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## Preface

Going to Guatemala had never crossed our minds.

After completing the Trans-Amazon Rally 2009, we left our boat *Ganesh* in Trinidad. The Caribbean was missing from our places-to-see list, and we wanted to spend part of the following year there. As sailing the Amazon in the company of other boats had been a fantastic experience, albeit nerve-racking at times, we registered for the Trans-Caribbean Rally 2010, which started in Point à Pitre, Guadalupe, and finished in Cienfuegos, Cuba. We planned to return to Trinidad after the rally and leave *Ganesh* in the sheltered, well-organised surroundings of Chaguaramas Bay during the hurricane season.

A broken injection pump, however, forced us to delay our departure from Trinidad, and we had to sail furiously for twenty days to reach Point à Pitre on time. As our journey progressed, a strong tailwind and a choppy sea convinced us that sailing back along the same route, with the hurricane season just around the corner, was not entirely the best plan. Despite the hectic journey, however, the rally itself turned out to be great fun.

Afterwards, we began to look for a safe place to moor so that we wouldn't have to sail a troublesome route back to Trinidad and make forced stops. The best idea, we concluded, was to leave the boat in Cuba, an island we have always loved. We were hoping that Havana's renowned Marina Hemingway would provide us with shelter, despite it being on a hurricane path. We drove a hire-car from Cienfuegos to Havana to check out the marina, but we were not overly convinced. The marina is built on three channels that run parallel to the sea. The boats are side-tie moored along the channels and, if a hurricane approaches, the staff raft the boats up at the centre of the marina with their prow to the wind, as they cannot be hauled ashore. The harbour master assured us that a number of hurricanes had passed that way over the years, but no boat had ever been damaged. Despite his reassurances, we weren't convinced and decided to look elsewhere.

In the meantime, we had made friends with a Swiss couple, Joseph and Isabelle, in

Cienfuegos. They were sailing *Opsis*, their Ovni 42, towards Florida and were planning to sail the Inland Waterways. They were returning from Rio Dulce, Guatemala. We had heard that Rio Dulce offered hurricane protection, but we hadn't considered going there. Joseph and Isabelle enthused about it and photocopied the entry instructions from their boating guide. They also jotted down a couple of pages of essential information and contacts.

In Cienfuegos, we also bumped into some old friends, René and Michele, whom we had met during the 2007 Atlantic crossing. They were on *Lof*, a glorious old Romanee, and were also keen on sailing Rio Dulce, so we decided to embark on this adventure together.

As we were crossing from Cuba to Guatemala, we stopped on Utila, one of Honduras's Bay Islands, where our small convoy was joined by Yvelis, a Beneteau 45 owned by a French couple, Sylvie and Yves. Their generous help proved invaluable when we sailed up and back down the Rio, as they had wintered there for three years and knew the area well.

We knew very little about Guatemala and once we had decided to go there, we had no way of garnering information, as there were no sailing guides in Cuba and we couldn't look online. Consequently, our journey to Rio Dulce was an adventure into the unknown, full of surprises and new discoveries.

When we arrived in Livingston, the port of entry to Guatemala, it was love at first sight. The colours, light, atmosphere and warmth of the local people were overawing. It was a first impression, but one that was confirmed over the next few days. Guatemala is one of Central America's poorest and – we were warned – most violent countries. However, we had a wonderful time and ended up leaving *Ganesh* there for two consecutive years.

Our sense of gratitude to this warm, friendly country spurred us to write this short guide. We also know only too well that newcomers have trouble finding their way through the unique setting of Rio Dulce. Without Joseph and Isabelle's detailed directions, and without our generous guides Yves and Sylvie, Rio Dulce might not have made such a positive impression. We hope that our guide will help you make the most of this stunning corner of the world.

## Our sailing background

We started sailing in our early thirties as crewmembers on the boat of close friends. We sailed around the Mediterranean, and then from Sweden to Spain. Several years later, we bought *Domenica*, an old Westerly Corsair 36, and explored the Mediterranean, then crossing the rivers and canals of France until we reached the English Channel and England itself.

In 2002, we bought *Ganesh*, a Passoa 47, built by Garcia Yachting in 1993: a sturdy and reliable aluminium cutter with swinging keel.

In 2006, we set off on a long journey with various ports of call. Since then, we have cruised for about three months each year, after which we leave *Ganesh* in a safe port and fly back home. We return the following year to continue our journey.

Using this system, we have skirted the coasts of Morocco and have been to the Canary Islands, Capo Verde, Senegal (sailing up the River Sine Saloum), as well as to Salvador de Bahia and Baía de Todos os Santos in Brazil. In 2009, we sailed along the east coast of Brazil via Fernando de Noronha and ventured about 600 miles up the Amazon River, after which we went to French Guyana and then to Trinidad and Tobago.

In 2010, we sailed up the Antilles, reaching the island of Hispaniola, stopping both in Santo Domingo and Haiti (Ile à Vache), then on to Jamaica, Cuba and our final destination Guatemala.

We dry-docked *Ganesh* at the RAM Marina and left for Italy in torrential rain that had started several days earlier and was wreaking havoc throughout Guatemala. When we returned a year later, we were worried that *Ganesh* had been damaged by the humidity. The tarpaulins and dehumidifier, however, had done their job admirably and the boat had been carefully looked after, leaving it in excellent condition. Consequently, we decided to return to the RAM at the end of our yearly cruise. Before upping anchor, however, we decided to spend a couple of weeks discovering Guatemala, and the more we saw, the more we loved it. We then set off towards Belize and Yucatan, intent on reaching Cuba. But adverse weather conditions cut our journey short and we ended up spending three weeks in Puerto Morelos on the Yucatan Peninsula. When a cool north-west wind blows, i.e. into the current, the sea becomes extremely hazardous and crossing the Straits of Yucatan is impossible. After three weeks, it was time to head home, so we postponed our trip to Cuba. However, we used our forced pit stop to visit inland Mexico and then take a relaxing break on Isla Mujeres.

The following year, it was time to leave Guatemala and continue our journey. We said reluctant farewells to our friends and to the river, which we had come to love. Our plan was to sail to Panama via the Bay Islands. To ensure favourable winds, we sailed up

the coast of Belize to Belize City and from there set sail for Roatán via Turneffe Island. We waited patiently on Roatán for favourable weather so that we could sail southeast towards Guanaja Island, the remote Cayo Vivarillo, Providencia (fantastic anchorage!), San Andrés and finally the San Blas Islands, Panama.

That year, we left *Ganesh* in Colón, on the north coast of Panama, returning the following year for another foray into the San Blas archipelago. We then headed to Cartagena de Indias, Colombia.

LILIA HARTMANN  
ROBERTO TRAPANI

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## 1. Why Rio Dulce?

There are two main reasons why Rio Dulce is an increasingly popular destination for globetrotting cruisers. Firstly, it is a safe place to leave a boat in the hurricane season. During this period, cruisers in the Antilles are usually forced to sail upwind south of 10° N, i.e. to Trinidad or Venezuela, which the insurance companies consider to be “outside the danger zone”.<sup>1</sup> However, if you decide to moor in the Antilles, then be prepared to take a risk, or stay aboard and up anchor as soon as you hear a hurricane is approaching.

Rio Dulce lies between Belize and Honduras, on more or less the same latitude as Guadalupe, so right at the centre of a hurricane zone. But Rio Dulce’s moorings are inland, about 18.5 miles from the coast as the crow flies, making it a perfectly safe hurricane hole. A chain of ridges and low mountains separate the anchorages from the coast, preventing the hurricanes from coming up the river. However, should a storm find its way inland, it would be innocuous by the time it reached any boats.

The second reason for Rio Dulce’s growing popularity is that it is an excellent base for cruising towards some of the most stunning locations in the northwest Caribbean. A southeast route will take you to Honduras’s Bay Islands: Utila, Roatán and Guanaja. Panama’s San Blas Islands are just a little further on. To the northeast lie Belize and its breath-taking coral reef, the second largest in the world; just beyond Belize lie Yucatan, Cuba and Jamaica.

In addition to its excellent location, Rio Dulce is also an extremely affordable place to winter or for extended stays. The marinas, their services and repairs are far more economical than elsewhere in the Caribbean. With a little patience, you will be able to have all sorts of work done to your boat at extremely reasonable prices.

Rio Dulce flows out of Guatemala’s largest lake: Lake Izabál. It is approximately 30 miles long, covers 228 square miles and lends its name to the entire region. From this great lake, the river wends its way through stunning scenery inhabited by countless species of fauna; it also boasts a wealth of vegetation and geological formations, and meanders lazily towards the Caribbean Sea, which is about 25 miles to the northeast. A little further downriver of the lake stands a large hump-backed bridge, the only link between the two banks, and just after the river forms a sort of lagoon studded with coves and fjords. This area comprises the majority of the river’s marinas and landing stages, which have sprouted up everywhere in recent years. On the left bank lies the village

<sup>1</sup> Today Venezuela can no longer be considered safe, although the reasons have nothing to do with the weather.

of Fronteras and on the right the town of El Relleno, but it is nowadays customary to call the entire area "Rio Dulce" after the river. In addition to its marinas, the area and riversides are also home to numerous beautiful, yet inconspicuous palm-thatched villas half-hidden among the forest. The area is a coveted holiday destination for Guatemala's wealthy middle-classes.

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## 2. Weather

In this part of the world, the year is split into two main seasons: 'the rainy season', which the locals call "winter" (May to October); and "the dry season", which is known as 'summer' (November to April). But don't be fooled by the word "dry". In our experience, rarely a day passes on the Rio without a light shower.

Note, however, that the length and the intensity of the rainy season vary greatly from year to year. A few days after we first arrived on the Rio (22 May 2010), it started to pour with rain. No sooner had we emptied the dinghy than it was time to start bailing again. It rained so hard for so long that floods and landslides hit the entire country. We even feared that we would be unable to leave, as a river we had to cross to reach Honduras's San Pedro Sula airport was about to burst its banks.

In spring 2011, however, the rains came much later and were much lighter. To compensate for this, "summer" 2012 was reluctant to make an appearance, and it was still pouring with rain most days in January and February.

Therefore, bear in mind that it may rain heavily and uninterruptedly for days on end.

The rainy season comes with frequent storms. If they arrive from east-southeast, they are lighter and shorter, but they can be pretty blustery on the rare occasions they arrive from the southwest. The locals call these heavy storms *biami*.

During the dry season, showers usually arrive in the early evening or at night, although, as the *gringos* say «it can occur at any time». You should remember this if you go for a wander. Get used to carrying an oilskin and to closing the skylights and hatch, even if the sun is shining when you leave the boat.

## Winds

The trade winds are the prevailing winds in the northwest Caribbean, as they are throughout the entire area, and they blow from northeast to southeast. But be warned: from December to March, you'll probably encounter the Norte, a blustery north wind caused by cold fronts originating in the Gulf of Mexico which brings rain and falling temperatures. Bear this in mind if you are planning a cruise from Rio Dulce towards Belize and Yucatan, and locate safe anchorages before you leave.

A sea breeze normally brushes across the river in the afternoon.

Strong winds form short waves on lakes Izabál and El Golfete; they are a nuisance and may pose a danger for small boats. These waves do not form on the river, but if you are heading east, sail in the morning (before 1 pm) to avoid the wind and bow waves.



### 3. Guatemala: the nuts and bolts

Guatemala covers 42,042 square miles and has just under 13.7 million inhabitants.

**CAPITAL:** Ciudad de Guatemala (Guatemala City).

**OFFICIAL LANGUAGE:** Spanish.

**TIME ZONE:** -06.00 Greenwich Mean Time (GMT).

**CURRENCY:** Quetzal (Q), named after the country's symbol: the long-tailed bird. It is divided into centavos. One Quetzal is more or less 10 euro cents (about 13 US cents). The Quetzal is pegged to the US dollar. Warning: most banks do not accept or change the euro, so it is advisable to take dollars.

Fronteras has cash machines, some in banks and major stores, such as Despensa Familiar. The machines are restocked from 9 am, so withdraw in the morning to make sure cash is available. You are allowed to withdraw a maximum of between 1,000 and 2,000 Quetzal at a time. Withdraw money with due care and attention.

Mastercard, American Express and Visa are accepted in major hotels and restaurants, as well as in supermarkets and various shops in tourist areas.

**BANKS:** branches are open from Monday to Friday 9 am to 3 pm, and on Saturday morning. Get used to seeing armed guards at the bank entrance. Bank robberies are fairly common...

**TELEPHONE:** Guatemala's international code is +502. To make international calls, dial 00 plus the country code. Buying a SIM card is extremely easy. Just visit one of the numerous telephone stores; normally you don't even need any identification. Local calls are very cheap. The main providers are CLARO, MOVISTAR and DIGICEL.

**INTERNET:** there is a variety of internet cafes, and most hotels and marinas, as well as many restaurants, provide a Wi-Fi network for customers. Another common system is the affordable pay-as-you-go TIGO dongle, which works throughout the country, providing there's a signal.

**ELECTRICITY:** the electricity runs at 110V and the sockets are US-style. If you come from outside the States, you may need to take an adapter; alternatively buy one in a local electrical store. Marinas and boatyards are almost always equipped with both 110V and 220V systems and have standard US shore power sockets.

**GEOGRAPHY:** a brief stretch of Guatemala's coast looks onto the Caribbean Sea. Puerto Barrios is Guatemala's biggest port and the only one on the Atlantic Ocean. Guatemala's Pacific coast is much longer and mainly flat, but Central Guatemala, called the High-

### 3. Guatemala: the nuts and bolts



lands, is mountainous and volcanic. The country has more than thirty volcanoes, four of which are active. The northeast Petén department borders Belize; it is flat and mainly covered in impenetrable jungle.

**CLIMATE:** as we mentioned in the Weather section, Guatemala has two seasons: ‘wet’ and “dry”. The best time to visit the country is undoubtedly the dry season (November to

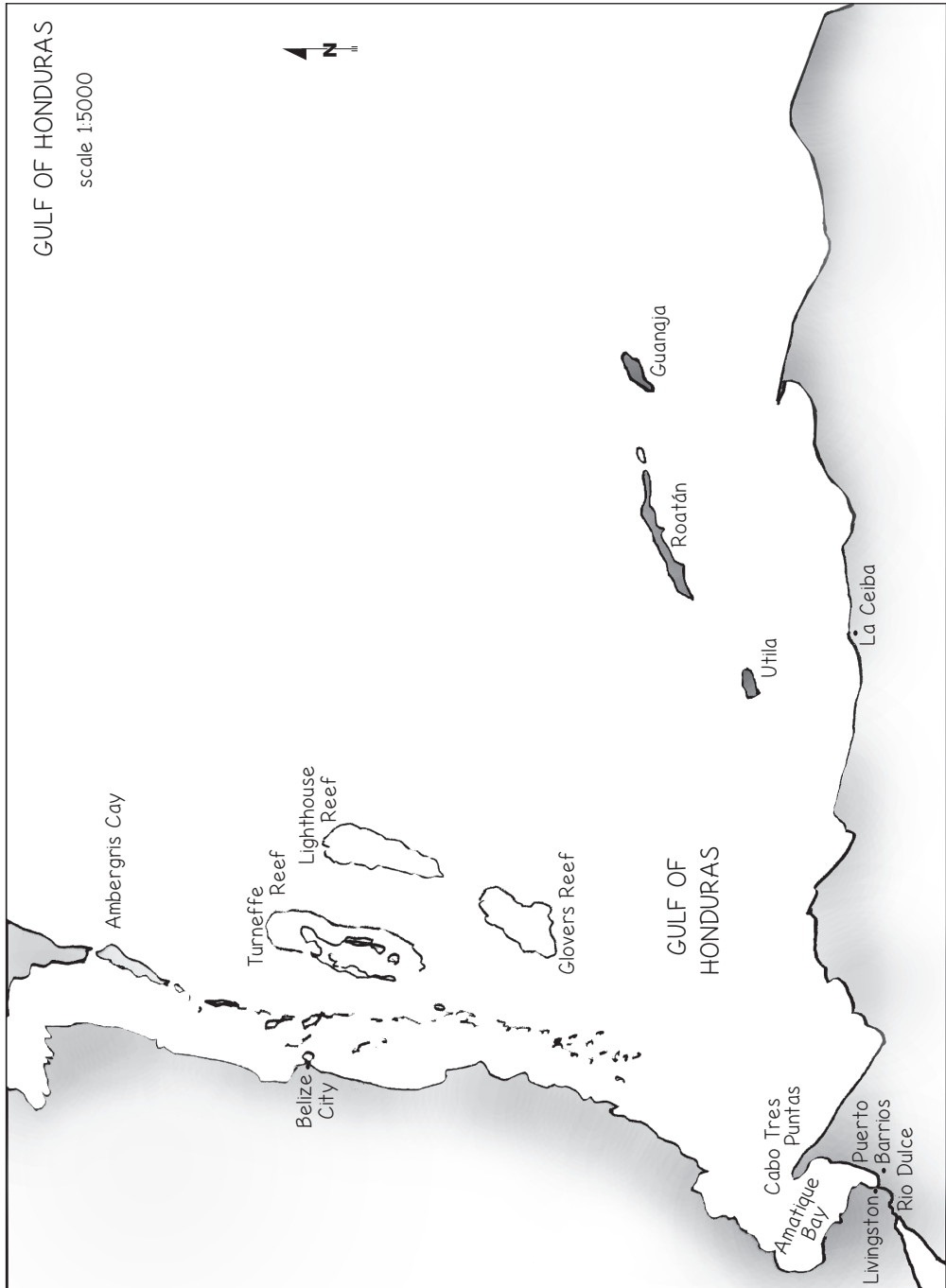
April). During the wet season, you will not only have to put up with the inconvenience of frequent endless downpours and unbearable humidity, but you also risk logistic complications because the roads may be blocked by landslides or flooding.

**POPULATION:** the main ethnic groups are the Maya (about 55% of the population) and the Ladinos (about 45%). The Ladinos are called “whites” and descend mainly from the Spanish conquistadores; they are the dominant ethnic group and provide the majority of the country’s governing class.

The Maya are the descendants of the glorious ancient Mesoamerican people. The reasons for their decline are still a mystery and the source of controversial theories. When the first conquistadores arrived, most Mayan cities in what is now Guatemala had already been abandoned, or were in serious decline. It was a different story, however, for the cities in what is now Yucatan. The surviving Maya withdrew to the forests and mountains. As these areas offered little of worth for the greedy conquistadores, the Maya were left in relative peace, which enabled them to survive, but excluded them from the country’s political life and decision-making centres.

The Maya are divided into various ethnic groups; each has its own language, which has always hindered mutual communication and understanding. There are twenty-three indigenous dialects. It was only at the end of the civil war, when schooling became more widespread, that the ethnic groups found a lingua franca. Ironically, that language was Spanish.

**THE CIVIL WAR:** during the 20th century, Guatemala’s economy was based on its large plantations, chiefly bananas and cotton; they were owned by US big business, especially the United Fruit Corporation, and by a few wealthy local families. The landless peasantry, mainly the Maya, were used as seasonal labour, heavily exploited and kept in poverty and ignorance. The governing class also tried to expropriate the Maya communities of their most desirable land. In 1944, a liberal coup installed a governing class that was no longer at the beck and call of large landowners, and it introduced a series of reforms in a bid to improve the lives and conditions of the underprivileged. These included the 1952 Agrarian Reform Law. These reforms hacked away at the privileges of the country’s powerful landowners. But, with the help of the US government and the CIA, the landowners organised a counter-coup in 1954. An ex-member of the military was installed in power and there began a bloody right-wing dictatorship. Intolerance towards the dictatorship ushered in a violent civil war, which led to the genocide of the indigenous population. The war lasted thirty-six years, during which time entire villages were razed to the ground and hundreds of thousands of people were killed or disappeared (*desaparecidos*), especially in the Highlands and in Petén.



These events are vividly portrayed in a book by Rigoberta Menchú, a K'iche' Maya, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. The peace between the government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG), which brought together the various rebel movements, was signed in 1996. Since then, Guatemala appears to have undertaken a slow path toward pacification. The Maya, however, are still the poor underprivileged class and as recently as October 2012 many of them were killed or wounded in episodes of harsh repression.

**DRESS:** the men wear mainly jeans, a shirt and the boots of a vaquero, the horse-riding livestock herders, but the women wear the traditional dress of their *aldea* (village). Their dress consists in a colourful loose-fitting skirt with a tight waist and a *huipil*, which replaces or is worn over a blouse-like garment. A *huipil* is a piece of rectangular cloth with a head-hole that is tucked into the skirt. It is often brightly coloured and skilfully embroidered. The fabric depends on the area and its climate, but the embroidery often symbolises the wearer's origin or marital status. An expert can tell a woman's village, and whether she is married or is to wed, all from her *huipil*.

**HANDICRAFTS:** Guatemala has some truly beautiful handcrafted items, particularly the



fabrics, including *huipil* and a range of brightly coloured upholstery that make stunning hangings, cushions or bags. Even the belts are embroidered. There is also an array of colourful, lovingly carved wooden animal- and demon-masks, as well as rural-style terracotta items painted in Naïve colours.

For the real Guatemalan shopping-experience, go to Chichicastenango market and haggle for some of the most bizarre objects you will ever see. For the best price-quality ratio, however, head for the State-run handicrafts shop in Antigua Guatemala, which also stocks some truly beautiful jade jewellery.

Rio Dulce does not have any particularly good handicraft shops, although you may stumble across something interesting among its market stalls. There is a fairly well-stocked shop in Livingston, on the left as you head up the main road.

**THE RIO DULCE MAYA:** Fronteras and the surrounding area appear to be home to more Maya than the national average. The Maya run the local shops and market stalls, and Mayan women cook *tortillas*, chicken and fried fish by the roadside. You'll see them on land and on rivers sailing their small canoes, often accompanied by their children.

**SAFETY:** when you consider its recent history, it is easy to understand why Guatemala is not the safest place on earth. It is actually one of the most violent and has an annual murder rate of 40–50 victims per 100,000 inhabitants. The most dangerous city is Ciudad de Guatemala, which we recommend you avoid or visit with extreme caution.

The main tourist areas are fairly peaceful, and any violence is mainly between Guatemalans. Nevertheless do not wander around alone at night, or on isolated country roads, and do not carry valuables or large sums of money (see Chapter 10 Safety).

**TRANSPORT:** Guatemala has its own internal airline called Transportes Aéreos Centroamericanos (TACA), which flies daily between Ciudad de Guatemala and Flores.

The alternatives are Guatemala's buses and minibuses, which will take you practically anywhere. The main national lines are Linea Dorada, which is the most 'luxurious' with its air-conditioning, reserved seating and sometimes even a bathroom, or the more basic Fuente del Norte and Litegua.

The timetables are available on their respective websites:

[www.lineadorada.info](http://www.lineadorada.info)

[www.grupofuentedelnorte.com](http://www.grupofuentedelnorte.com)

[www.litegua.com](http://www.litegua.com)

There are also a number of multi-coloured local buses, often old US school-buses, and minibuses.

These buses are normally jam-packed with people and are known locally as "chicken

buses". The drivers specialise in white-knuckle overtaking manoeuvres, which make any journey unforgettable, especially when you are climbing a steep, winding mountain road.

Private minibuses are also available and they organise group tourist trips that can be booked at hotels and local travel agencies in tourist resorts.

The taxis are fairly cheap and the fare should be negotiated before the journey. If you are in a group, it is often a good idea to opt for a taxi. For a little more than a first-class bus, you can travel more safely and are not conditioned by a timetable.