

Luperón's role in the Caribbean

an out of this world retrospective on changes along the "thorny path"



Ever play Martian? You know, where you hover over our planet and try to figure us out like a Martian might, sort of the way 15 year olds will cogitate over a science project's ant farm.

For example, humans tromped all over the Americas for 30,000 years, leaving only a potsherd or two behind and a slight tilt to my cheekbones due to one of only four women that marched across the Bering Strait's land bridge. Then for just the last 1.6% of this time Europeans and Africans milled about, strewing colonies and trails all throughout our two continents.

In 1972 -- in the last tenth of a percent of human time in the Americas -- I came to a city in Brazil which staggered me with its size and complexity. Sky scrapers poked out of the mountainous jungle from a slew of freeway spaghetti-bowls. Some potsherds, huh? At that time my girlfriend told me Sao Paulo housed 18 million people, 3 million of whom spoke Japanese. Asians had clearly arrived post-WW2.

Now that you have a Martian handle on our migratory hemisphere, hover a bit closer, over the arc of Caribbean islands. You will find a new spoor deposited during the last one hundredth of a percent of western wanderings. It primarily features resort complexes and roads and ship- and air-ports and landfills. At first you notice what looks like a water borne bacterial infection building up along these complexes, but it quickly blossoms into an advanced community of cells living in full symbiosis with them.

Why, damn! It's you and me! And our marinas and boatyards and hangouts and potlucks and fleamarkets. We converged on the knots of tourist amenities, and the resorts fed off the attraction of yachts at anchor. In no time myriad yachts blazed out their cruising meccas while threading the island lees down to the Spanish Main.

Take Trinidad for an example. In 1986 I sailed *Jalan Jalan* up to the rickety docks at downtown Port of Spain. The British yacht *Keelson* had arrived nine months before me. The Customs ledger showed more than a year with no yacht arrivals before them. The T&T Yacht Club lay in ruin, its stone jetties tossed asunder by the once-every-age gigantic swells from the Gulf of Paria. Only TTYA marina existed for a few local boats.

Customs arranged for a car from the motor pool with a spectacularly beautiful policewoman to drive me to the many bureaucratic instances that wished to get in on the actual clearing of a yacht. It became a two day pursuit as we found most of the offices closed most of the time. The pleasantest interrogatories I've ever received from a uniformed official came when my driver would turn to me, smile, and say, "Well, what shall we do now?" A truly great experience.

Trinidad has changed a bit, at least with respect to numbers of yachts, which some put over 3,000, mostly ashore.

Now even a Martian can't directly see all the infrastructure which has developed in support of the train of yachts. For instance, skippers have to correctly call local winds and seas. Should they ply the sea breeze or the nocturnal wind, or follow the wind's day by playing in the coastal fronts? They've got to *know* the gradient conditions and the location and movement of weather features.

The U.S. National Weather Service's Miami function, the Tropical Prediction Center, has made up products useful to craft smaller than super tankers, and the U.S. Coast Guard as well as private interests broadcast them for easy pickup by yacht computers. Chris Parker, of the Caribbean Weather Center in Tortola, works all night long tailoring reports for individual yachts on marine band shortwave and email. Herb Hilgenberg does the same from Canada. HAM radio buffs George and Arthur from the U.S. Virgins and Barbados add to the Wx information, and Melodye of the Caribbean Safety and Security Net daily focuses the community on those concerns. The Swedish Net, the German Net, the CruiseHeimers Net and Email and the Internet and Satphones and Cellphones -- they make up a neural network that has given the creature a brain.

Only telepathy goes missing for communications on the 1500 sea miles of track from Georgetown to Puerto la Cruz. A Martian could easily mistake us for a fully developed organism. After all, if Hugo Chávez sneezes, the whole head of the snake whips over to Trinidad. If Chris Parker smiles sunnily, the tail, broken off by weather at Turks & Caicos, gathers itself up and rejoins the main body at Luperón, one of the cruising meccas.

To see Luperón, fly your Martian craft over the island of Hispaniola and hover down the north coast of the Dominican Republic where you'll find the deep protected bays of Luperón (LuperonCruising.com) lying between hillsides of spectacular seaviews. Just over the hills to the east Al Meister has added to his two parks in the Bahamas by creating the world's largest dolphin encounter at Ocean World (www.ocean-world.info). His 109-slip marina will open this year, just beyond the sea lions and the tigers. In Luperón's yacht harbor Puerto Blanco Marina and the Marina Luperón Yacht Club direct cruiser antics, while construction proceeds on another marina and a haulout.

But how did Luperón look just 25 years ago? That's when I sailed *Jalan Jalan* into a village with dirt streets and a few hundred poor fishing folk living in palmwood and cane-thatched houses. Today the streets have pavement and sidewalks. Much of the housing has morphed into concrete, and thousands more people have thronged here. Back then *Camposinos* had walked miles to the town's single multi-purpose school building. Today's students don't walk. They have separate complexes for upper and lower schools which have run out of parking space for scooters, motorbikes and cars. These changes came principally due to the recycling of the rain of money from the yacht anchorage which, in a survey taken some years back, amounted to \$72,000 per month. Some rain on the muddy streets of an impoverished village.

Though Luperón still gives off the flavor of the *campo*, particularly in the real muddy rain, it now has hordes of hookers and gaggles of guides gleefully running after Eurotrash fly-ins and Margaritaville wannabe sail-ins. Outlanders start and fold restaurants, cantinas and nightclubs, sometimes within the same week. The town has become festively jammed with entrepreneurs and opportunists. Anyone sailing in on an even keel will find it exciting and fun to live on its edge. Even the uneven seem content to get swallowed up by the cheerful wickedness of it all.



We've had 165 boats at anchor here last winter, and this hurricane season we have about 100. More than a dozen cruisers have built retirement homes ashore including myself. The Dominican Republic has the largest economy in the Caribbean Basin when you subtract petroleum from Venezuela's. No surprise, then, that Luperón has become a major ganglion on the living train of yachts along the Thorny Path. To join this season's gala, plan to set sail now.