

INBOUND THROUGH THE SURIGAO STRAIT

The following is a summary of advice and suggestions provided by a number of cruising yachtsmen who all wish you the very smoothest of sailing. Please note: the views and comments expressed in this document are offered in the interests of the pleasure, safety and security of all, and do not necessarily reflect the policy or opinion of Puerto Galera Yacht Club, Inc.

If you find anything in these notes that is not quite accurate or, if you wish to add new information, please contact the: cockpit@pgyc.org

LITTLE KNOWN FACTS

The Philippine Deep

40 miles due east of Siargao Island lies the Philippine Deep, which was first surveyed by the German vessel Emden in 1927. The Deep reaches a depth of more than 35,400 feet, whereas the height of Mt Everest is less than 30,000 feet. The GPS reading at the deepest point is 9° 42'N, 126° 50'E. Don't plan to drop anchor here!

The Surigao Strait

This is the same route taken by Magellan when he first entered this vast archipelago, in 1521, and claimed it for the King of Spain. The islands have ever since been known as 'the Philippines', in honour of the King. The Strait itself is deep and free from dangers, with the shorelines steep too. The only challenge is the tidal flow – up to 8 knots in places, when in full flood.

WEATHER

The Philippine islands experience two distinct 'seasons' of weather: the NE monsoon, from November through April; and, the SW monsoon from May through October. The NE monsoon brings the 'Amihan' winds, which typically range from five and 20 knots, under mostly clear skies. The SW monsoon brings the 'Habagat' winds, which range from 10 to 25 knots, under variable skies. It is the SW monsoon season that drives most of the cyclonic storm systems -- Tropical Depressions that may turn into Typhoons (a.k.a. Hurricanes, Cyclones) in as little as 24 hours. Ahead of and behind a cyclonic storm system you can expect winds to be light or very light, and variable, for 24 hours or more. Typhoons can occur at any time of the year and it is recommended that you obtain weather bulletins at least once every two days, whatever the season. Check the weather links on the MoreInfo page of the PGYC website.

HAZARDS

Fishing boats are the main challenge when arriving off the Surigao Strait, as they are throughout the coastal waters of the archipelago. In the daylight you can see them and they can see you – no problem. Arriving after dark, many of them are carrying no lights (except for the squid boats, which are so well lit as to appear to be a town on the horizon when first approached) and so they are obstacles that must be avoided. Also, day or night, even small fishing boats may be running a trawl line or net, so you should be observant of signals given by the boat's crew if passing close across the stern of a fishing boat – they will let you know if you are about to destroy the source of family income. Rule of thumb, if you must sail after dark stay five miles offshore and keep a lookout.

Navigation lights marked on charts are occasionally out-of-service, especially the secondary or least important ones.

An innocuous piece of bamboo sticking vertically out of the water, sometimes miles offshore, is probably a Fish Aggregating Device ("FAD"), anchored to the seabed by strong fishing line. Recently however, more elaborate FADs have been deployed by local fishermen in some areas, in the form of oil

drums anchored to the seabed by chains. There are no reports of lines being strung between FADs, so it is considered safe to pass close to and between them.

Unattended fishing nets are typically not used away from very shallow water so you should not find these to be a hazard throughout much of the Philippines. However, around South-east Asia in general they are sometimes used up to two miles offshore. The general rule is: if the net floatation devices stand vertically at the surface then it is usually safe to pass between them; but, if the net floatation devices lie flat on the surface then it is almost always unsafe to pass between them. Best advice: stay clear; last year while racing our yacht was caught by an unmarked / unattended net one at night, about a mile and a half offshore, that had floatation devices standing vertically at the surface.

INFORMATION RESOURCES

Apart from the Puerto Galera Yacht Club website, which you already know about, there is an excellent HAM radio station at 14.323 MHz, on-air everyday at 00:00 Z/GMT/UTC. The South East Asian Maritime Net (formerly known as Rowdy's Net) is a friendly participation service where yachts cruising around the South China Sea and beyond can keep up to date on who, what and where. Richard is the facilitator on-air and all are welcome.

ANCHORAGES

ARRIVAL IN THE DARK: In the area of the Surigao Strait, there are two suggested 'first stops' to choose from at night. Both are located on the east of **Dinagat Island**, both are very sheltered inlets and both are safe to enter at any time of day or night.

Malinao Inlet near 10° 15'N 125° 38'E
Gaas Inlet near 10° 11'N 125° 39'E

The choice of onward routing around Dinagat Island would depend upon the tides because you would only want to take the southern rounding if you were expecting to be in the area between Kabo Island and Bayagnan Island at slack water – if you arrive at that area when the tide is in full flow there may be as much as 8 knots of tide with you or against you. Plus, the volumes of fast moving water here generate whirlpools.

The **Suluan Island** navigation light is a useful guide when entering the Surigao Strait because it is almost always working and can be seen from up to 28 miles out. There is an anchorage marked there on most charts (near 10° 45.60'N, 125° 56.30'E) but we have no knowledge of anyone using it. It may be a good first stop during the NE monsoon, but the island's small size suggests that if there is any significant weather around then the anchorage may not offer a good night's sleep, despite good holding.

ARRIVAL IN DAYLIGHT: In the area of the Surigao Strait, the suggested 'first stop' would be one of the following:

Hibuson Is. near 10° 25.60'N, 125° 28.60'E (sheltered, coral and mangroves at shore)
Tabujon Bay/Lisub Cove near 10° 21.20'N, 125° 33'E (sheltered, near a town)
Layauan Bay near 10° 16.80'N, 125° 32'E (sheltered, mangroves on shore)

See also **Suluan Island** mentioned above, under 'arrival in the dark'.

ROUTING TO PUERTO GALERA

You should attempt to arrive off Puerto Galera on the north-east tip of **Mindoro Island** (near 13° 31'N, 120° 57.50'E), in daylight because the both entrance channels are quite narrow and there are reefs within the bay itself.

DIRECT TO PUERTO GALERA head north to the entrance of the **San Juanico Strait** (near 11° 15'N, 125° 04'E), between the islands of **Leyte** and **Samar**. This strait holds the record for being the narrowest, navigable – maximum draft 4.8 metres (15.5 feet) -- strait in the world, but it is recommended that navigation should only be attempted in DAYLIGHT. It is possible to hire a local 'pilot' for between Php500-1,000 (negotiable) per passage, and the deeper your draft the more we would recommend this option. Alternatively, follow a larger vessel (of which there are usually many) through the strait because they almost certainly have a pilot on board.

NOTE: there is a bridge within the strait that is considered yacht-friendly -- 30.75 metres (101 feet) clearance at high water – as confirmed by the Tacloban Pilots Association (January 2004).

It is possible to check-in to the Philippines at Tacloban City (near the southern entrance to the strait) without too much hassle. However, if you are planning to sail directly to Puerto Galera, this is not absolutely necessary -- immigration formalities can be accomplished here in the town, with the Club available to assist if requested.

Upon exiting the Strait, be careful not to take the west passage, past **Biliran Island**. There is a bridge between Biliran and Leyte that does not appear on most charts. The bridge IS NOT considered yacht-friendly, although the crew of a sailing yacht – a Choy Lee 36 (11 metres LOA) -- has reported safe passage, but only after anchoring, going ashore and checking the clearance with a line (actual clearance not recorded). Upon exiting the Strait it is recommended that you leave Biliran Island to port.

Onward routing could be west or east of **Masbate Island**. In a strong NE monsoon we would recommend passing west of Masbate.

If you do choose the west of Masbate route, you may wish to drop into the legendary, white-sand paradise of **Boracay Island** (near 11° 58'N, 121° 55'E). In a NE monsoon, choose the south or west coast for your anchorage; the east coast in a SW monsoon. There is a deep anchorage at the SSW corner of the island, just outside the reef that protects the west coast / beach. It is possible to access shallow waters inside the reef if you approach from the southern entrance, in daylight – vessels with a draft of 2.5 metres (eight feet) have anchored inside the reef within the past year. However, at some times of the year it is prohibited to take a sailboat inside the reef so if someone tries to stop you entering please listen to him / her. Note: If you do choose to go to Boracay then the close-reach from there to Puerto Galera may be uncomfortable in a NE monsoon unless the wind has a good southerly component to it -- bringing it onto the beam.

PUERTO GALERA VIA CEBU After Dinagat Island, your next stop could be off the town of **Maasin** (Southern Leyte) approx 10° 07'N 124° 52'E, this spot is a little bit open, but is sheltered during a NE monsoon.

From Maasin you can hop directly to **Cebu Island** and check-in in Cebu City, although this is not absolutely necessary as immigration formalities can be accomplished in Puerto Galera. You may choose to take a day or two skipping through the small islands of northern **Bohol** en route. In any event approach Cebu City from the north. You will find two bridges linking Cebu Island to **Mactan Island** – these are yacht-friendly and should pose no problem for your mast. Note: It is not recommended to sail at night around northern Bohol because there are many reefs; in daylight the reefs are easy to navigate.

From Cebu City you can go around the north of Cebu Island and then to **Masbate Island**. From Masbate you could route through **Romblon** and **Marinduque** to Puerto Galera. This is considered the comfortable route during the NE monsoon.

Alternatively, after Masbate, you may wish to drop into the legendary, white sand paradise of **Boracay Island's** east coast (11° 58'N, 121° 55'E). See previous section 'Direct To Puerto Galera', for more details.

OTHER ANCHORAGES EN ROUTE TO PUERTO GALERA

The SE side of **Bantayan Island** (near 11° 10.80'N, 123° 41.90'E) is a beautiful sandy anchorage. This island is worth a visit and lies to the NW of the long, thin Cebu Island itself.

Tablas Island has Loooc Bay (entrance near 12° 14.50'N, 121° 58'E) on its western coast. The bay is considered to be a typhoon shelter.

Romblon Island has Romblon town anchorage on its NW tip (near 12° 35'N, 122° 16.20'E), which is where the Spanish founded a stronghold in their hey days in the Philippines. An interesting visit to a harbour that is claimed to be "typhoon proof".

Marinduque Island in the Sibuyan Sea is a very interesting visit, with at least 3 natural harbours, which are also typhoon shelters. These are:- **Port Balanacan** on the NW end of the island. **Santa Cruz Harbour** on the NE end of the island. Salomague Island covering **Masagasai Bay** below Santa Cruz on the east coast.

Vessels often stop at **Maestro de Campo Island** on the way to Puerto Galera.

Puerto Galera, "the Port of Galleons", is the perfect anchorage en route to anywhere, and cruisers often stay for long stretches, enjoying the friendly yacht club, the beach life and the natural beauty. In fact it can be difficult to leave such a paradise. You have been warned!

ENTERING PUERTO GALERA

We strongly recommend a daylight entry into Puerto Galera, especially if this is your first visit. If you arrive off Puerto Galera in the dark then we recommend that you anchor outside the bay until dawn. A good place to anchor is near 13° 31.20'N, 120° 56.60'E – you can safely anchor within 100 meters of the shore. The west, or Manila, channel is the best entry for first time visitors because it is consistently deep and wide; the north, or Batangas, channel is narrower and has a shallow coral outcrop at its inner end – even Club boats occasionally nudge this one. There are a number of coral reefs within the bay itself, with navigable channels separating them. If you have not already done so then check-out the modified Admiralty chart (A3559) on the MoreInfo page of the PGYC website for a greater understanding of the inner bays.

Enter the Manila channel (near 13° 31.50'N, 120° 56.75'E) and stay in the center until you can clearly see the two, large white mooring buoys in Boquete Bay to your right – at this point you will also see the town of Muelle due, south of your position, with the Club moorings visible to the left of the town pier, DO NOT head straight for the Club moorings. Instead, turn to starboard and head for the two, large white mooring buoys in Boquete Bay. When you are approximately two boat lengths from the first, large white buoy turn to port and head directly for the closest Club mooring buoy. You can pick up any of the vacant Club buoys while you wait for the service boat to direct you to the most appropriate one for your yacht. DO NOT pick up on either of the two, large white mooring buoys in Boquete Bay except in an absolute emergency.

Note: the Club can be contacted by radio on Marine VHF Channel 68. However, because of the geography of the area, your broadcast may not be heard by the Club immediately unless you are within the bay. If you are inside the bay and still can't obtain a response from the Club then try calling the "service boat" by name, on the same VHF Channel 68 – the service boat is usually somewhere in or around the mooring area and has a better line of sight to the Manila Channel entrance. If you have

cellular or satellite telephone then contact the Club using +63 (0)43 4420136. The Club hours of operation are currently from 08:30 hrs to 22:00 hrs daily.

TRIVIA and TIPS:

- 1) Check-in with Immigration and Customs at Surigao City may not be the best idea -- it is reported to take a long time and may cost more than you need to pay under existing government legislation.
- 2) The Cebu Yacht Club is reported to charge comparatively high rates for boats using its mooring and pontoon facilities. Most yachts visiting Cebu prefer to anchor a little offshore and then go ashore in their own dinghies.
- 3) If you decide to overlook the suggested routes above and instead go southwest from Cebu City then you will come to the island of Negros. Near the southern tip of Negros Island you will find Bonbonon Point, and just west of this is the entrance (near 09° 03'N, 123° 07'E) to Port Bonbonon – a grand name for a small but effective, natural typhoon shelter that serves as a temporary home for a number of cruising boats.
- 4) Filipinos consider their children to be more worthy than themselves in almost all aspects of life. While you are anchored in a secluded spot, if a fishing boat should come along side with a child or two on board, giving a gift for the children is taken as a friendly sign and an acceptable gesture -- superior to offering a gift to the parents themselves. Tip: Before entering Philippines waters, buy a few writing books, pencils and ball pens (school supplies) as gifts for children – if fish are offered in return for your gift it is impolite to refuse, but accept only enough for one meal.
- 5) Rum, gin and beer are very inexpensive in the Philippines (In a store: US\$1+ for a bottle of rum, US\$2+ for a bottle of gin, US\$0.25+ for a bottle of beer) so do not stock up on these items before you arrive; stock up on these items before you leave the Philippines.
- 6) Whiskey and Brandy are considered expensive items in the Philippines – having a couple of spare bottles on board when you arrive will give you a currency tradable for favours and assistance. However, do not encourage people to drink to excess on board your boat – most Filipino's, by virtue of their religion, do not drink regularly and some have been reported to become intoxicated quickly.
- 7) Every year, in February, there is a sailboat race from Manila to Boracay. The race covers 204 miles, with changes in point of sail every 25 miles or so, usually ending with a downwind sleigh ride. The Puerto Galera Yacht Club organizes a Chicken-out party to coincide with the time when the yachts pass through the Verde Passage, across the entrance to Puerto Galera -- every year a gaggle of yachts either, find the lure of the Yacht Club's restaurant and bar too tempting or, are forced to retire with broken gear or low crew morale.

Fair Winds!

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