

Running the bar

Â (Editor's Note: Since we have a lively discussion going on in the Rio Dulce Forum about GPS coordinates for crossing the bar at Livingston, it seems timely to rerun Casey Brooks' article about "Running the Bar". Please read the discussion Here . If you have a boat with a draft of 6' or over and have different waypoints than those mentioned, please let us know.) Â A few notes on the Rio Dulce entrance, GuatemalaÂ

By CASEY BROOKS Â Â For those of you who have not crossed the bar yet I want to summarize up front: DONÂ€™T WORRY ABOUT IT.Â

Â The normal depth of the sandy bar is five and a half feet. Many of you have a GPS with tide stations. Some of you might have the regular printed tide tables.

Â Â You can find the tables on the www.mayaparadise.com website.Â Â ThereÂ was a photocopy on the wall in RaulÂ€™s (ServaMar) office in Livingston last time I was thereÂ Â Â You want to cross an hour or even two before high tide. Check that you are on the right time, too. You want to err on the early side so you have time to fool around getting off before the tide falls. Â Â When I crossed the first time, âœRetrieverâ€• was very heavy drawing 6â€™8â€•.Â Since then a ton, literally, of 25 years of cruising stuff has come off the boat and into my shop on the lower Golfete. Now she draws 6â€™6â€•, maybe 6â€™7â€•. I have been over the bar six times now, with the lowest I have tried a plus 1.4â€™ Iâ€™ve encountered a number of river bars over the years: The Pacific Northwest, Ecuador, Malaysia, East Africa, and most memorable, Coffâ€™s Harbor, Australia with roller coaster seas running. Â Â Â The Rio Dulce is pretty easy.Â HereÂ€™s my strategy. Pick a reasonable tide. If this is your first crossing you want to do it in daylight.Â Â Find the entrance buoy at approximately N 15degrees 50â€™ W 88 degrees 44.5â€™. When the light works it flashes green. Hang offshore of the buoy and get ready. Douse the sails but keep them ready. Â Line up the distant canyon mouth and check that it is about 225 to 230 degrees on your compass.Â Set up your GPS âœrunway pageâ€•.Â Â When all is ready for example, pull your dinghy painter up tight if you are towing. Â Then get the boat full speed and go for it. This is about a 10-15 minute run.Â Have your crew watch the GPS and say GO RIGHT or GO LEFT. DonÂ€™t get all technical and expect to steer a perfect course. Â There is often a side setting current here. Keep looking back at the buoy to see how this is affecting you and come back onto the line drawn between the buoy and the canyon. This is seat of the pants and eyeball navigation. The GPS is just there to make you feel good. Â If you start to bump, donÂ€™t back off the throttle, keep the momentum you have, this muddy/sandy bar canÂ€™t hurt you. I like an afternoon tide, because usually an onshore wind is blowing, say ten to fifteen knots.Â Â Â This sounds scary, but in reality it is very helpful for a boat like mine. âœRetrieverâ€• has a very old and tired 3 cylinder diesel. Add to the equation a narrow two blade prop and Iâ€™m lucky to get the boat up 5.7 knots. Â Now with the wind and waves helping, âœRetrieverâ€• bumps over the bar instead of sticking.Â This bumping starts about a hundred meters in from the entrance buoy and continues until about the point the hotel sits on. Â By the way donÂ€™t angle into the anchorage off the town dock until you are about at right angle to it.Â âœRetrieverâ€• has a full keel with external lead ballast shaped like a V. Without the wind waves she happily wedges herself into the sand and sticks there with a dumb dog look on her face.Â Â If this happens to you, donÂ€™t panic, the boat is not in dire straits. The bottom is soft, there are no rocks, and youâ€™re not going to sink. Are you?Â Â Put on the coffee pot. If youâ€™re not an English, tea. If you are an old Rio hand, crack open a beer. Now CALMLY, unfurl the genoa if there is wind. Your strategy is to heel the boat. Now using the engine try going back and forth. Â Advanced students can let the boom out as far as it goes and get your crew to climb out there. Bribe with beer if necessary. If all you have for crew is Jake or Fluffy, try hoisting the dinghy from the end of the boom. Try bucketing water into the dinghy for extra weight...Â Â Now by this time the sailboat that might be anchored off Livingston has seen you or heard your calm call on the VHF (try 68 in addition to 16). At any rate, a local lancha will come out. The natives are friendly.Â Â They want to, of course, make some money pulling you off. If you just canÂ€™t get off yourself, start negotiating. I think something around \$30 or \$40 is reasonable. The 100 Quetzal note is worth about \$13 US. If you donÂ€™t speak much Spanish try holding up two twenty dollar bills and see if they agree. At any rate, be nice; give them each a coke and maybe some cookies. Â If they donÂ€™t come down from a ridiculously high price, tell them âœGraciasâ€• for coming out, crack open another beer, after all you ARE technically in the Rio, and pretend to rig the hammock.Â Â Â Just remember old tub of lard Spanish galleons got in here and so have 7â€™ draft yachts.Â Â I just now turned on my GPS, November 12, 2007 clicking on the tide page for Rio Dulce Entrance; I see that the tides are asymmetrical at the moment. The first high is 9:30 am and is only a plus 1.3 feet.Â Europeans please switch from meters, and shellbacks please switch from fathoms, so that we are all talking feet here. Â The second high is a really good one, topping out at a whopping 2.0â€™ at 8:00pm. I would go on this one.Â LetÂ€™s say Iâ€™m in the Rio and want to go out. I would go down to Livingston in the afternoon and check out. Then around sunset I would head out with the tide at about 1.6 and rising.Â Â Â Â So letÂ€™s say youâ€™ve made it over. Anchor off the town dock, hoist a yellow Q flag and wait for the authorities to come out.Â Â Raul is your key guy here and makes checking in smooth and easy.Â Nobody hurries here; call Raul on 16 if no one has come.Â Â If Iâ€™ve caught a fish, I like to have chunks ready in plastic bags for the officials. There will be four or five.Â Cookies and cokes are good here too, and Raul is very fond of Velveeta cheese. So to summarize, DONÂ€™T WORRY ABOUT IT.Â Â Â Hope to see you on the Rio, Â Â CaseyÂ Â Â