

Greetings from San Blas...

Location and I are in San Blas now after a thirty hour single-handed passage last week from Mazatlán without an autopilot or other electronic navigation instruments, except for a hand-held GPS. *Location* was struck by lightning in September (or at least a near miss) while she was berthed at the Marina Mazatlán and I was back in the States. The near strike took out all of her navigation instruments, including the radar, chart plotter and mast head wind instruments. I have been haggling with my insurance company since my return in October. I installed new depth and speed instruments myself so I could see the bottom at least, and then decided to just head south while the details are worked out to make her whole again.

My original plan was to sail down the coast for short day-sails of twenty to thirty miles at a time, and then layover at night on the hook. But after a couple of quiet days in the anchorage at Isla Piedras in Mazatlán, I talked myself into an overnight passage to Isla Isabella, eighty-five miles to the south. The weather was great, the wind was steady, and the seas were calm. It was a wonderful, but very long night on the sea, and I reached Isla Isabella seventeen hours after my departure, exhausted from the constant steering and sailing, happy to be done with the trip. Unfortunately, the anchorages at Isabella were all full of boats already at anchor and so I was forced to push on to San Blas, another forty-five miles or so. Ten hours later, after being awake for nearly thirty-six hours, I was on the brink of hallucinations as I motored around The Breakers toward Matanchen Bay, imagining channel lights, rocks, and small islands that were not on my charts. I would have done anything for radar then. I finally dropped anchor in twenty feet of calm black water and went to sleep. In the morning, none of the obstacles I had imaged were there of course, but I found myself anchored at the top of the bay fifty feet or so from several sets of long fishing lines. Single-handed sailing is tough enough. Doing it without instruments and an autopilot or wind-vane steering, is no fun at all. I don't think I'll repeat that anytime soon.

Matanchen Bay is a BIG bay just to the east of San Blas. It provides a wonderful anchorage, with grey sandy beaches and friendly palapas lining its shore. The little village on the north shore has a number of small tiendas and restaurants, but with very limited selection of goods. The village is somewhat famous for their banana bread and you will find a fresh baked supply of bread, muffins, and other baked goods displayed in glass cases that line the street in front of most of the shops. The palapas on the north end serve a variety of fresh fish and shrimp, and the beer is cheap and cold. The only drawback to the area is the *jejennes* (no-see-ems). The palapas all burn coconut husks throughout the day to keep them away, and most of the time they are not a problem. At dusk nothing seems to keep them at bay however, and if the breeze drops away, which it does most evenings, then you need to be as far away from the shore, and well protected behind closed hatches or screens, and repellent, to keep from being eaten alive by the nasty little gnats. An hour or so after sunset they disappear again, so it's only a short period of time to be concerned about.

Norm Goldie is still here of course, lurking on the VHF (call name "JAMA"), and offering help and assistance to all who desire it. The self-appointed concierge of San Blas, he will talk you through the harbor channel or make reservations for you at the marina or his favorite restaurant, or whatever you need, and he did prove very helpful last week coordinating medical care for a seriously sick cruiser. He's still very controversial though, and

never mentions that he expects a gratuity for his help until after he has sucked you in, and the jury is still split about 50/50 on him it appears.

The channel entrance to the San Blas Harbor still has a shallow bar at the entrance, but it is not as treacherous as rumored. I brought *Location* in through the center of the entrance channel two hours after the high tide with about eighteen inches to spare under her eight foot keel. The channel inside is well marked with red and green channel markers all the way up to the Singlar Marina, and I took a slip there for a couple of days to provision and prep for my next leg down to Punta Mita. It's a nice facility with a pool, and laundry, a small store and seafood restaurant, and some limited shipyard services. It's just a short walk to downtown San Blas for fresh vegetables and other basic supplies. You won't find a supermarket or extravagant supplies here, but the markets are clean and well stocked with staples, and the restaurants and bars around the cathedral square are fun and cheap. At the San Blas Social Club you'll find a cadre of local expats filling the bar, and the "especial", a shot of reposado tequila and a beer for only 40 pesos.

The Fonatur / Singlar Marinas have now all been sold to a single buyer and the process is expected to complete in February, which is a shame since these marinas are now among the best run in the country. It took them a long time to come to grips with the marina business, and the needs and desires of recreational boaters and cruisers, but they have been steadily improving their service and gaining more acceptance from cruisers in the past couple of years. The identity of the buyer has not been disclosed and it should be interesting to see what the future holds for these facilities. Hopefully it will be an experienced operator who will take the lessons learned to heart.

Best Wishes and Best Sailing - On the Edge,
James "J" Mills
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