Yacht services available at Bocas del Toro

By Ray Jason

It has been about two years since I sailed out of the Rio and headed for Bocas del Toro, Panama.Â Since then a few of my Rio Dulce friends have arrived in Bocas and have been delighted by the cruising wonderland that they have discovered here.Â Some of them suggested that I pass the word along via the Chisme-Vindicator. Bocas del Toro is an archipelago on the Caribbean side of Panama only about 30 miles from the Costa Rican border.Â It is comprised of nine big islands and hundreds of smaller ones.Â Some of the outer islands provide a barrier that turns the area into a comfortable inland sea.Â Waves rarely exceed knee height and at their worst are generally only waist high.Â And the icing on the cruising cake is the fact that Panama is well below the hurricane belt and has never been hit by one. There is a flourishing ex-pat community scattered around the islands, many of whom are former sailors who have thrown out the hook because they found it so alluring here.Â Cruising around to visit friends and attractions is extremely safe with only one boarding in the 9 years since I first started coming here.Â There are so many things to do and see in the area that one almost never has to beat to windward.Â Just pick another destination where the sailing is smoother.Â There are monkeys and toucans and sloths in the foreground and mountains and volcanoes in the background.Â Some superb beaches and nice reefs also vie for your attention.Â The little town of Bocas del Toro is mellow and un-gentrified.Â The main road is like a bike path compared to Frontera.Â You donâ€™t have to look up the bridge and hope that the brakes on oncoming truck donâ€™t fail.Â The town is full of locals and Indios and backpackers and surfers and sailors - an eclectic and fun-loving blend. Almost any need a cruiser might have can easily be met here.Â There are good grocery and hardware stores.Â The phone service and internet is excellent and there is now a Mail Boxes Etc for small deliveries.Â For bigger items there is a Marine Warehouse service that allows one to pick items from West Marine and other catalogs and have it ocean shipped down here.Â It usually takes about 5 weeks until arrival.Â Â Â But the BIG NEWS in Bocas del Toro these days is the opening of a full-service American owned and operated boatyard.Â It took SEVEN (thatâ€™s not a typo â€“ SEVEN) years of bureaucratic purgatory for Courtney Parks, the owner, to shepherd the haul-out through the permitting labyrinth.Â But he has finally succeeded; and it is a very nice facility.Â The 60 ton travel-lift can handle boats up to 20 feet wide.Â They also have a crane on the premises.Â Do it yourselfers can wail away at their dream projects or you can hire the reasonably priced yard workers to sand and paint the bottom.Â They also offer electrical, painting, welding and other miscellaneous services.Â Check out all that they offer at: www.bocasboatyard.com.

There are three different marinas scattered around the islands and Iâ€™d like to brag a bit on my favorite, which is the Bocas Marina.Â I split my time between meandering around the islas and chillin out at this marina. It is a U.S. caliber facility, but at Third World prices.Â The grounds and gardens are impeccable.Â The docks are the high-end floating concrete type and the power and water are very dependable.Â The free wifi is far more reliable than normal marina systems.Â The bathrooms and showers are really clean and there is a terrific bar/restaurant called the Calypso Cantina.Â It is one of the last great Cruiserâ€™s Havens left anywhere.Â There are swap meets, domino matches, live music and festivities for every holiday.Â They have had the same office and dock staff for years at a time, which is always a great sign of a well-run operation.Â See their website HERE.

And here is a real kicker â€“ twice during my years here, Jimmy Buffet has brought his mega-yacht into the marina to chill out and do a little local surfing.Â Now last time I checked, Jimmy has the financial wherewithal to vacation just about anywhere.Â And if it is good enough for him- it is good enough for me.Â Perhaps it might be good enough for you as well.Â The livinâ€™ is good and the price is right- so come on down!Â Â Â