return, she asked for milk and cereal for the children, which seemed a fair trade. After our hike, we returned to the boat for the promised supplies that were anxiously awaited on shore by

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our growing fan club. In addition to the requested items, we brought crayons, paper and large bags of popped corn to share. We were rewarded with smiles, hugs and a beautiful murex shell, timidly presented to us as a gift by the youngest girl. The final addition to this overwhelming hospitality came when, Iris, mother to four of the children, offered us a red snapper caught by her fisherman husband that morning. When asked if we could pay, she smiled and said, "You already have!"

Back to Margarita for some last minute provisioning (and well, yes, to fill every available nook and cranny with rum and beer!). It was time to get serious and head to Puerto La Cruz for a needed bottom paint job. The necessity of civilization calls, but the allure of the remote islands we visited remains incredibly strong; it's why we continue to cruise.