

San Blas and Matanchén Bay have new rules for visiting yateros

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San Blas is a mid-sized fishing harbor on the mainland side of the Sea of Cortez, often overlooked by the megayachts as they cruise between the resort ports of Puerto Vallarta and Mazatlan. But for relaxed cruisers on shorter-legged yachts moving between the two big destinations, little San Blas makes a convenient fuel stop and rest area. Adjacent Matanchén Bay is a major stop on the surfing circuit.

We covered the San Blas region in our nautical guidebook, “Mexico Boating Guide.” Hurricane Kenna thoroughly trounced San Blas when it made landfall here in late summer of 2002, and the entrance had some big waves during Hurricane Marty in 2003.

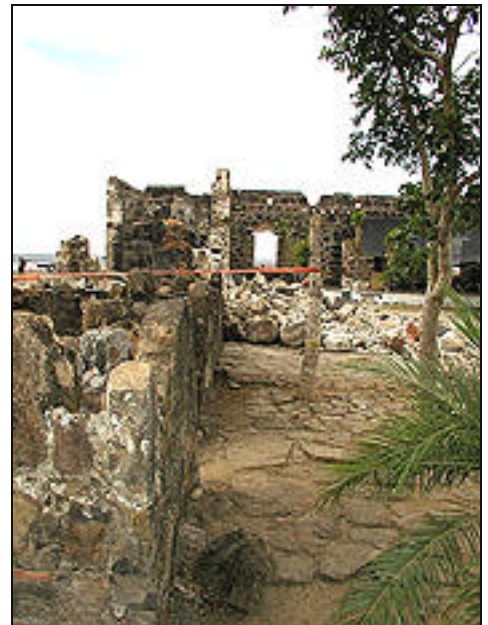
We stopped in at San Blas and Matanchén Bay to see how well the harbor facilities had been repaired and if the nearby anchorages had recovered their former beauty. We post our Updates page on www.MexicoBoating.com so check there often for news from us and *Baja Insider*, too.

The good news is that San Blas and its environs are up and running – but with three significant changes of importance to boaters.

SHIP’S AGENT

First, US boaters should note that the Port Captain of San Blas, Ing. Hector Leal Soberanes, now requires recreational boaters to use the services of a local ship’s agent to handle their port-clearance paperwork and to arrange for the boat to take on fuel. This includes boats anchored in adjacent Matanchén Bay.

Soon after San Blas reopened, San Blas got a new ship’s agent just for yachts and recreational sportfishers. You can contact Ing. Irma Fernandas Zuñiga Bugarini on VHF-16 or 22, and her office in the center of San Blas is at #143 H. Batallon. If you’re going to walk from the dinghy landing, take the street to the right, go three blocks east to H. Batallon and turn left. A sign marks her office. You can phone Agent Irma: 011-52 (323) 285-1025. The port clearance fee is 200 pesos (about \$20 US), the minimum charge nationwide, and it includes the Port Captain’s office, Migración, Aduana and the bank lines.



Restoration is still going on at the old Spanish fort atop the only hill in San Blas. Hurricanes brought down huge blocks of stone that had stood for 300 years

“Boaters can just hail me as Agent Irma,” she says. She speaks perfect English and knows all the local repair services. Clearing in and out in one operation is still the fastest and least expensive way to go, especially if you’re stopping just for fuel or one or two overnight stays. However, if you clear in and stay awhile, give Agent Irma a 24-hour notice to begin your outgoing clearance papers. By the way, the “Ing.” before her name means she has a PhD.



Agent Irma: The newest ship's agent in San Blas is the lovely Ing. Irma Zuniga, who speaks perfect English. Hail her as "Agent Irma" on VHF-22 or 16.

CHEAP FUEL

Second, the price of diesel and gasoline in San Blas is reported among the lowest along Pacific Mexico, because there’s no “pipa” or tie-up fee – at least for now. This benefit won’t last forever; it’s intended to help the community of San Blas get back on its feet economically after Hurricane Kenna’s devastating blow.



Until the special discount is removed, San Blas fuel dock has one of the cheapest diesel prices on Pacific Mexico

The nicer fuel dock for yachts is along the northeastern side of the harbor channel. It is a high stationary concrete deck, about 200’ long on the channel side, about 100’ long on the perpendicular basin side. At lower tides, boaters should constantly tend their dock lines to keep the gunwales from slipping beneath the concrete ledge and getting damaged.

We won’t quote exact fuel prices, because they can change before publication and are often based upon the quantity purchased. However, about \$2 per gallon is typical throughout Mexico. Fueling in San Blas could be a new and interesting stop for sportfishing boats heading to and from the tournaments at Mazatlan and PV.

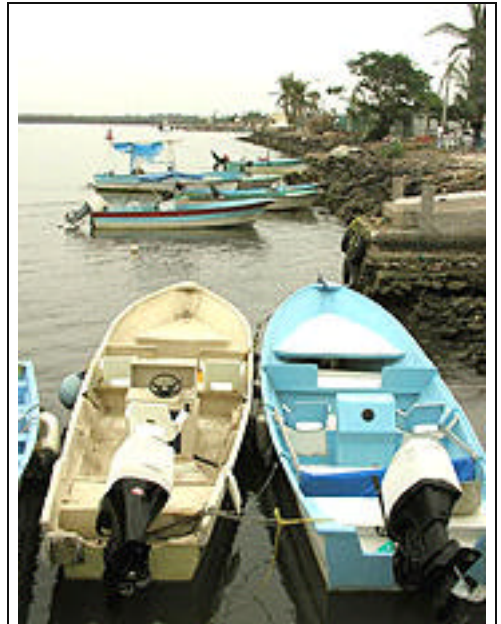
PILOT SERVICE

Third, especially since Hurricane Marty in 2003, silt continues to wash down into San Blas harbor’s narrow entrance channel from the surrounding mountains and estuaries, so the bending channel into San Blas harbor shifts its position every few months.

“Boaters should not follow the range markers or they will be in trouble,” says Norm Goldie, a local sportfishing captain well known to cruisers for the past 10 years. We saw local shrimpers with 8’ draft having no problem coming and going, even with the

maximum 3-knot current – but they know where the shoals are that day. New summer storms of 2004 will add to this problem before dredges can clear the harbor and reset the channel buoys.

Instead, boaters should hail “Captain Norm” on VHF-22 and Goldie will come out in one of his boats and pilot them in. Goldie has lived in San Blas for many years and is well known as “the cruisers’ friend” for his helpful advice on dozens of local services.



Until the floating dock is rebuilt, the dinghy landing is here, along the starboard side of the channel

Until a few years ago, Goldie acted as San Blas' unofficial ship's agent by



San Blas is a good place to reprovision for wonderful fruits & veggies not readily found on Baja

National Museum at Tepic and in other galleries around the world.

ANCHORAGES

Once you've been piloted safely inside the harbor, the main anchorage is along the west side of the North-South channel. Anchor opposite the second basin that opens off the east side of the channel. Don't block the channel, because shrimpers and small commercial fishing boats steam through here at full throttle – often with the current behind them.

Anchor in about 10' to 13' of water over good holding mud. The Port Captain posts a guard at the dinghy landing, found on the east side of the channel before the two basins. The guard can give you directions in Spanish and will watch your dinghy while you go ashore.

MATANCHÉN BAY

Matanchén Bay has scads of palapas where you can leave your dinghy, but Goldie says Ismael's is safest. Matanchén Bay lies about 3.5 miles east of San Blas harbor, beyond Punta Camarones and another point that are both fringed with breakers. The best anchoring spots in Matanchén Bay are in the northwest corner, north of Punta Camarones. Anchor in 15' to 22' over soft mud. Goldie recommends that Ismael's Ramada is the only secure place to land a dinghy and have someone watch over it, especially if you go ashore at night. Painted bright turquoise, this friendly seafood cantina has water for showers and they speak English. From Ismael's beach, it's a half-mile walk to the crossroads village of Los Islitas where a regular bus takes you into San Blas.

Our worst complaint about San Blas and Matanchén Bay is the "no-see-ums" – a microscopic gnat with a nasty bite – that come out for a few hours when the wind dies at sunset. Boaters can spray their screens with House & Garden Insect Spray or slather on the Canadian Watkins insect repellent cream or Avon's Skin So Soft. Or burn coconut husks below deck like incense, which is what many of the locals do.

Private homes in town suffered the worst damage. When Hurricane Kenna stopped directly over San Blas, it brought winds in excess of 100 mph and dumped torrential rains for several days before moving inland. Kenna tore off the roofs and flooded the interiors, washing the mortar out of the brick walls. The Port Captain told us that 90% of the homes were reduced to piles of rubble.

helping visiting "yateros" get their papers cleared and arrange for fuel and other services. However, Goldie said he became disillusioned "after too many cruisers became shirk-laws and tried to sneak in without clearing papers." He added, "Don't come here if you don't want to abide by the law."

Sportfishing aboard his Mako 20 with 140 Johnsons now occupies most of Goldie's time. He loves to take visitors fishing or act as guide on other people's boats. The local catches are marlin, sailfish, dorado, snook, corbina, red snapper and Spanish mackerel. Goldie refers visiting boaters to local services, but does not collect a commission. His wife, Janet Mary de Goldie, is an artist who honors the region's indigenous Huichol tribes. Her watercolors and limited-edition lithographs are exhibited in the



San Blas' main harbor has lots of room for the local shrimper fleet, here tied several hulls deep in the first basin, before you reach the fuel dock. Note the Pemex sign in the background



The main Zocalo is great for people watching

Fortunately, the 50,000 residents of San Blas and its vicinity had been evacuated to shelters in upland Tepic. After the storm, the Mexican Army arrived to prevent looting and to operate the heavy equipment that reopened the roads and got basic power and water back online.

Anyone who lost their home was given all the materials necessary to rebuild it, thanks to an array of disaster relief organizations. Many international NGOs donated cash, equipment and supplies. Mexican Army soldiers and marines trucked in concrete blocks, plywood, spools of electrical cables and miles of new water pipes, then they stayed to rebuild the infrastructure. All the hotels, restaurants and tourist services are

alive and well – with a fresh coat of paint.

GOLDIE'S HOSPITAL

Norm Goldie organized assistance for a small local hospital for those without insurance, and boaters planning to visit San Blas could bring down much needed medicines – anything from aspirin to chemotherapy drugs, even out-of-date prescriptions for any common ailments such as arthritis and high-blood pressure. He said the hospital can make good use of cash for the Medicine Fund and of any medical equipment, especially a small EKG unit.

Clothing for men, women and children for donation to the hospital's patients can be brought to Goldie's home near the harbor. Children who have been displaced by Mother Nature appreciate a few toys as well.

For more information about donations to help San Blas recover from hurricane damage, boaters may contact Goldie by phone: 011-52 (323) 285-0238.

Our special thanks to our new friends at Point Loma Publishing for sharing this article with us - Tomasiado

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