

# ***PROVIDENCIA ISLAND***

By J A Rogers



## **PROVIDENCIA ISLAND**

Having an auxiliary engine on a sailboat is something like carrying a firearm. Both give a false sense of security. Not to worry, we'll just blast our way through! Without them you must be more careful, but because you are, you take fewer chances and probably end up having a better time.

Waiting for weather is always of prime importance, and after transiting the Panama Canal in October, we waited in the San Blas Islands for the end of hurricane season before heading toward Florida. At that time of the year, winds can be very light and wind direction is also affected by Panama's high mountains. But as the mountains faded into the distance 20 miles astern, we found a steady east wind, mild seas, and soon we were sailing a fast reach toward Providencia Island.

After two days of perfect sailing and with only a compass and sextant to find our way, we sighted Providencia's high green profile rising on the horizon around nightfall. Having a small scale chart and only simple sketches in a cruising guide to navigate the reefs around the island,

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we decided it best to sail in circles all night a couple of miles off the southwest coast and wait for daylight. In the morning we were met by a friendly local fisherman alone in a small boat who guided us all the way in to the anchorage. He lead us over the clear shallow water until we were close to shore. When he signalled us to turn north, we followed close by the island inside a reef which protects the main anchorage off the town of Isabel. There we found several familiar cruising boats from previous anchorages resting peacefully.

Storms at sea can cause the normally crystal clear water surrounding Providencia to become clouded for short periods, but usually the anchorage off Isabel is in clear water over a sand bottom near a concrete pier used for loading and unloading a freight boat which arrives regularly with supplies from San Andres 50 miles to the south.

Soon after our arrival, we were invited by the friendly islanders to a beach party that takes place almost every day on a beautiful coconut palm lined sandy beach about two miles south of Isabel called Fresh Water Bay. There are fresh water shower stalls on the beach where you can indulge yourself for a change and then feast on Rondon, a delicious stew of pigs' tails, whole freshly killed chickens, carrots, yucca, potatoes, and bananas. A big pot is cooked over an open fire on the beach and all are welcome.

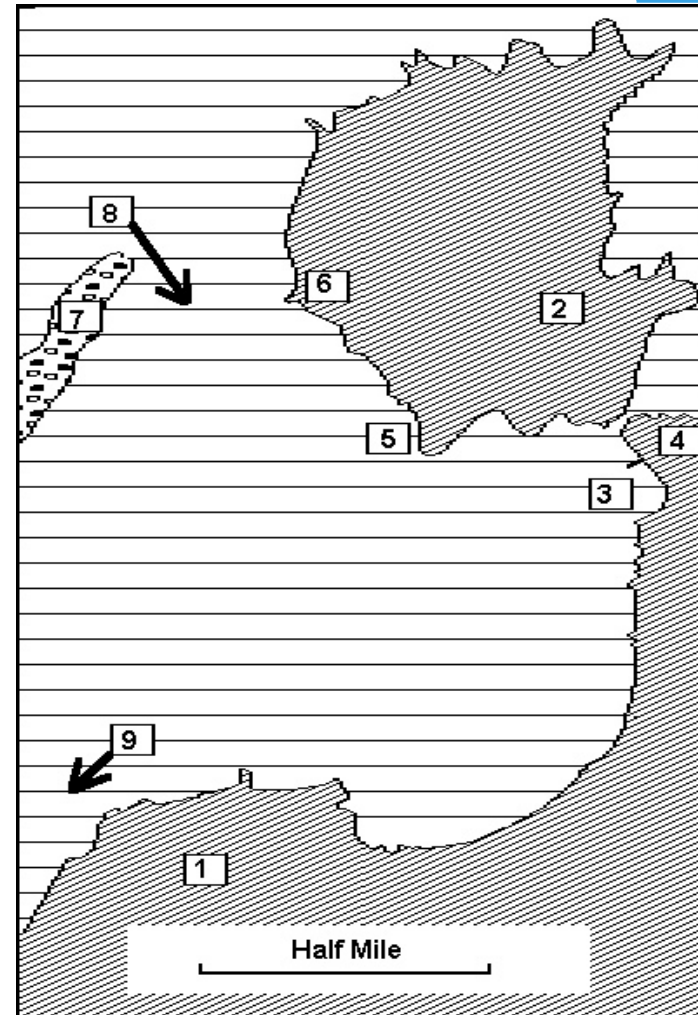
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**Sketch to Right:** 1. Providencia Island. 2. Santa Catalina Island 3. Anchorage near concrete pier. 4. Town of Isabel 5. Good snorkelling. 6. Morgan's Head. 7. Reef. 8. Approach to anchorage from outside reef. 9. Approach to anchorage from inside reef close to shore.

The sea is the main food source for Providencia, and lobster can be a steady diet there! In spite of fertile volcanic soil that can produce limes the size of oranges and delicious guavas, the islanders depend more on imported items than they do on their own agriculture. And imported fruits and vegetables are expensive. Bakery items and a few supplies are available in one of the general stores in town.



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There is excellent diving of all kinds around the island. A fascinating snorkeling experience teeming with fish swimming through colorful coral formations in shallow water is only a short distance from the anchorage at Isabel near the ruins of Fort Amy on the southern point of Santa Catalina which is the small island barely detached from the rest of Providencia.

Europeans tossed Providencia back and forth during the early centuries as they plundered the New World. Now a territory of Colombia, the island was traded to them by Britain for other real estate. Before that, it was called Santa Catalina by the Spaniards who had built a fort in the northwestern part and used it as a provisioning stop for their treasure galleons sailing the western Caribbean. Henry Morgan and his band of pirates overran the fortifications and took the island from Spain prior to Morgan's looting and burning of Panama. It is



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primarily the descendants of Morgan's pirates who now reside on Providencia. Most of them speak English clearly with visitors, but among themselves they speak a unique language all their own that sounds strangely familiar and had the curious effect of making you smile!

Administered by the Colombian government along with the island of San Andres to the south, the two islands could not be more different. San Andres is a flat coral island where many cruising boats stop on their way north and south. By contrast, Providencia is a lush high island of volcanic origin, less often visited by cruising boats, and according to some, with a more reasonable port captain!

Stories varied widely among other boaters concerning what the port captain's charges were for checking in and out of Providencia. Perhaps that is why he waited until boats were leaving before assessing the fee for each one. Someone recommended the use of an agent whose name we were given. But after we arranged for him to do our paper work, we found the agent (who was also a frozen fish and ice cream salesman) had accidentally packed our papers in a crate of frozen fish!

In late fall or winter, strong winds from the north generated by the weather fronts in North America can reach all the way down to Providencia, and one of those fronts was in the area as

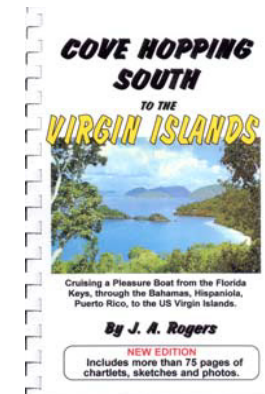
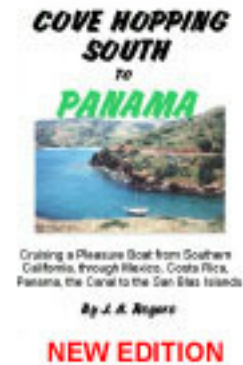
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we prepared to leave for Cozumel. Waiting for it to pass, we were able to pick up the English language commercial radio broadcasts from Grand Cayman Island with the weather report for the western Caribbean. Commercial stations from the Florida Keys and the Bahamas could also sometimes be heard clearly.

When the weather reports were for winds returning to the east, we went to the port captain to check out and found that negotiating with him directly was not so bad. He was one of the few people on the island who spoke Spanish and being able to communicate with him in his own language helped. Plus we coordinated our departure with other boaters leaving at the same time, which kept us from being overcharged.



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