

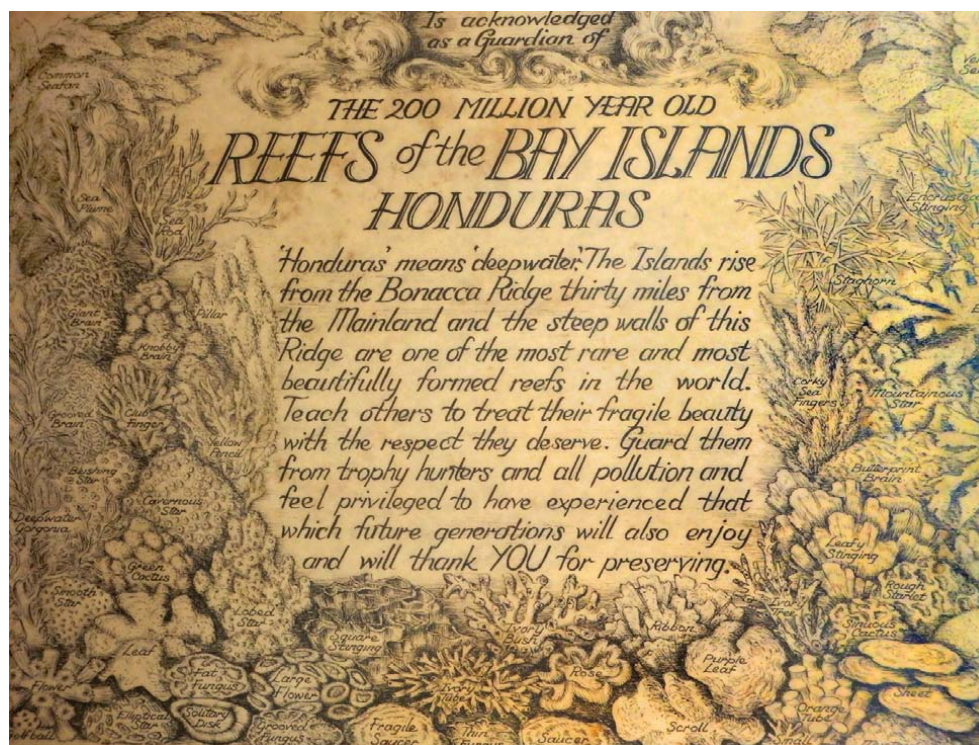
THE BAY ISLANDS OF HONDURAS – PIRATES OR PARADISE?

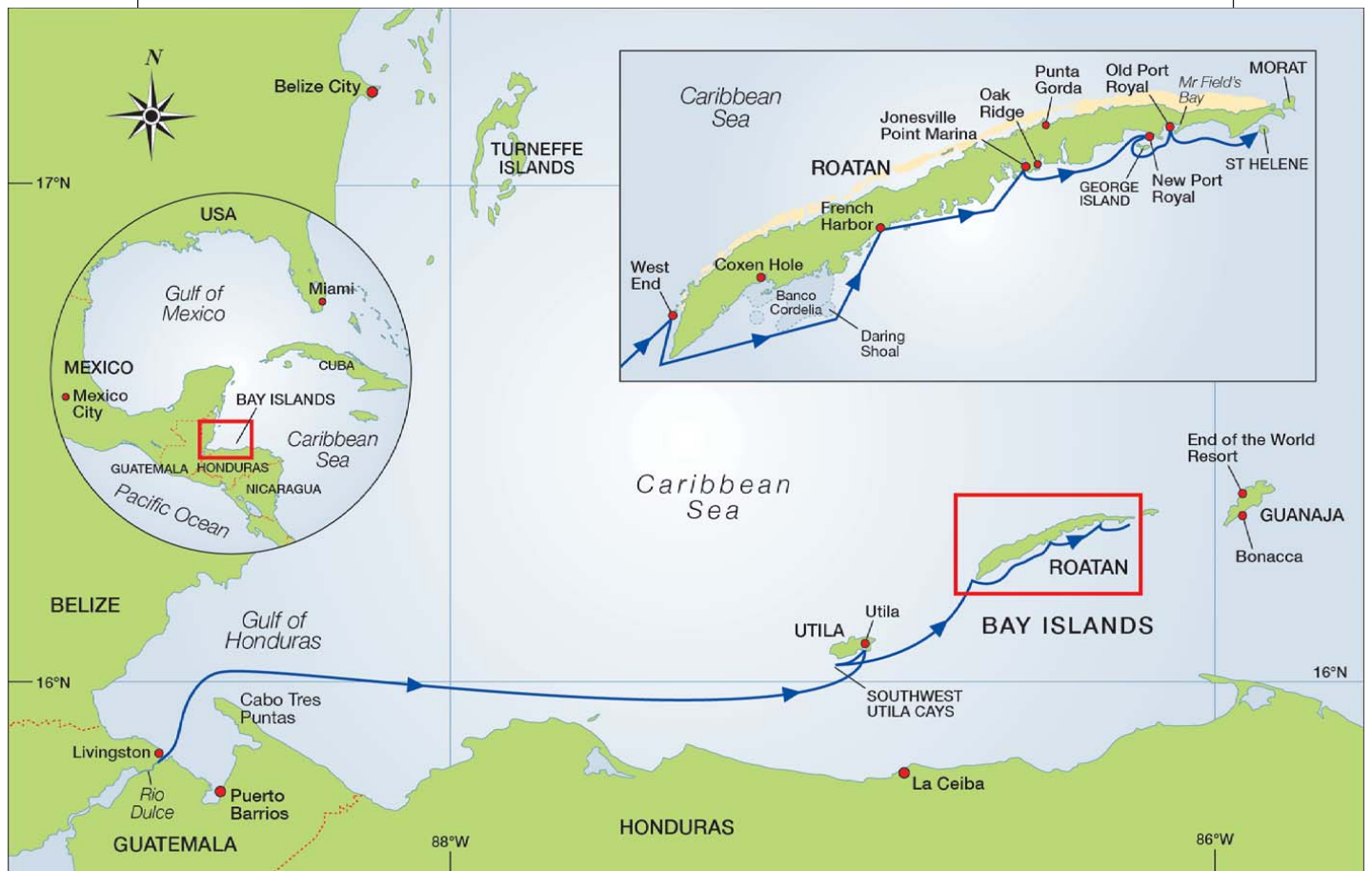
Chris Burry and Madeline Hibberd

(Chris and her husband Bill own Plover, a Dickerson 41, and have twice crossed the Atlantic in her. Most summers they cruise to the Canadian Maritimes from the southern Chesapeake Bay where they are Port Officers for Deltaville and Mathews, Virginia. In late December 2019 they travelled to the Rio Dulce in Guatemala, where they joined OCC friends Roy and Madeline Hibberd who live aboard their Prout 46 catamaran, Mithril of Newhaven, for a month-long cruise to the Bay Islands of Honduras.

This was the second time Chris and Bill had been guests aboard Mithril, having previously cruised with Roy and Madeline on the coast of Belize – see The Western Caribbean's Best Kept Secret in Flying Fish 2019/2.)

The Bay Islands of Honduras are the country's prime sailing attraction and conjure up images of palm trees swaying in tropical sea breezes and coral-studded reefs teeming with sea life. They comprise several small islands – Utila, Roatan, St Helene, Morat and Guanaja. We were excited at the chance to cruise there on Mithril of Newhaven even though friends and family questioned the wisdom of travelling there given Honduras's reputation for violent crime and piracy at sea. After preliminary research we concluded that the only way to find out was to investigate ourselves. What we discovered was a perfect cruising ground whose popularity with yachts has increased





steadily in recent years as an alternative to the Eastern Caribbean and the Virgin Islands – less crowded, yet scenically on a par with the Virgins. There is the added benefit of English being the primary language for islanders, even though Spanish is the official language in Honduras.

Our trip began when we joined *Mithril* in the Rio Dulce, Guatemala, where she had spent the previous hurricane season. The Rio Dulce is a beautiful waterway dotted with local flora and fauna, whose story merits a separate article. From the coast of Guatemala it is a 110 mile overnight hop to Utila, the westernmost of the Bay Islands.

Log Entry Christmas Eve, 24th December: 0700 Anchor up. Rolly overnight so ready to depart. Set jenny and we are on our way.

The passage was uneventful thanks to our weather forecaster, Chris Parker, but the seas were lumpier and the winds more on the nose than anticipated so we motored the whole night. The only excitement was catching a seagull on the fishing lure – we promptly reeled him in and released him safely to live another day. We had timed our landfall in Utila for first light on Christmas Day. Our first impression was of a sleepy island town lost in time. We celebrated, Q-flag flying, with a 12lb turkey purchased in Guatemala with all the trimmings – cranberry relish, sweet and white potatoes, Brussels sprouts and gravy. Madeline had a Christmas pudding that we enjoyed with homemade custard.

On Boxing Day we went ashore to clear customs and immigration. The cruising guides warned of petty crime, and specifically mentioned Utila as a place where we should keep our guard up. When we landed our dinghy at Bush's dock and asked about locking it, the young man on duty told us they have security cameras on the dock and not to worry. While waiting for the immigration office to open we met the Mayor, Troy Bodden, a local man born and raised on Utila. He was loading a golf cart with Christmas gift care packages for older people on the island. He said that they had persuaded the Honduran government to place extra security on the island since they can't afford to lose tourism revenue due to crime. While we saw no specific evidence



*Departing
Rio Dulce,
Guatemala*



Madeline, Troy Bodden, Mayor of Utila, Roy, Chris and Bill

of the military presence, neither did we experience any crime throughout our stay nor feel threatened at any time.

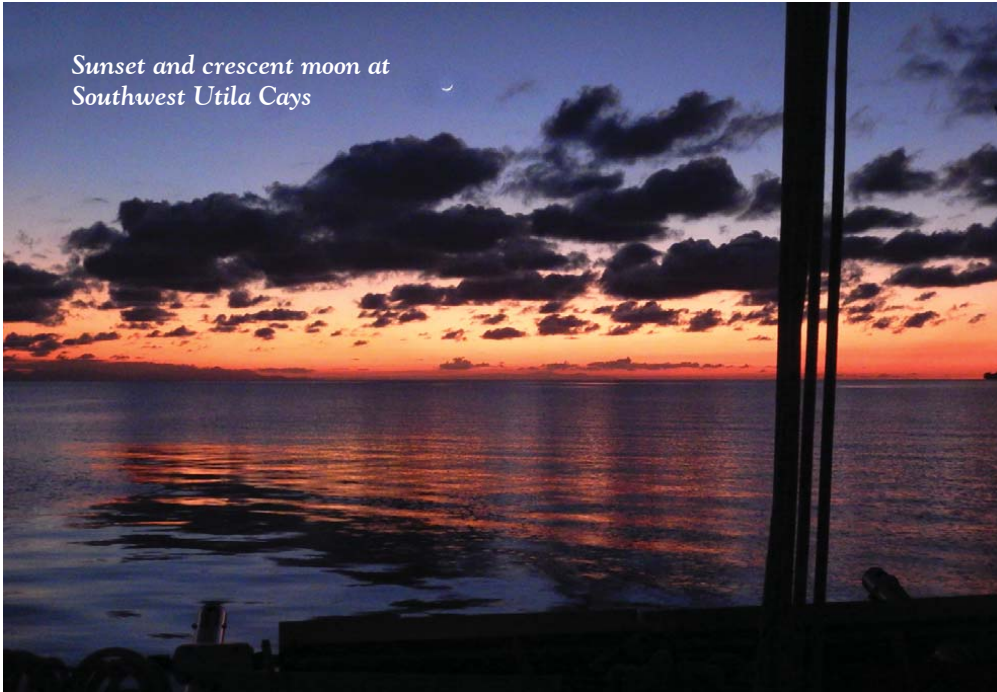
We enjoyed our walk around the town of Utila and visited a local iguana farm, bought a CLARO SIM card (see page 186), and used the ATM to withdraw Honduran lempiras (at the time of our visit there were 25 lempiras to the US dollar), though most local businesses accepted dollars or credit cards. We sampled a typical breakfast favourite called *baleadas* – a traditional Honduran dish composed of a flour tortilla filled with cheese and beans and maybe additional items such as eggs, meat etc. We strolled through the gardens of the Jade Sea Horse, an eclectic hotel with a large collection of artfully displayed mosaics, and had an introduction to local Honduran boats – unique, canoe-shaped one-off designs with external rudders and inboard engines. Back aboard *Mithril* we settled in for a quiet evening, but loud music started up ashore and continued till 3.30am – Utila's reputation as a party island was alive and well. So at first light we made the decision to depart the main harbour and move west to the Southwest Utila Cays.

Utila is known as a dive mecca with PADI facilities for inexpensive certification. We didn't dive on the island but did enjoy snorkelling off the reefs at the Cays. We motored between Jack O'Neil's and Pigeon Cays but, as the charts were not reliable, Madeline downloaded a Google Earth image on her iPad so we could see the reefs entering and exiting, plus we had Bill and Roy on the bow through the cut between the reefs. We also used Julius Wilensky's *Cruising Guide to the Bay Islands of Honduras* (see page 185). It was an extremely peaceful anchorage and we spent a quiet night before heading off to West End, Roatan.

Log Entry 28 December: 0815 Underway headed to Roatan. Retraced our track coming back out. 20 miles to West End. Sunny, light easterly winds.

West End is one of the most touristy locations in the Bay Islands and is close to the cruise ships at the main harbour in Coxen Hole. There are about twenty moorings

*Sunset and crescent moon at
Southwest Utila Cays*



available, maintained by the Roatan Marine Park [www.roatanmarinepark.org]. It is a beautiful spot with gorgeous sunsets and the reef right off your stern for diving or snorkelling. There is no designated dinghy dock, so we tied up at one of the local watering holes for a walk around the dusty streets. The waterfront teemed with local *pangas* (runabouts) carrying tourists to and from the cruise ships. There are a few small grocery stores where we found Island Harbor lettuce mix grown locally at Blue Harbor Plantation.

French Harbor Marina



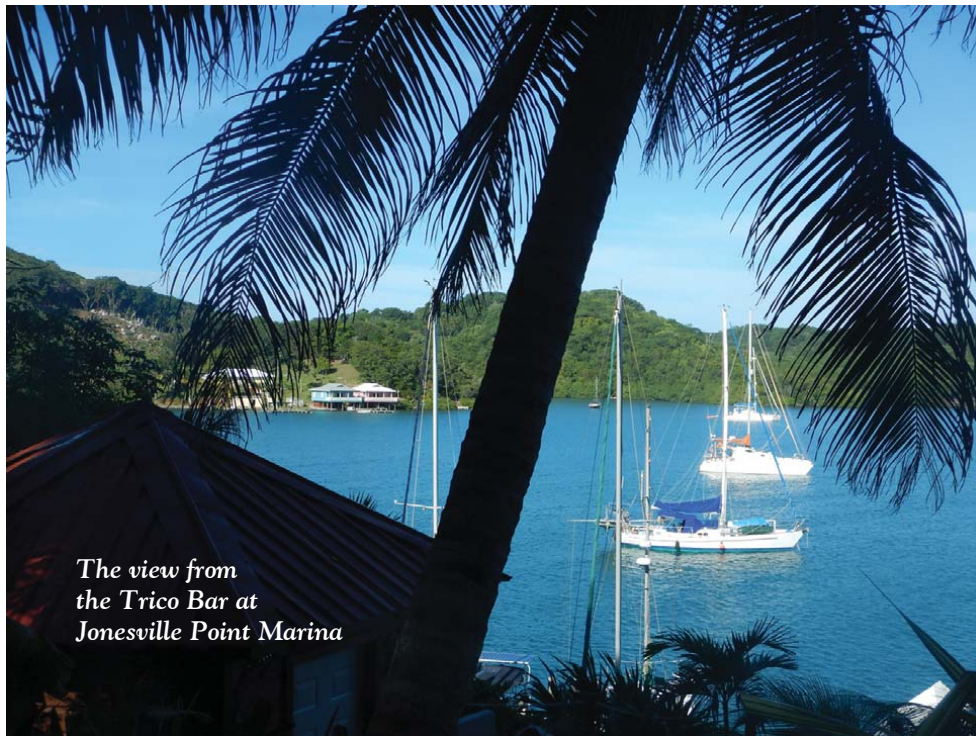
From West End we motored the 12 miles to French Harbor, heading out around Banco Cordelia and Daring Shoal. French Harbor, where one of several marinas is located, has good protection from the prevailing easterlies and is the closest location to Eldon's store, one of the best for grocery shopping (every Tuesday the marina runs a van service there for visiting cruisers). There is a good reef to explore just east of Fantasy Island resort. We had a cruiser's potluck with several OCC boats at the marina for New Year's Eve, then awaited fireworks and live music at midnight which continued until 3am.



*Waterfront houses
on Roatan*

On New Year's Day we departed early before the easterly trade winds came up and moved 6 miles up the coast to our next stop at Jonesville Point Marina. We spent two weeks there while the easterlies blew and it rained on and off for days – very unusual weather for the non-rainy season! Chris Parker said, 'there is a big change coming in the weather for the next few weeks and no one will be able to travel. Strong high pressure to the north and strong low pressure to the south will cause a tight wind gradient and high winds for an extended period. Trade winds will build in and last, possibly until early February'.

So we hunkered down and enjoyed the local sights. The Jonesville Point Marina provides free internet in the Trico Bar in addition to casual dining, a full bar, and laundry service. They will assist with hiring local taxis to pick up groceries or run other errands. We employed Miguel to drive us to Coxen Hole so Roy and Madeline could renew *Mithril's* cruising permit. Miguel was born on Roatan and described the culture of the *caracoles*, the English-speaking people who have been established in the Bay Islands since the early 19th century and are chiefly of European descent. The native islanders prefer the term 'islanders' when being referred to and English is their first language, regardless of race.



One of the most interesting aspects of being in Jonesville is the ability to travel both east and west along the south coast by small boat in protected waters inside the reef. Another cruiser described it as a series of twists and turns through mangrove channels and under a bridge, making it sound complicated, but in fact it was easy to follow the local boats running through the channels. One of the coastal villages, Oak Ridge, is primarily accessible by water and all the locals ride around in skiffs. There are a few

Chris, Bill, Madeline and Roy celebrating at the Trico Bar





Back channels at Oak Ridge

hangouts for the expat community offering live music on different days of the week, including BJ's and the Hole in the Wall. At another location, the Reef House, we walked out on a concrete dock to the reef and snorkelled right offshore before enjoying lunch under the shade of the porch.

It proved easy to hire a car, so while the trade winds blew we did some touring around Roatan. We drove east to Old Port Royal, where we walked among coconut palms along the sandy shore, and decided we should bring *Mithril* there, weather permitting. From the anchorage at Old Port Royal there is a nice walk along the road to La Sirena with stunning views and on the way back we stopped at La Sirena Tiki bar. Returning to Jonesville we drove along the north shore of Roatan and stopped at a Garifuna village named Punta Gorda. The Garifuna are descendants of the Afro-indigenous population from St Vincent who were exiled to Honduras in the 18th century. Many of them now live in Belize but there is also a settlement in the Bay Islands. We ate a typical Garifuna meal of *marucha* seafood soup, a local speciality with lobster tail, king crab, fish, conch and shrimp in a coconut soup base – delicious!

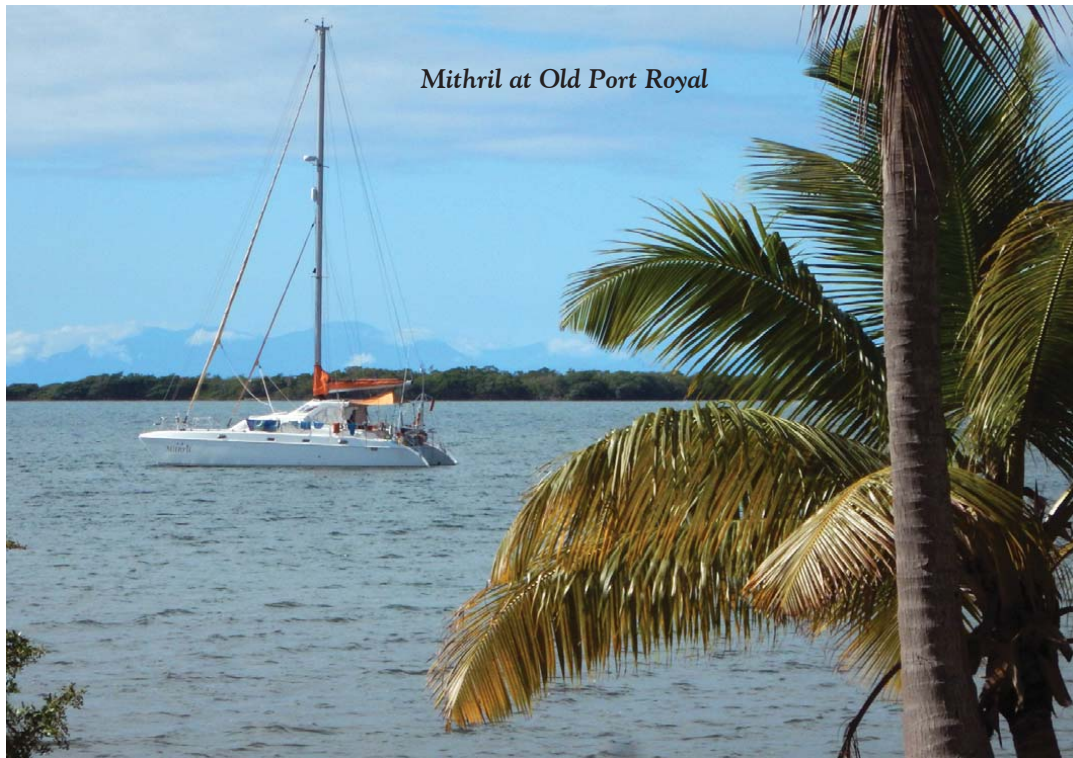
The trade winds finally eased enough for us to venture eastward in *Mithril*

An Oak Ridge water taxi





along the south coast to Old Port Royal. We anchored for a few nights in the large bay at New Port Royal of Caribbean pirates fame, occupied by the English as far back as the 1740s. We discovered a dinghy channel through the mangroves that the locals use to go east, so upped anchor and moved 5 miles east outside the reef to Old Port Royal, where we had driven a week earlier. We enjoyed the bay to ourselves, took walks ashore in an old coconut plantation and snorkelled on both entrance reefs.



Mithril at Old Port Royal



A fisherman at St Helene

After watching the locals take a channel further east through the mangroves, we took our own dinghy and found a cut through to the north coast at the east end of Mr Field's Bay. Halfway across the island the water changed colour dramatically from Caribbean blue to muddy river brown. It poured with rain the whole day and was a wet but interesting dinghy ride. In better weather you can reach the north coast by dinghy through this channel.

Our last foray east took us to St Helene, an isolated island at the eastern tip of Roatan, which has one of the poorest villages in the Bay Islands. It has been left behind by the others and only recently have electric power and potable water reached the village. Ashore we found the Mangrove Inn and Restaurant where we met owner Willis and his wife who run a small beach bar. He was born and raised locally but has travelled extensively. We ordered beers, and he had to walk up the beach to get them out of a friend's cooler. We took the dinghy around the corner to the uninhabited island of Morat, which has a lovely white sandy beach with a few conch shells. It was a very pretty spot with crystal-blue water, although the locals told us about a large lagoon with lots of crocodiles.

Before long, it was back to Jonesville to prepare for our return flight home. The timing of our trip was fortuitous as we departed the Bay Islands just prior to the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak. Madeline and Roy chose to ride out the virus in the Rio Dulce in Guatemala waiting for the opportunity to continue their adventures.

So what did we conclude about the Bay Islands? No pirates, less crowded than the Eastern Caribbean and scenically on a par with the Virgins. Definitely paradise!

The End of the World by air

We longed to sail to Guanaja, the most easterly and remote of the Bay Islands. This is where most cruisers clear in if arriving from locations further east in the Caribbean. It became apparent that Bill and I would not be able to sail there aboard *Mithril* due to the trade winds, although Roy and Madeline were able to do so after they eased. If planning a limited stay in the Bay Islands, it may be worthwhile to head as far east as possible to Guanaja before heading west.



The End of the World resort

We realised the best way to get there was by air. We chose a resort on the west coast called End of the World [<https://endoftheworldresort.com>] and, as there are no direct flights from Roatan, had a layover in La Ceiba on the Honduran mainland to change planes. Then it was a short hop out to Guanaja. The airport is located next to a narrow channel which runs between the east and west parts of the island. Brian Rowland, the owner, was off the island but put us in the care of his staff, Armando and Marlee. We were the only ones there and had a fabulous two-day stay. The scenery from our treetop room was spectacular and justified the long climb up the stairs to the top.

Marlee, the cook, was born in the town of Mangrove Bight on the northwest corner of the island and was raised on Guanaja. She lived through Hurricane *Mitch* in October 1998 which devastated the island, nearly destroyed the mangrove forest and resulted in her village being renamed *Mitch*. She served us three delicious meals daily plus drinks at the thatch-roofed bar, including rum in frozen coconuts one evening. Armando took us out snorkelling both days to see some of the best reefs in the Bay Islands. They teemed with large lobsters, nurse sharks and colourful reef fish. Plus we saw our first lionfish. These predatory fish imported from the Indian Ocean are taking over the reef and eating all the indigenous fish. We learned that you can take a course in how to kill and cook lionfish! On the last day, Armando and Marlee took us on a walking tour of Bonacca, the island's main town, where 2000 people are crammed close together on a series of walking streets built up on stilts.

Practicalities

Customs and Immigration

Foreign yachts can clear in at any of the three major Bay Islands – Utila, Roatan or Guanaja. First stop should be immigration, which costs US \$3 per person. They take fingerprints and photos, and usually grant a 60-day visit. Next stop is with the Port Captain where they require a digital photo of the yacht and, for no charge, grant a

60-day cruising permit. Both officials were courteous and spoke English, and further month extensions are usually obtainable.

Note that foreign yachts coming from Guatemala are subject to the Central America-4 Free Mobility Agreement, known as the C-4. This was established to permit free movement across the borders of the four signatory countries – El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. However there is a three-month limit for foreign nationals, so if cruisers are near the end of their three-month limit they may consider a stop in Belize before sailing directly to Honduras.

Cruising Guides

There are several cruising guides for the Bay Islands. *A Cruising Guide to the Northwest Caribbean* by Stephen Pavlidis is one of the newest and does a good job of offering suggestions for places to visit with sketches of the anchorages. Although somewhat dated, Julius Wilensky's *Cruising Guide to the Bay Islands of Honduras* has excellent hand-drawn sketches of the anchorages.

Navigation

We found Navionics digital charts to be the best but even they were not always accurate. The best option is to rely on eyeball navigation with a sharp lookout on the bow, especially when navigating passes between the reefs.

Weather

Chris Parker's Western Caribbean forecast is broadcast six days a week and covers a wide swath of the Western Caribbean from Cuba west to Mexico and Belize and south as far as Colombia – check www.mwxc.com for frequencies and schedules. You can also subscribe via the website, in which case Chris will tailor his forecast to your location.

Provisions

Food and spirits, including local rum, are readily available but expensive at the Bay Islands' well-stocked supermarkets. Stocks can vary after shipments arrive from the US and often include well-known US brands. On Utila, Bush's market on the waterfront is the best stocked and is convenient by dinghy. On Roatan, the best store is Eldon's in French Harbor.

Fruit and vegetables including papaya, plantain, pineapples, potatoes, tomatoes, eggs, lettuce, zucchini, oranges and limes are also available from outdoor stalls along the highway and in villages.

A roadside fruit and vegetable stall





The trade winds blowing...

Marinas

There are several marinas in Roatan but they are small by first-world standards:

- French Harbor Cay Marina is associated with the Fantasy Island resort [www.fantasyislandresort.com/marina-en.html]. Current rates are US \$0.90 per foot per day up to 14 days, and \$8.00 per foot per month for longer stays, or you can anchor off the marina and use the dinghy dock for \$2 per day. On Tuesdays they run a free van to Eldon's supermarket.
- Jonesville Point Marina [www.jonesvillepointmarina.com/marina/] is east of French Harbor and has limited dock space though there is ample room to anchor off. Americans Sherri and Brian Visker manage the Trico Bar as well as the marina itself. Amenities include hot showers, laundry, free internet, access to local transportation to Eldon's and assistance with shipping packages from the US. They host Trico Tuesdays with live local musicians at the bar.

Communications

We used a cellphone (mobile phone) with a Honduran SIM card for communications, both as a cellphone with local number plus for data on the internet. This worked everywhere in the Bay Islands. There are two cellular companies, TIGO and CLARO, with CLARO offering better coverage.

Security

Cruisers should practise caution in the Bay Islands and adopt basic security rules – lock your boat at all times, use alarms, raise and lock your dinghy at night and lock it at the dock during the day, travel in groups whenever possible and keep the VHF tuned to Channel 16 plus the shared channel with fellow cruisers in the area.

