

Spanish Gold

by Joy Smith

Spanish gold – I think we’ve found it. Uncluttered harbors, crystal waters and no tourist traps! Last year Gil and I finally edged our sailboat, *Joy For All*, out of its womb in the British Virgin Islands for an excursion to the Spanish Virgins, which are really part of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. Situated six miles east of Puerto Rico and about twenty miles from the BVI, this unspoiled grouping consists of Culebra, Vieques and their surrounding islets. The area is new to commercialism due to its history of U.S. Marine and Navy weapons testing and practice maneuvers.

The Navy halted operations in Culebra in the mid-1970s, but hung onto Vieques until a few years ago. As a result, much of the land in both islands has remained a wildlife refuge. Fish and shellfish abound in the area surrounding these islands, called Vieques Sound. So, if you are planning a bareboat charter and want to get away from it all, perhaps your charter company will extend your cruising grounds to include this upcoming area.

Culebra

We set out for Culebra in March, a time when the winds have tamed to a comfortable 10-15 knots and the northern swells, which make traveling or berthing anywhere open to the north a rollicking nightmare, have abated. The boating conditions in Vieques Sound are similar to the Virgin Islands, except that there are more rocks and reefs to avoid. Throughout the four hours it takes us to reach Culebra, we are never out of sight of land. Culebra is only about eleven miles, fringed with mangrove forests and white sand beaches. Having no rivers or streams to cloud the waters with run-off, its waters remain Saran-wrap clear.

The main harbor is wide, deep and so large that it houses several mini-harbors. Dakity Harbor, to port as we enter, is a scoop of flat aquamarine water protected by a long skinny reef. We make a mental note that this will be our next overnight stop. The town of Dewey caps the harbor, and good anchoring surrounds the tiny islet that nests center harbor. We set anchor near our friends aboard *Brigadoon* and *Jarro*, who have already arrived. Gil phones in our customs check-in to Vieques since the

office on Culebra has limited hours and happens to be closed. If you don’t have a U.S. Customs sticker, like we do, you will need to check into customs at the airport personally.

After arrival cocktails aboard *Brigadoon*, the six of us dinghy into Dewey in search of dinner. Dewey, a working town, appears run-down and could be a lot tidier, yet it is said to be safe, with little crime. We trot across the bridge spanning a canal that permits small boat traffic to traverse the width of the island between Dewey and Ensenada Honda village, on the northern side. Bright street lights reveal a line of pastel buildings – restaurants, shops and wee inns – bordering the street along the canal.

Mamacita’s, the best restaurant of the two in the area is jammed, so we return to the shore side Dinghy Dock Restaurant and Bar to find it, too, is hopping. While the Dinghy Dock Restaurant is *it* for nightlife in Dewey, the characters there are fascinating. Most of Culebra’s 2,000 residents are Puerto Rican with a Key West twist. Need I say more? Many rounds of drinks later, the six of us are ravenous and figure getting fed is going to take forever. But, it doesn’t. The service is good and the food is decent.

In the morning Gil and I dinghy in to explore Dewey. On the road to Ensenada Honda, where the ferry from Fajardo, PR comes in several times a day, we pass several take-out restaurants, a church and a few touristy shops. Tee shirt - I must have one, but I swear the selection is the ugliest I have ever seen. This definitely is not a place to shop. (Gil is cheering.) Here we run into Joe Ann and Sam, who join us for a wonderful lunch at Mamacita’s, verifying to us that it’s a top choice. Lesson learned: go early.

Afterwards we accompany our friends to the airport since they have tried and failed to check into customs, which doesn’t open until three. Moving away from Dewey center, the homes seem to be in better repair. We pass a school, noisy with children and a large municipal building. The airport is small, with a dicey-looking landing strip, and provides domestic service to Vieques and the mainland.

On the way back into town, we flag down a bus to Flamenco Beach, a gorgeous mile and a half strip of fine white sand that horseshoes at one end and offers toilet and rudimentary shower facilities and two food stands. While there are several beaches on the is-

lands, Zoni is the only other one suitable for swimming. As we pad barefoot along the shore, we notice campsites behind the sea grape trees that shade the beach and stop to examine a rust-riddled tank left behind as an air gunnery target.

Ensenada Dakity

Time to move on. And Dakity, that idyllic harbor at the entrance, is calling to us. There, we three boats secure free moorings behind a couple of houseboats. To the west of us is a powerboat that apparently is a restaurant of some sort - Captain Hungry. There is little to do in this Garden of Eden spot except swim and relax unless you’re ambitious enough to explore Culebra’s 1,400 acres of wildlife preserve that nests 85 kinds of seabirds as well as the endangered leatherback turtle and Culebra giant anole.

While Gil takes the women for a dinghy tour, Sam and Ron go snorkeling, reporting that much of the reef is dead. I suspect from the extensive anchor damage (I am told that the “Puerto Rican Navy” – huge powerboats with noisy families that invade Culebra on weekends) that boats are the cause. If you’re a heavy-duty snorkeler, don’t be discouraged. According to Ron of *Jarro*, it is excellent in outlying coves, which also are loaded with lobsters for the taking.



Gil, Jane, Ron, Joe Ann & Sam at Seaborne Inn, Culebra



The town of Dewey from Culebra harbor



Gil, Joe Ann & Sam at Ensenada Honda, Culebra-ferry landing

That evening we dinghied to the Seaborne Inn for dinner. Hidden behind a rickety dock and small forest of trees, the facility is surprisingly upscale with a pool and palm-fringed décor. The help is new, resulting in snail-like service, yet the drinks are good and our dinner guests are gourmet.

Culebrita

The weather is holding, so we all follow *Jarro* through the tricky passage into Bahia de Tortuga (Turtle Bay) on Culebrita, an out-island of Culebra accessible only by private boat. You should know that private tour companies offer charter services out of Culebra to harbors such as this for diving, snorkeling or beach walking. Open to the north, this harbor can be extremely uncomfortable in opposing seas. Although there are no free mooring balls in the shallower area closer to shore, we opt to anchor in 12 feet of turquoise-beautiful water.

Tortuga Beach, in front of us, is a breeding ground for turtles. Culebrita also has a windward beach called Trash Beach, because all debris is driven there, and a shallow beach to the west surrounded by

continued on page 12