



Venezuela's Hurricane Chavez

Once a hurricane haven and maintenance hub, cruisers are now wrestling with the question: Should we go there?

By Louise Wollman

Like graduating students everywhere they wore mortarboards and gowns. Except in June 2007, 23 of 73 Venezuelan journalism majors tied black bands across their mouths, symbolic gags protesting President Hugo Chavez's closing of the country's largest, longest-running TV station, and its loudest opposing voice.

It was stirring. Also brave, in a country where dissent has the potential for being dangerous. Their symbolic silence added to the voices of other students marching in most Venezuelan university towns.

They proved freedom still lives there. People do say what they feel about Chavez—out loud even—and Venezuelans still travel freely outside the country.

That Chavez is a dictator bent on total control is clear, but whether a repressive dictator of the Castro or Pinochet stripe remains to be seen. Venezuelans are anxious, marking time, wondering if he will drop the other shoe...and if so, will it be a military boot?

Cruisers, too, share this uncertainty: Sí or no, to come or not to come—for boat work or just to while away a hurricane season. Cruising on no particular schedule allows us to drop into a culture

for a while, to live and be part of a place, to form connections, yet observe and evaluate.

In 2001 and 2002, my husband and I, liveaboards, spent more than a year in those Venezuelan ports and islands considered safe—sometimes weeks, sometimes months—living comfortably and cheaply among a vibrant, outgoing people.

During that time the currency lost 40 percent. Many viewed Chavez, mercurial and erratic, as a *chistoso*—a clown. On April 11, 2002, he was kidnapped and fleetingly unseated. The opposition floundered and folded within 36 hours. Afterward he dramatically reinforced his power base.

In May 2007, we returned to the northern coastal city of Puerto La Cruz, near Caracas, a magnet for vacationing Venezuelans. Its suburban El Morro district is an enclave for boat maintenance, an inexpensive alternative to sweltering, far-from-downtown, sardined-in-a-marina Trinidad conditions.

We came again for routine boat work—paint, gelcoat, galvanizing, welding and waxing. Elsewhere in the Caribbean, and even in the United States, boat work is sometimes crummy and cheap but more frequently mediocre and expensive.

We had deliberated about crime: boardings, beatings, even a double murder, which subsequent rumors churned and magnified. But Puerto La Cruz cruisers told us these incidents occurred in habitually dangerous nearby anchorages. The murders, though heinous, involved intra-Venezuelan grudges. We decided Venezuela was no more dangerous than, say, St. Lucia, St. Vincent or Trinidad.

EXPECTATIONS AND HARD REALITIES

We expected Venezuela's typical efficiency and quality, unequalled and at unheard-of prices. The inflation rate and still-falling Bolivar enhanced that package.

Change initially whacked us in the face. Merely getting price quotations took more than a week. "Mañana," literally "tomorrow," now meant "not today." And "not tomorrow" either.

Our boat, on the tarmac under a relentless sun, turned into an inferno. We moved into Maremares, a huge hotel and marina complex. Internet connectivity—and hot water—were iffy. After a government takeover several years ago Maremares was never upgraded and the docks poorly kept. Only



Journalism graduates protesting Chavez's closing of a TV station, previous page. The mansion-lined canals in Venezuela's Puerto La Cruz

the five-star status was maintained.

Still, price controls were becoming onerous at the local, personal level. Big swaths of empty supermarket cases: beef and chicken disappeared for weeks; eggs and milk were scarce. At one restaurant, no steak for the fajitas, no milk for the coffee and no bottled water. Did the manager under-order or did supplies dwindle?

Food stores limited purchases—so many per customer. Chavez offers free food coupons; but people stood on long lines and got little they wanted.

Farmers and ranchers apparently stopped producing or were selling on the black market. *The Wall Street Journal* reported Chavez taking over farms, giving them to city folk with no farming experience. Which aligns with his socialist agenda, and is typically shortsighted.

We, the well off, knowing the right find-it-all wheeler-dealer, could get meat and chicken—even vacuum packed and frozen. Black-market money exchange, once a scary street transaction, has become a ho-hum operation. Despite an official rate of 2,150 Bolivars per dollar, 3,800 was common and 4,800 predicted. Few use credit cards

because they are routinely kited.

But we could not order a dinghy from either major Venezuelan factory. Production of larger dinghies was virtually stopped. Management feared the government could freeze employment levels and Chavez offer complimentary jobs with unlimited futures to the unskilled poor he champions.

Was our boatyard's excruciatingly slow pace merely seasonal, as claimed, or really caused by fear of a packed payroll?

Feeling menaced, the owner of a small dinghy-repair operation now worked alone. The “riff-raff” (her implication, not her words) were protesting their pay; picking fights, not patching seams. Better be rid of them while still possible.

A Brazilian oil businessman said excessive regulations, official corruption and trade obstructions make companies give up; if an important-enough industry, the government simply takes over. An inflated Bolivar eliminated imported products. Chavez ignores the crumbling infrastructure.

When Chavez rewrote the existing contracts of major U.S. companies, slashing their percentages, they retaliated by closing. One

cruiser-veteran said Conoco-Phillips alone sent home 80 families who had rented handsome canal homes. Their former cooks, gardeners, nannies and chauffeurs joined the unemployed.

It would be wholly consistent with previous statements suggesting have-nots steal from haves, if Chavez invited people to squat in those empty homes, owned by real-estate fat cats.

Said one (middle-class) Venezuelan. “He’s counting on the poor making him Emperor.”

SHOULD CRUISERS COME?

I say, “Provisionally, yes.” The Chavez toll is being paid by the Venezuelan people and their economy. Venezuela is still a financial bonanza for foreigners.

In Puerto La Cruz dinghy fuel costs an astonishing five cents. Diesel, which went for six cents in 2006, was unavailable but the fuel dock and pumps were being overhauled. Predictions were this plum franchise would go to a Chavez amigo.

The downtown offers shopping, eating and evening strolls along the palmed waterfront amid energetic crafts vendors. We never, for one moment, felt threatened. Nor did our friends.

El Morro is a charming canal system chockablock with colorful condos and luxury homes, though pockets of blight and abandoned construction do exist. Cruisers zip everywhere by dinghy, including Plaza Mayor, a busy, multi-level mall with food court, markets, restaurants and pharmacies that dispense without prescription. Well-trained dentists and doctors (including laser and plastic surgeons) charge nothing that approaches their American colleagues.

The chief marinas sit at opposite



The author and her husband, Gary Strutin, at the Maremares pool

ends of the canals, both with pools and 24-hour security. The more popular Bahía Redonda charges \$12 daily, including electricity and water. Maremares costs \$25 on a daily basis and \$18 long term, including electric, water, a telephone, even clean towels. Meanwhile Trinidad's Crews Inn had increased slip rates to 63 cents per foot, 50-foot minimum, plus water and electricity, increasing Venezuela's desirability as a hurricane-season destination.

able alternatives to Venezuela and Trinidad. Reported crimes against cruisers have increased in Trinidad but actually declined in Venezuela.

Still, no one steps out into Bahía Redonda's dangerous surrounding barrio. But cab rides most everywhere are a few dollars; drivers are waiting and organized to serve cruisers. From Maremares you can walk, day or night, to a large mall, a bakery and assorted restaurants.

BONANZAS

Insurance companies have always nixed Cartagena, Columbia, arguably the best Caribbean hurricane hole. Since Hurricane Ivan, some restrict Grenada and some even Bonaire and Curaçao, limiting the most reason-

There's a morning net on VHF 72, potlucks and people to help you get anything done, even in Spanish.

As for us, our boat work eventually got done and done beautifully. Once begun it proceeded efficiently, as promised. Hauling and blocking our 61-foot sailboat cost about \$400. Labor for two paint coats, including preparation, cost \$350. Seahawk's Islands 44, the current favorite among ablative bottom paints, cost \$200 a gallon, including tax, compared to \$240 in St. Lucia. Tin boosters are available.

When we beat our own 48-hour record for destroying new gelcoat—by marrying our newly finished transom to a concrete wall—the boatyard fit us into the schedule, fixed us in the water and charged just \$140.

Like almost anywhere nowadays, we cruisers need to pick

PUERTO LA CRUZ'S EL MORRO DISTRICT

CRUISER NET: 0745 on VHF 72, Mon-Sat

HAILING CHANNEL: VHF 72

SAFETY & SECURITY NET: 0815 on SSB 8104 Upper Side Band

www.safetyandsecuritynet.com to check for incident updates by country

MONEY EXCHANGE at "discount" or "black-market" rates, as opposed to the bank rate—2,150 in July 2007—is available from many sources and sometimes even in retail stores. Though officially illegal, you will learn word-of-mouth. Paying in Bolivars, you can get, effectively, about a 40% discount on all purchases.

Effective January 2008, a new Bolivar Fuerte will be coined. Old money will lose its last three zeros, so 1,000 Bs will become 1 B. Old currency is usable through April 2008, but as of October 2007, all prices will be quoted in Bs F.

BOATYARDS

TMO: TechMarine de Oriente, C.A.

Contact: Paola Brand

Tel: (0281) 267 7011

pbrand@techmarine.com.ve

70-ton Travelift, biggest in the area, hauling multihulls up to

21 feet wide. Also motorized multihull trailer. You can work on your own boat at a charge of 5,000 Bs (about \$1.35) per foot per day. No outside contractors allowed. All other marinas allow you to work on your own boat free. Restaurant steps away.

AquaVi Marina & Boatyard

Contact: Victor Diaz de León

aquavimarina@cantv.net

50-ton lift. Outside contractors allowed but they pay a commission to the yard.

Attached hotel with restaurant

PR Yacht Service (at Bahía Redonda)

Contact: Rolando

rolando@bahiairedonda.com

boatyard@bahiairedonda.com

50-ton lift. Trailer for multihulls any length, up to 9 meters (29.5 feet) wide

Outside contractors pay a commission to the yard.

Nearby restaurant at Bahía Redonda Marina

MARINAS

Maremares Hotel & Marina

Manager: America Perez

Dockmaster: Jean

marina@maremares.com

VHF 71

our terrain. I wouldn't suggest Caracas, Araya or Puerto La Cruz's immediate environs. Neither would I walk through Baghdad blithely. Experience says we are as secure as possible sticking to recommended and well-trodden paths: empty Tortuga, Los Roques, Los Testigos, parts of the Golfo de Carioco, Blanquilla and probably Juangriego. We are watched over and well cared for in Porlamar and Puerto La Cruz. Heed other cruisers' warnings and never anchor alone. Avoid the

offshore islands and nearby shore points, where there are desperately poor people who believe we are rich.

SUPPORT

Some Venezuelans think Chavez can't go much further. His past says otherwise. Without significant support from other leaders and world public opinion the burgeoning dissent will fizzle, the complaints come to naught.

Later in June Chavez told his

people to prepare for guerilla war with Americans. Canny and calculating, he loves to "strut his stuff," an anti-U.S. stance that plays well to the ignorant and disgruntled, to anti-U.S. foreign opinion. But he also knows America, his best customer, for the most part ignores his rants.

Clearly, cruisers need to carefully monitor the news and the Safety and Security net for any significant changes.

But stop coming? Not us. Not yet. ≈

54 slips, enormous pool, cable TV, some WiFi available; towels and boat telephone supplied. Sunday night cruiser potlucks. Hotel has 3 restaurants

Bahía Redonda International Marina

Manager: Carlos Vasquez

Dockmaster: Jesus Potter (known as Potter)

brmi@cantv.net

160 slips, WiFi, cable TV pool, restaurant, Monday night potlucks; 1, 2 and 3 bedroom apartments available for rent

SERVICES & CHANDLERIES: From canvas to dinghy repair to galvanizing chain, almost every yacht trade is represented—frequently in duplicates. Given language differences it is frequently easier to contact someone skilled in assisting cruisers. Or, the other surefire method: ask your boat neighbors. There are three primary chandleries, Xanadu, Vemasca and Auto Boat. Auto Boat is most like a West Marine but since imported products are scarce, you won't necessarily find what you're craving. Our lives ran much smoother once we met Charlie Alpha (see below):

EXPEDITING:

Charlie Alpha is Carlos Andres Gonzalez. He was educated in the U.S., and speaks perfect English. Call him Carlos or Charlie, he assists cruisers with any project—from handling check-in/check-out papers; to expediting chain galvanizing; to finding products, sources and taxi drivers; to interfacing with boatyards; to arranging travel. When the Bahía Redonda staff was unavailable to hook us up with electricity late one Saturday afternoon, Charlie had us plugged in within 15 minutes.

VHF 72

Cell: 0412 859 7070

charliealphams@yahoo.com; www.charliealpha.com.ve

TAXI DRIVERS

Unless otherwise noted, each speaks good English.

Most can be hailed on VHF 72

Leo: 0416 480 90 28, handy for finding boat parts.

Andreas 0416 784 5525

Arnaldo: 0414 808 6589

PROVISIONING

Unicasa is a full-service market located in dinghy-accessible Plaza Mayor. Bahía Redonda Marina has a small mini-mart, run by Ann Robinson, for rudimentary basics. Many other markets, like CM (Central Madeirense) are accessible by inexpensive taxi ride.

Panaderia Plaza Mayor: full service bakers, also offering Italian baguettes (called Pan Sicilian) and an array of Italian deli products.

La Baguette, a short walk outside Maremares, on Avenida Americo Vespuccio, fine bread, light breakfasts and sandwiches.

La Cava is a real butcher shop in nearby Lecherias, easily reachable by taxi. Butchers take orders (pork, plus chicken and beef, whenever in stock), custom-cut and wrap it while you wait. Or, will freeze and vacuum pack it for pickup later. A rear case holds frozen roasts, ribs, chops, lamb, turkey and lomito (Venezuelan filet steak.)

El Mercadito: a small outdoor "farmers" market for fruit, vegetable, cheese, butter, featuring different vendors. Cheaper than supermarkets; eggs usually available. On Avenida Americo Vespuccio, a short taxi ride from Maremares.

Farmacia Locaté! with several branches, is near the playground in Plaza Mayor. Wide selection of medications at big savings over the US; most prescription unnecessary.

NOTABLE in DOWNTOWN PUERTO LA CRUZ:

Every night, but particularly on weekends, people stroll and shop the lovely main drag, Paseo Colon, then stop for a shawarma (Middle Eastern meat or chicken wrap) at El Amir Palace, on the western end of the street.