



Ducking below the Caribbean's hurricane belt in happier days, Nick and Jenny Coghlan find tranquility in South American waters now deserted, where Predator drones rule the skies

IN A SEA LESS TRAVELLED

*une too soon
July stand by
August a must
September you'll
remember
October all over*

This is a rhyme that everyone in the Caribbean knows, to remind themselves of the approach of the hurricane

season. Climate change means it's not as reliable a guide as it once was, but for decades the month of June has seen cruisers seeking a mooring in one of the Caribbean's few hurricane holes; or heading south, below 10 degrees.

In happier times, Venezuela was the default destination: wonderful empty beaches on

ABOVE
Margarita Island,
once a popular
tourist destination

the offshore islands, a mainland coastline deeply indented with jungly coves and toucans in the trees, friendly people. And – if yours was a power boat – fuel cheaper than bottled water.

Back in 1988, we spent days hanging around in the crowded anchorage at St George's, Grenada, waiting for the passage of a tropical



wave – a trough that brings heavy clouds, thunderstorms, squalls and a shift in the wind from east to southeast – before we decided it was the right time to make our move to Venezuelan waters. It was just two days before that ‘July stand by’ warning was due to kick in.

Los Testigos, a small group of near-desert islands 90 miles to the southwest, was our first stop. They could not have been a greater contrast to buzzing Grenada. There were eight or ten cruising boats scattered among three anchorages, each of which had its own sandy beach and colourful snorkelling among

the fringing rocks. We spent the days swimming or walking in the dry, scrub-covered hills on the biggest island: a few cacti, perhaps refreshed by the tropical wave, were flowering. From the 250m summit we could see all the way to Margarita Island, 40 miles to the west, and to the mainland of South America. There was a small village that consisted of a few makeshift fishermen’s shacks and a more substantial pair of buildings that housed a three-person navy detachment. The young Teniente was wearing shorts and a tee-shirt with holes: he barely glanced at our papers and wished

ABOVE
The bay of Los Testigos

BELOW LEFT
Hiking behind the naval station, Los Testigos

BELOW RIGHT
On the beach at Los Testigos

us a happy stay in Venezuela; we should check in more formally at Margarita, he said.

Life for the fishermen looked to be hard. Then was no naturally occurring water in the islands, no electricity. Lacking ice, they would dry their catch in the open, which made for a stench around the settlement and great clouds of flies. When a second tropical wave came through, everyone rushed to bring in the fish and, instead, put out big blue plastic drums wherever drips accumulated. We took advantage of it to let our dinghy accumulate 2cm of water and used it as a bathtub.





Isla Margarita

Pampatar, the most popular anchorage on Isla Margarita, was in those times a Venezuelan tourist trap and one of those not-especially-attractive places to which cruising boats gravitate in large numbers and become inexplicably rooted. One enterprising husband-and-wife crew who spoke Spanish had taken advantage of this phenomenon and offered a service called Shore Base. They would take your paperwork around the necessary stops – customs, immigration and so on – for a fee of 350 Bolivars (the actual fees involved totalled 30 Bs). We very much prefer to do such things ourselves. This is all part of cruising life and while some officials can be difficult, we usually find that with a few polite words and a little flattery about their country, we make new friends.

But Pampatar, we had to admit, had its uses. We'd been experiencing problems for months with our alternator.

The Electro Auto Caribe saved us. Chief mechanic Antonio confirmed my diagnosis that the regulator – a little box on the back – was at fault. No, he didn't have another in stock, he said. But then, after some thought, he said "a Fiat will do." He asked us to wait, went out of the front door of his workshop and looked up and down the street. We watched him walk away and around the corner. He was back 20 minutes later, with a used regulator, wires and all. We were sure Antonio had simply lifted it from an unsuspecting car owner. But it worked.

We sailed out to the islands again, this time to La Blanquilla. There is a picture-perfect cove on the western side of this island – described by cruising doyen Don Street as the most beautiful beach in the Caribbean – that is known as the Bahía del Americano. The gringo in question was long gone, the house he had built in ruins, the airstrip, to which he once flew his millionaire

ABOVE LEFT
The dinghy guard greets us; Pampatar, Isla Margarita

ABOVE CENTRE
Cayo Herradura, Isla La Tortuga

BELOW LEFT
Bahia del Americano – Isla La Blanquilla

BELOW RIGHT
Local fishermen eager to trade, Isla La Tortuga

friends, overgrown and unusable. We had the place to ourselves. One night we made a fire with driftwood gathered from the beach, baking two large potatoes in foil in the embers, accompanied by a can of beans. As the fire died, we watched the stars setting over the empty ocean to the west.

La Tortuga

At La Tortuga, reached after another night sail – this time to the southwest – we anchored first at Playa Caldera. Two fishermen and a young boy came out to see us. They presented us with a mero – a grouper – and Jenny went below to find what we could offer in return. Counterintuitively, it was two small tins featuring Charlie the Tuna, which had been with us for at least two years, that lit their eyes up. As they prepared to head back, one of the men hesitated, then said:

'Oiga...Listen, if you see anything, or hear anything in the night, don't worry.





But don't come out. Me entiende? Understand?'

Later that day, we came across the wreckage of two light planes on a makeshift landing strip behind the shacks on shore. No, those planes were not the result of poor flying by Caracas playboys, we learned. La Tortuga was a transit point for drugs bound for Florida; the wrecks represented a couple of shipments gone wrong. The noises we should ignore would be from clandestine night landings and/or high-speed launches.

We moved to a location the fishermen recommended, where no-one would 'molestar' us: Cayo Herradura, (Horseshoe Key), a low, flat island off the northwest corner of the big island.

When I think back, all these years later and after 70,000 miles at sea, it seems to me that of the hundreds of places we have dropped our anchor, this one was especially memorable. We could see our chain as it snaked away on the white sand

bottom. There were kilometres of shimmering pristine beaches, pelicans at the shoreline, manta rays and angel fish in the shallows. As we snorkelled, we could hear the parrotfish munching on coral. We brought on board a few of the more interesting (uninhabited) shells we found, along with the jaws of a shark that must have fallen victim to the fishermen a year or two earlier. There was even an interesting if enigmatic morsel of history, something I always appreciate. Wedged among coral rocks and old conch shells behind the beach was a cracked plaque that told us that German polymath and explorer Alexander von Humboldt was at Cayo Herradura in July 1799.

There were signs even in 1988 that paradise was threatened: the two wrecked aircraft, the fishermen's warning.

Since our season off the coast of Venezuela, the country's economy has collapsed; amid political chaos, millions of people have become refugees in neighbouring countries;

ABOVE
Approaching
Cayo Herradura

BELOW LEFT
Wreckage of a
narco plane, Isla
La Tortuga

BELOW RIGHT
On the beach,
Cayo Herradura

**ABOUT THE
AUTHOR:**
Nick and Jenny
Coughlan have sailed
70,000 miles offshore
in two successive 27ft
boats. Nick's latest
book - *Under Wide
and Starry Skies: Fifty
Sailing Destinations in
Seas less Travelled* -
was published in 2025
by Adlard Coles (UK)

narcotraffickers rule the coast. Dramatically, in January of this year and after having assembled a massive naval fleet offshore, the US launched a night-time military operation to abduct President Nicolas Maduro and his wife and bring them to trial in the USA.

The future of Venezuela today looks more uncertain than ever. What was at best an edgy destination is now a definitive no-go for cruising sailors and land-based tourists alike. Neighbouring Colombia, which had largely rebuilt its reputation for safety and hospitality to cruisers after many years in the wilderness, has gone off-limits too, its coastal waters under the vigilance of all-seeing American Predator drones.

The upper jaw of the shark is on the wall above our dining table at our home on Salt Spring Island in British Columbia as I sit writing this, and the shells are on the windowsills. For all that, Venezuela and Cayo Herradura seem almost impossibly distant at present. ✦

