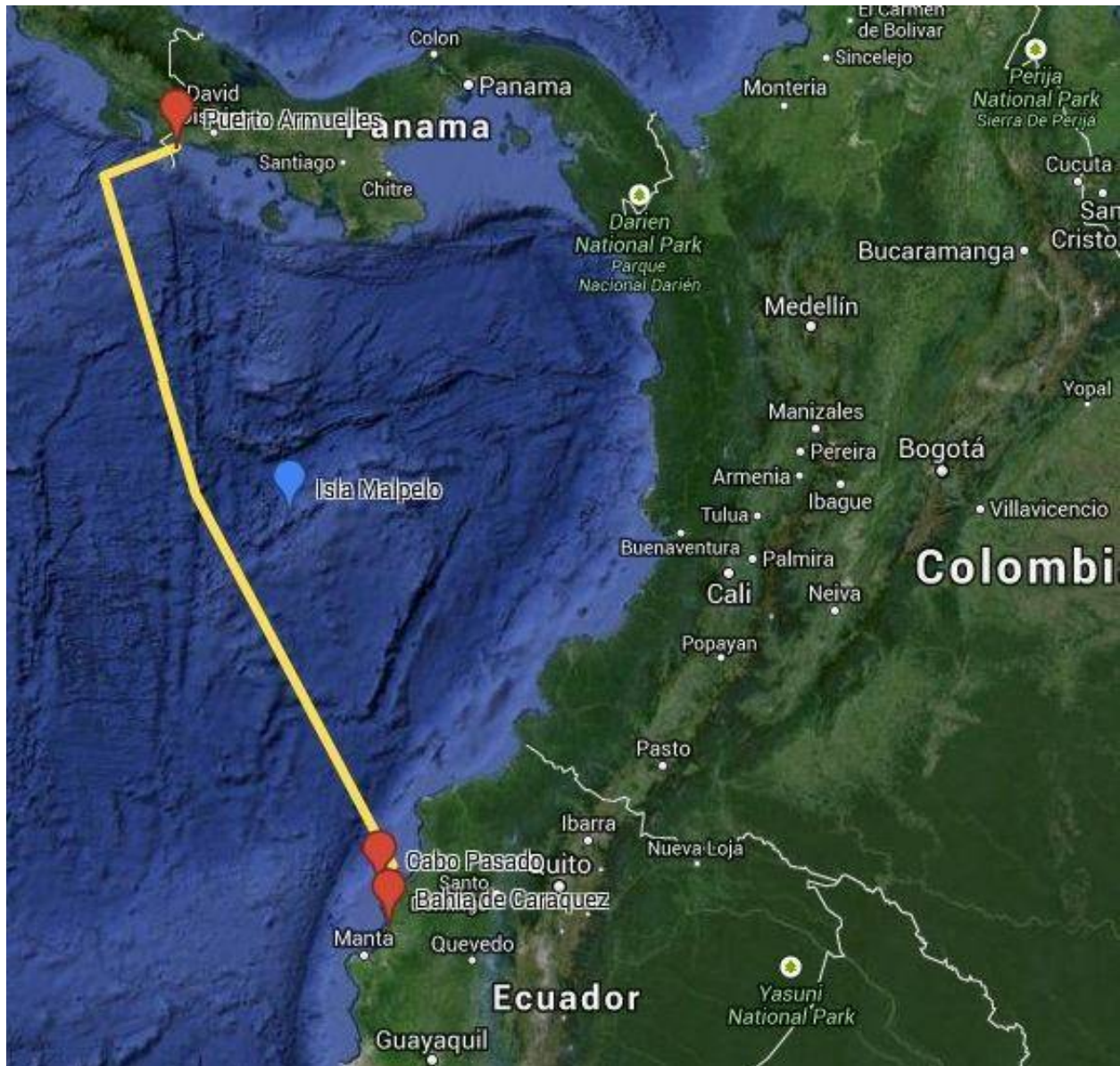


Panama – Ecuador a Different Route

Devastating electrical storms in Mexico, Panama and Central America cause thousands of dollars of damage to cruising boats every year. We have identified at least 40 boats hit by lightning over the past couple of years. The best alternative to avoid being hit by lightning is to get out and leave these danger zones. Ecuador provides the only safe lightning free place to be on the Pacific.



Panama to Ecuador is usually a slog directly against the wind and the current. We have made the trip twice, both times taking 5-6 days. I want to suggest to cruisers a route, while still being close hauled, might give you a better angle.

Most boats depart from the Las Perlas islands or directly from Panama City. The recommended route is to stay west of the Colombian island of Mapelo and avoid getting close to Punta Mala as you exit the Golfo de Panama. This route does add a lot more miles but closing the coast of Colombia you can experience lots of convection coming off the coast. This convection usually stays close to the coast and the worst of it does not travel far offshore. Others folks prefer to make a direct rhumbline route from Panama City but rarely can it be made without multiple tacks against current and wind.

Instead, I recommend you consider going WNW to enjoy exploring and harbor hopping along the coast of Western Panama and then making the jump to Ecuador from the Costa Rican border.

Unless the ITCZ is way north or you hug the Colombian coast there is a good chance you will have to cross the ITCZ. Sometimes its active and other times a few rain showers and a wind shift. I have worked many boats as a net controller on the Pan Pacific net providing weather information for those either headed to Ecuador or the Galapagos and just about everyone complains about the upwind trip. Especially irksome is when the current gets ahold of you and further reduces your forward progress. The biggest complaint on this trip is the sea state, rough and very lumpy as the current pushes up against the wind waves.

The first trip we made to Ecuador we departed Golfito, Costa Rica near the Panamanian border and sailed 6 days to Ecuador on one tack. My experienced sister and her husband on SV Encore who have made the Panama-Ecuador trip 6 times told us "Stay as far west as you can point". Unfortunately we didn't make enough westing on our first trip when we had the opportunity and struggled to make our land fall way point.

On the second trip we departed Panama City and spent a couple enjoyable months cruising Western Panama. June 2014 we had a very easy check out from the Puerto Armuelles(08 15.9000 N 082 51.4500 W) which lies just south of the Costa Rican border. We anchored by the large pier, the Panamanian officials came out to us in a panga, did some paperwork onboard and then transported me into town to finish the check out and buy a jug of diesel. All told it took less than an hour. Plus we did not need the expensive Panamanian mariners visa which is required when checking out from Panama City(We had departed Panama a few months earlier via plane and upon our return were issued a 6 month tourist visa at the airport).

The boats that check out in Panama City never have any issues with spending a month or more continuing to cruise Western Panama before leaving the country.

Departing Western Panama we set a waypoint (03 57.81N 082 44.71N) 70 miles west of Isla Mopelo and at times sailed 50 degrees above the rhumb line. Beware that Mopelia corrected position is 04 10.116N 081 36.470W almost a mile NW of its charted position. The Colombian government requires a National Zarpe and a special permit to stop at Mopelia and cautions to give it a 10 mile radius.

Put as much westing as possible in the bank because as you get down the track the wind and currents will make it very difficult to lay your course. Jacaranda is a weatherly boat and that helped a lot. We could never actually lay this waypoint but we sure tried. The 2014 trip (51/2 days) was slightly better than the first. Maybe knowing what to expect ahead of time made the uphill process more manageable.

Both trips we were able to cross the ITCZ at a good angle with few squalls and never saw winds more than 20 knots.

The most common first stop in Ecuador is Puerto Amistad, Bahia Caraquez. This is a river entrance that is only able to enter/exit at the top of the tide. You are required to have an agent to clear in and depart from Ecuador. Puerto Amistad will provide a pilot and take care of your paperwork. Contact Tripp Martin at least 24 hours before arrived with estimated arrival information. (email Puerto Amistad at puertoamistadecuador@yahoo.com) . Channel 69 is the hailing channel (sometimes monitored during business hours 9-6 Mon-Sat closed on Sunday) When approaching Bahia be aware that a number of shoals exist.

Virtual Buoy 00 35.7800 S 080 28.3000 W - Pass outside (West) of this virtual buoy before turning in to the Pilot Station.

Pilot Station 00 35.8050 S 080 26.8320 W - also known as the "Waiting Room" in some guides. Best not to anchor here as it's only about 18' and can be very rough if a large swell is running. Pedro the pilot will come out to meet you and come onboard your vessel. Look for a panga with a red canvas top. You MUST arrange the pilot with Puerto Amstad before you arrive or you could end up waiting till the next day!

Cabo Pasado 00 21.8140 S 080 28.6930 W Alternative anchorage if coming from the north. It's about 17 miles from Bahia but offers a less roly spot to spend the night. Beware of the reef

running off the point towards the north. Sand bottom in about 15-18'. When you depart from here heading to Bahia to meet the pilot, be sure to give yourself lots of time as the contrary current can be flowing very strong as you exit the anchorage.

Weather information

Weather4D - Before departing western Panama we used Weather4D on our iPad when we had wifi. Running animated grib files daily for 2-3 weeks before departure gave us some idea of the winds. This is a GREAT app and highly recommended.

Grib files via sailmail. Ran these daily while underway

Currents - We used a program developed by Eric from SV Sarana that allowed us to obtain daily "currents" while underway. We found these helpful in confirming the strong currents we encountered. I put together an easy way to obtain the currents using airmail.

#4 Getting Ocean Currents: <http://www.jacarandajourney.com/#!/other-good-stuff/ce48#>

Shipping Lanes - We 10-12 ships along this route but departing from Panama City there will be numerous more sightings. A good watch is always recommended and our Watchmate 850 AIS earned its keep.

Summary

You will find that the trip to Ecuador is not a "Pan Cocida" (Piece of cake) but an uphill close hauled 5-6 day trip. The seas will be very confused and very uncomfortable. The wind against currents cause the sea to lump up and at times we thought we were in a 30 knot sea with 15 knots of breeze. Lots of water will be coming down the decks.

Ecuador will be very cool compared to Panama and no real weather to speak of. Days are very mild in Bahia Caraquez. - daily sea breeze of 15kts, mostly overcast days with a little sun breaking thru. Temperatures are very comfortable and you will not be sweating like crazy as in Panama. Great for boat projects! Your solar panels will provide little energy as the majority of the days are cloudy and overcast. Generators are highly recommended.

You can read more about our trip at www.jacarandajourney.com (Passage Notes #49 & #63)

Chuck Houlihan Jacaranda Lifetime Commodore SSCA

