

Islas de Rosario ... Cartagena's Getaway

by Marcie Connelly-Lynn

Just twenty miles southwest of Cartagena lies the idyllic coralline archipelago of Islas de Rosario (Rosary Islands), a welcome respite from the hustle and bustle of city life and a quick refresher trip for those attempting to relearn the intricate art of sailing after two months on the hook in Cartagena. The standard chart kits furnish only sketchy information, but a hand drawn chart obtainable from Club Nautico (\$3.50) provides all you need for negotiating the area. A new regulation (August 1, 2003) requires cruisers to have a permit for the Rosarios, easily obtained through your agent in Cartagena and costing 3.000 pesos/person (\$1.10).



A large salt-water tank at the entrance to the aquarium

There are several appealing anchorages in the Rosarios, but with limited time, we chose the one closest to the aquarium on Isla San Martin de Pajares, deep and calm, surrounded by reefs. The limited access was marked by two cement posts, one slightly askew from a boat nudge we guessed, and our 7-foot draft skimmed through with inches to spare. We anchored in 35 feet and were barely settled when the Guardacosta stopped by to ask if we had permission to anchor. When we showed them our newly issued permit, it was obvious they weren't sure what it was, but it looked so official, they said fine and left us alone. Next came the vendors for fish, jewelry and woodcarvings... all friendly whether we purchased or not. Having been denied our daily swims by the uninviting anchorage waters in Cartagena, we enjoyed a long overdue dip in the clear, warm, crystalline waters

Interspersed with the reefs surrounding the anchorage, are little islands and islets, each supporting at least one or two private homes, ranging from small, brightly colored, thatched-roofed huts to impressive weekend villas. No other boats were in sight when we entered, and during our stay, only one other boat arrived. Life is good.

Our first night was such a pleasant change from the city noise and constant wakes caused by the water taxis racing through the anchorage day and night at breakneck speeds in Cartagena. We could hear a generator humming somewhere on shore and in the distance the sound of some unidentifiable musical tune, not blaring, barely loud enough to pick up the deep bass, not the melody. Every once in awhile a dog barked or a rooster crowed. There were very few lights on shore, but the glow on the horizon to the northeast clearly pointed the way to Cartagena. Lightening lit up the sky, but the water was smooth as glass, allowing only that soothing, lapping sound against the hull. Occasionally, we could hear surf breaking on the reef that surrounded us. It was so quiet at times; there weren't even any boat sounds. I noted that out loud to David and as if to prove me immediately wrong, the boat responded with a new "ah-yuh" kind of squeak we had never heard before.



Though we see dolphins frequently, it was fun to watch them perform on cue.

It's not hard to spot the aquarium with its huge shark weathervane rising clearly above anything

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else on the island. Touted as the Caribbean basin's most beautiful aquarium, Acuario San Martin (aquarium) is open daily, primarily catering to the tour boats that arrive from Cartagena and other towns along the coast. There is a small canal with a wharf that allows convenient dinghy tie-up. Other cruisers told us that we could enter for free, however we found that if you wished to watch the show, there was an entry fee of 10.000 pesos each (\$3.50) which we gladly paid.



Watch those toes...Nurse sharks a little too close to the toes for my taste.

The presentations were short and in Spanish, but we were able to glean the salient points. Lots of sharks, sea turtles, rays and dolphins swam in separate holding areas and though we see dolphins frequently, it was fun to watch them perform their tricks on cue. One presentation included nurse sharks climbing on a platform for food, much too close to the presenter's toes for my taste. Even the egrets and boobies had a role to play and were rewarded by fish chunks, tossed and caught in mid-air. You can also make arrangements to swim in the large fish (non-human-eating variety) holding tanks and with the dolphins after hours if you wish. You can roam around the paths of the island, which is actually an eco-resort, and wander past

natural bird habitat areas. Boobies and egrets are everywhere, as well as a huge flock of hissing geese, which seemed incredibly out of place. We also saw several chacalacas, which required our bird book to identify. There is a small snack bar, restroom facilities and a gift shop along with several educational exhibits also on display.

After a couple months of city life, the Rosarios were indeed a welcome change and highly recommended for an easy weekend getaway or an overnight stop on your way to or from Panama.

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