

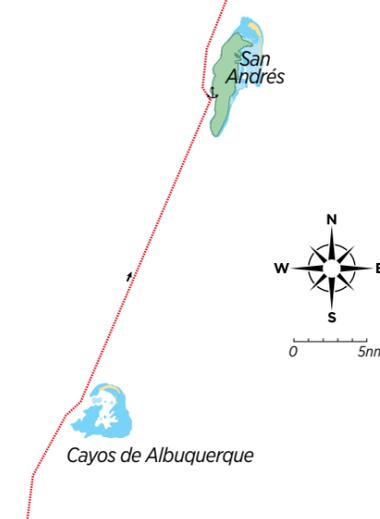
Providencia really was the unspoilt paradise that we had hoped for

Providencia: the Caribbean island that no one sails to

- Trying to escape the westward pull of Panama, Kitiara Pascoe sails against the wind and off the beaten track to an unspoiled Caribbean island



PHOTO: KITIARA PASCOE



I had never even heard of Colombia's Isla Providencia before I arrived in Panama, so it was strange that by the time I was setting off for it, it had an almost mythical status. A sort of island El Dorado for sailors trapped in that corner of the Caribbean.

It's not that Panama is a bad place to cruise, but it is a bit of a plughole. Those wanting to head through the canal can just carry on, get sucked on through and end up in the balmy gaze of the Pacific. For those who want to continue their Caribbean explorations, it's a very different story.

Panama collects neglected boats and uncertain cruisers in the way that sailors collect useful looking bits of rope. It's a delightful sail downwind from the eastern Caribbean and even the United States but it's a long beat to windward should you want to go back. Some cruisers never

leave; I met several who were hitting their tenth year in the mangroves of the Bocas del Toro region.

When I revealed to one boat that we were heading north to Providencia there was a sharp intake of breath.

'In November? You've left it far too late. People have broached going up there this time of year,' they told me. Broached? The stories got worse. So fearsome were the conditions just to the north of Panama that apparently sailors regularly battered into four-metre swells.

Every day on the pontoons I'd get the same thing: 'You haven't left yet? You won't make it to Providencia now.'

Soon I was having nightmares about the 300-mile journey to windward and prayed that I would wake up and already be at this isolated tropical island, far from the fickle Panamanian northerlies and into stable easterlies.

We meant to leave at the beginning of October but an excruciatingly improbable leak in the cockpit floor, dripping precisely over the gearbox breather cap, delayed us by six weeks as we waited for a spare. By the time the wind was as favourable as it would ever be, I had built the voyage up in my mind to Southern Ocean proportions. It's amazing what spending five months in one place can do to you.

Bocas, a labyrinthine archipelago of mangrove and jungle islands on the Panamanian side of the Costa Rican border, suffers from almost nightly thunderstorms and squalls. Sometimes it rains for weeks with fat, heavy clouds squatting above it, reluctant to move on. But no matter how much rain goes into this rainforest, the wind never quite makes it. Dying about forty miles off Panama's Caribbean coast, the wind rarely makes a play for the land and when

it does it's northerly and 5 knots. So the start of the journey was always going to be motoring – unfortunate as we have windvane self-steering rather than an autopilot, and just a 60-litre fuel tank.

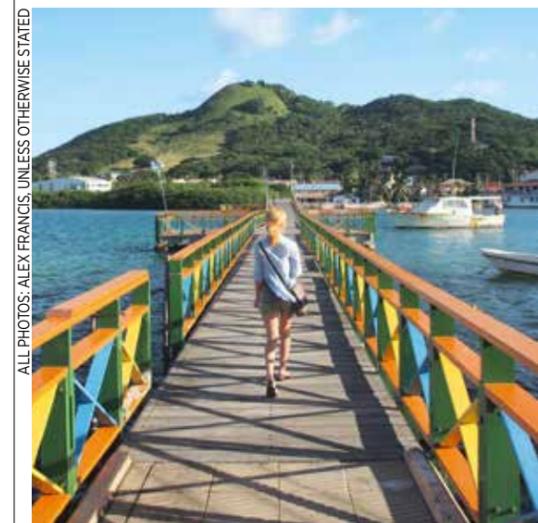
As Bocas faded from view, we hand-steered, puttering across a mirror-flat sea and hoping desperately that the wind would kick in. This was the first time I had been offshore in five months, having spent the hurricane season exploring the Americas by land. I was amazed to find the swell a mere murmur under the surface, despite the forecast, and physics, indicating this would be the case.

I was at the helm when the first hint of breeze skittered across the smooth water and I held my breath, not wanting to scare it away. After a few minutes, I sneaked out some genoa, the main already up to steady

'Ominous squall clouds stood out against the dark, night-bruised sky'

us. Soon the engine was off and we were sprinting along across the flat ocean close-hauled under full sail. At 0300 I started to feel queasy. Pulled from my sleep by the incessant clock, I sat in the cockpit in the 26°C air and focused on the stars. The motion surprised my body after so many months ashore. The standard concern about the ominous squall clouds I could make out against the dark, night-bruised sky did nothing for my stomach.

I distracted myself by fiddling around with the sails until 0600 while the wind kept changing its mind about its strength. The next two days were



Lovers Lane bridge joins neighbouring Santa Catalina island to Isla Providencia

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similar; hot and lumpy but fast. Nausea came day and night as fatigue and motion combined and I found myself unable to eat. We decided to head for land.

The San Andres archipelago is made up of two islands and twin cays. Albuquerque Cays is the first section you come to and consists of two miniscule cays, or sandy islands, inside a treacherous reef. It's technically a Colombian naval outpost with what seems to be a shed on the northern cay housing five naval officers, possibly bored out of their minds. While it's the first Colombian 'island' you reach, you can't check into the country there but you can stay for 48 hours.

We continued to beat towards these islands overnight, making slow progress to windward with a double-reefed main in a Force 5. By the time the Cays were in reach I was exhausted from the heat,

PHOTO: KITARA PASCOE



Providencia is home to some fascinating wildlife, including giant hermit crabs

the lack of food and the lack of sleep. We decided to head for the Cays' western entrance. We arrived after several hours hard on the wind, but this is not an area to trust a chart. Any chart.

The sea was a mess of spray as the wind was now gusting Force 6. Clouds overhead deadened the water colour and made it impossible to see the vast amount of coral outcrops. It quickly became obvious that this was far too dangerous. It was 1000 on our third day out and we decided to continue to San Andres, 40 miles north.

I felt stupid by this point; I had sailed the Atlantic with no more than three hours sleep at a time and some nasty weather. I had sailed through rainbows and squalls up the West Indies and streamed across the entire Caribbean Sea with my arms outstretched, why was I so pitiful after three days? We reached the latitude of San Andres, the main and largest of the islands, around 1700 and chose to tack for three hours to reach the western anchorage. Then the fishing line whizzed out of the spool and off into the depths. Alex leapt to action and I hove to.

For twenty minutes he played with the fish – or the fish played with him. We had no idea what it was but it was the strongest we'd ever caught and did its best to circle the boat several times, Alex hopping around the stays and bow to keep it from tangling the line in everything. Eventually we pulled it aboard, our dinner for the next week, an 8kg mahi mahi.



The Christmas Winds were late to arrive, but squalls were regular

We crept into an anchorage on the west coast, knowing that we shouldn't be there. Not a port of entry, we wanted to sleep at anchor and then take off at first light.

I could see as we motored slowly into the large bay that there was some kind of ship at anchor. I figured it for a fishing vessel but as Alex stood on deck folding the main onto the boom, a huge floodlight shone right at us.

'Uh, I think someone's having a look at us,' I called forward.

'...mhpf...' said Alex, a sail tie between his teeth.

'I think it's a warship,' I said. I looked up at the backstay, the British ensign still flying. They had shone the light just before the 'GBR' on the sail had folded away.

I couldn't imagine we looked incognito enough for them to worry. Sure enough, the floodlight went out and the VHF never buzzed. It did make me rethink creeping up on a Colombian naval frigate, though.

We anchored and I finally relaxed, sleeping until 0600, a luxuriously deep, velvety sleep. At sunrise I steered a course

The islands are protected by a wide outer reef



Scooters were a good way to see the island



out, giving the now very obvious naval vessel a wide berth, and we set off for Providencia again.

The wind remained persistently northeasterly for the entire passage. By 2000 we were eight miles to leeward of Providencia. The swell had completely disappeared, though, blocked by Providencia's extensive barrier reef, and we tacked up to the island at 6½ knots under a shower of starlight.

My experience of Caribbean buoyage thus far was that it was patchy at best. Charted marks almost never existed in reality, unless French or in a working harbour, and all manner of spurious buoys were used to mark channels with no consistency, let alone any inspiration from the IALA system. A single remark on the Noonsite website had convinced every sailor headed for Providencia that the charts were all 200m off, so I was amazed when we saw the channel extremely well lit with port and starboard marks and a safe water mark flashing at the entrance.

The only minor bemusement was that all the marks flashed on and off in perfect sync, leaving you overwhelmed and well lit up for a two seconds and then plunged into total darkness for the next two seconds. Not only was this bizarre and not ideal, but we were mystified as to how they'd even managed it short of running cables along the reef out to each marker.

Surrounded by coral reef on either side, we motored slowly down the channel and turned up past the final port marker and into the anchorage. Around six other yachts were there, spread out in just 2.5m of depth. We made our way between the sleeping yachts and found a place at the front of the group. Because we're almost always smaller than every other yacht in any Caribbean anchorage, we do this a lot

but it makes me nervous in the dark.

The next morning I tidied the boat while Alex went ashore to check in. He was back within half an hour and a bag full of bakery goods dropped over the guardwire and into the cockpit.

'Everything good?' I asked.

'Yeah,' he said with a shrug, 'the agent, Mr Bush, says "Enjoy the island."'

'That's it?'

'He took our passports and said to come back tomorrow to collect them. Then he just said, "Enjoy the island."'

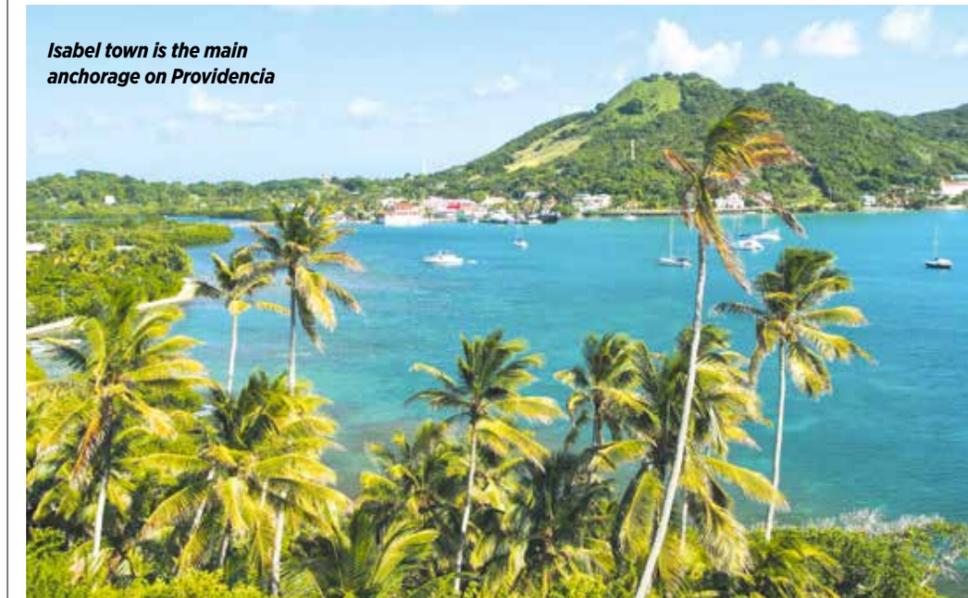
'How long can we stay?' I asked. Alex shrugged, and said the agent had been friendly but not forthcoming about details.

While Panama had been a melting pot of peoples without a unified culture or heritage, Isla Providencia had an atmosphere wholly its own. People

laughed and called to each other on the street and everybody smiled and said hello to us as we passed. The main language of Providencia may be Spanish but a large proportion of the residents speak English as their first or second language and as well as speaking a unique Creole.

The town had a passion for pumping music every Friday and Saturday night and while there we often fled south for some peace, to South West Bay just three miles down the coast at the bottom of the island. Iconic Caribbean palm trees and sand, South West is Providencia's ➔

Isabel town is the main anchorage on Providencia



South West beach provided a quiet getaway from the hustle and bustle of town



*Saturday horse racing
at South West beach*



Berwick Maid anchored at South West beach

prettiest beach and remains free from hotels and shops; just three small local restaurants adorn the shore.

One Saturday, we'd hung around at anchor, reading and daydreaming, when I realised that a crowd of islanders had gathered on the beach. I roused Alex from his sun-drenched lethargy and we jumped in the dinghy, anchoring just off the shore.

Some Saturdays, we'd heard, there was beach horse racing. It could take place at any time of the day and the crowd seemed to be drawn by word of mouth alone. Only two horses ever raced and only one race happened if at all. I could see the two horses, frisky on the narrow strip of sand, being cajoled by their riders at the far end of the beach.

The crowd filled the mid-section of the beach and as soon as the starting gun fired, the horses careered along the sand and shallows. With only metres to go, the roaring crowd parted and the riders and their animals passed through, dodging low palm fronds and enthusiastic people. The

thud on the sand could be heard across the bay and a fight broke out among the betting audience the second the first hoof crossed the line. This was no tourist event; this was a local tradition.

Surrounded by a vast reef extending nine miles north of the island and a further mile to the south, Providencia promised spectacular snorkelling and we were determined to take the boat out to the far reefs. Waiting for a windless day in the far reaches of the Trade Winds is like waiting for snow in Cornwall; it's possible but you can't get your hopes up. Nevertheless, after a couple of weeks of exploring the island and the reef along the channel, three windless days arrived.

The Christmas Winds, strong annual trades, were very late and a disintegrating cold front over the Caribbean Sea was killing the existing wind. We had a chance and grabbed it.

At 0700 one morning we motored across the reef off the northwest corner of Providencia's Santa Catalina Island and out across the drop-off. We managed to sail up with the remaining wind to the lighthouse at the northern extreme of Providencia's barrier reef and nudged our way through badly-charted coral heads.

We anchored in two metres with clear white sand beneath us and coral on either side. A few small fishing pangas were up there too, not much more than long fibreglass dinghies with 100hp outboards on the back. We swam there for two days, spearfishing jacks and glimpsing curious nurse sharks. The reef was the most alive I'd ever seen and the fish, without any tourist boats, were undaunted by humans.

As squall clouds stacked up on the eastern horizon we headed back, a rain shower hosing us down as we closed in on Santa Catalina again, Providencia's miniature neighbour.

Connected by a rickety wooden footbridge, Santa Catalina historically protected the islanders and a long promenade brings you round to a set of cannons atop a cliff. We later explored the walkable sections of this islet and as we descended onto a tiny sandy beach just round from the fortifications, we bumped into Carlos William.

'Welcome my friends, where are you from?' he asked, unfolding his tall frame from a hammock.

'England,' we replied.

'Ah England! We too are English here,' he said, his fist thumping over his heart. 'You know Henry Morgan was English? The pirate?' We nodded. 'Around these rocks here is Morgan's underwater cave, he used to hide his treasure here long ago.'

Indeed, the whole of Providencia is geared up to Henry Morgan, littered with legends and evidence of his visits. As we walked to Morgan's Head rock and looked across the ocean to Nicaragua, we stood metres away from more than one hidden cave. I couldn't help thinking that Isla Providencia was an El Dorado after all. ▲

Kitiara Pascoe

Kitiara is a 27-year-old freelance writer who learnt to sail when her partner Alex bought and refitted their Nicholson 32, *Berwick Maid*, in 2013. With Southampton as their home port, learning to sail in the Solent gave her the ambition to sail to warmer climates. *Berwick Maid* is currently in the Azores, following a two-year Atlantic circuit.

