

The Muelle de Los Pegasos in Cartagena is lined with alongside berths and marinas such as the Todomar CL Bocagrande facility.

with Venezuela, the Amazon rainforest, which spans nine South American countries, and the interior. It also extends to islands in both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

With such variety on offer, it should be a dream destination for boaters. The coastline comprises 1,642km along the Caribbean and 2,188km facing the Pacific. There are also 18,225km of navigable inland waterways, with four major river basins: Magdalena, Atrato, Orinoco and Amazonas, with an additional 1,800 lagoons and reservoirs, and 1,900 marshes.

Colombia's location is its great selling point. It is situated just below the hurricane belt of the Caribbean. In 153 years (from 1851 to 2004) there were 1,325 hurricanes and tropical storms in the region, but none affected Colombia. These conditions make it not just a calm place to cruise, but a sensible place for US boat owners to store vessels over the winter.

Overcoming decades of stigma

Despite its ideal location, Colombia has many hurdles to overcome if it is to be viewed as an attractive cruising destination. Popular objections to cruising Colombia's waters include



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Waking up to its nautical potential

From an area to avoid to a market to watch, Colombia is being transformed into a viable and attractive cruising region. Charlotte Niemiec (right) outlines how the country has addressed its murky nautical history and is now edging towards a successful future.

As I pulled up outside the Cartagena Boat Show in March this year, the adjoining marina boasted a stampede of colour as luxury yachts jostled for space. Inside, exhibitors and visitors alike were abuzz with excitement. There's something unique about Cartagena, where the majority of the country's marinas are concentrated. A popular tourist destination on the Caribbean coast, its year-round warm, tropical weather and wealth of things to see and do contributes to the relaxed atmosphere of its annual boat show. The old, colonial walled town encloses a variety of markets, excellent places to eat and night entertainment. The beaches here are clean, with crystal blue water and five-star hotels lined up along the tourist sector of Bocagrande, a mini-Miami where families sunbathe during the day and eat by night to the sound of waves and Caribbean music.

Colombia is a mega-diverse country, with huge differences in weather

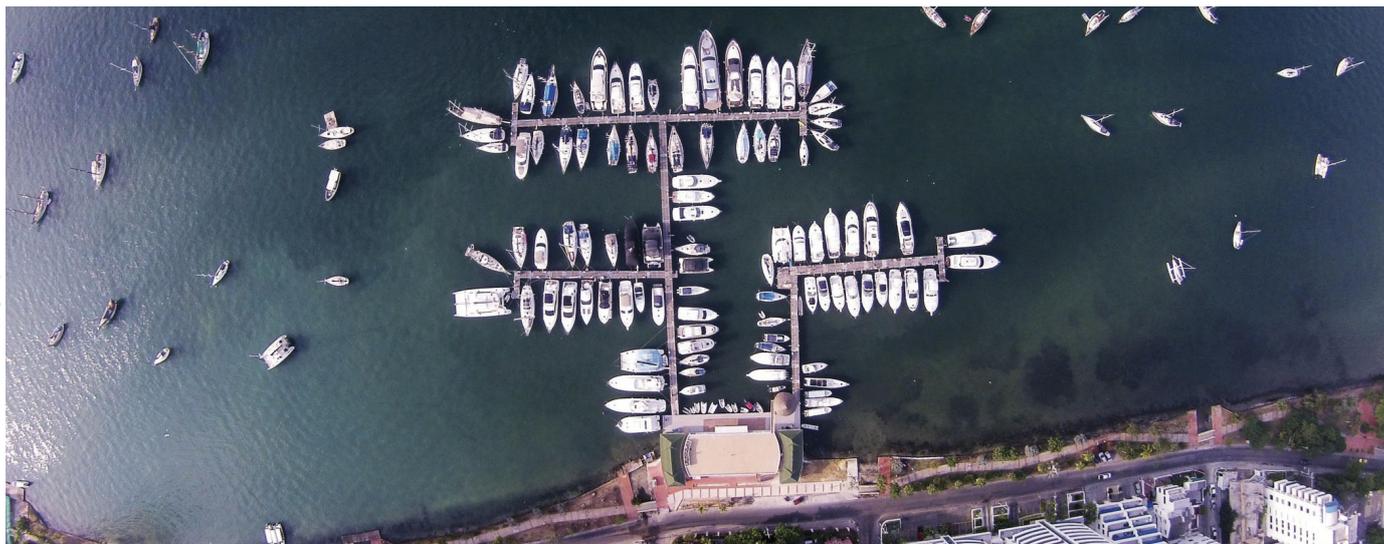
and geography. It encompasses the Andes mountain range, Pacific and Caribbean coasts, vast plains shared



Photo: Jaime Borda Fotografia Aerea

Cholon Isla Baru is one of Cartagena's boating hotspots.

Photo: Jaime Borda Fotografía Aerea



its infamous drug trafficking history, piracy, wild tides and weather on the Pacific side, confusing and frustrating customs regulations, the widespread language barrier and a lack of repair or maintenance facilities. But, according to industry professionals in Cartagena, many of these problems are now outdated and inaccurate.

Historically, the country's customs regulations and procedures have made cruising its coastline impractical. Until recently, transients were required to clear out of each and every port. The government has now recognised the problem and visitors need only check in and out of the country once. This has simplified the process and made Colombia more accessible.

Another problem for those attempting to develop the industry has been the government's perception of nautical tourism. According to numerous industry insiders, the government is only now beginning to see the potential this sector offers to the economy. Previously, all things boat and boating were considered the domain of the military, which still controls a large part of the industry today. However, the government is now positively encouraging the development of the nautical sector and streamlining its regulations to attract foreign visitors.

Colombia is still struggling to overcome the stigma of its drug problem which, following enormous efforts to clamp down on drug trafficking by the coastguard, police and navy, is fast becoming an issue of the past. However, the country's drug

A drystack for 150 boats dominates at Todomar CL Marina but additional wet berths are planned.

history has contributed to the slow development of nautical tourism as, not so many years ago, simply owning a boat in Colombia was deemed suspicious.

Santiago Amortegui, director of the Cartagena Boat Show, says Colombia's economy is growing fast and he expects that, due to Cartagena's geographical position, the nautical industry here will grow too. He adds that Colombia is much safer, with vast improvements seen in both the drug trade and piracy. "The landscape has changed," he says, "and perception and investment need to change too." Today, infrastructure is more developed towards tourism and projects are more optimistic, with an increase in both domestic and international demand.

However, growth in Colombia has now stagnated, he notes. While the economy has improved – with tourists

Club Nautico de Cartagena has been refurbished in recent years and has 100 berths. It is a very popular marina with high occupancy levels.

spending more money inside the country – and security tightened, there are still few modern marinas and a deficit of berths. Armed with statistics that show the nautical tourist in Colombia spends four times more than any other tourist, Amortegui is determined to change perception at government level.

Demand for berths currently, however, outweighs supply, not just for international visitors but for domestic boat owners. In order to develop the industry and push for bigger, better and more facilities, The Asociación Náutica de Colombia was established in February this year. Hugely significant as a first step forward, it is the first entity to represent the nautical interests

Photo: Jaime Borda Fotografía Aerea



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of the country. Working with the government, the association raises awareness of the importance of sailing for sustainable development along the Caribbean coast. It collects, analyses and distributes information relating to the nautical industry, promoting and supporting the development of projects. A huge focus of its work is attracting foreign investment as it recognises that, without this, the country will be hard pushed to build facilities on its own.

One industry observer notes: “The government of Colombia is now very involved in promoting nautical tourism development and is particularly active in international marketing. The only concern is that, when international vessels arrive, the quality marina infrastructure should be in place to greet them in order to avoid disappointment. In this industry, word of mouth is so important that timing of progress should be followed closely.”

Marina offerings

Cartagena is the marina mecca of Colombia. Marinas vary in size and accessibility, but the majority have all the modern facilities expected by the discerning international visitor.

Club de Pesca de Cartagena has a total of 150 berths, 20 of which are reserved for international visitors. It

has one berth available for a 100ft boat, three for boats up to 50ft and the remainder for boats of approximately 30 to 40ft. Services include a private boat ramp, potable water, electricity and waste disposal. Currently, a new dock with 20 berths is being constructed.

Club Nautico de Cartagena boasts 100 berths for vessels of 40 to 120ft. A very popular marina, its average occupancy is 90-100%, with services that include potable water, electricity and WiFi. A restaurant and bar are currently under construction.

Todomar CL Marina has two facilities in Cartagena comprising just 15 berths, although a project to construct a further 50 is under way. It has 150 drystack storage spaces and offers maintenance and service repairs. One marina is located in Bocagrande and the other – primarily a boatyard – in the Albornoz district of Colombia, 15 minutes from Cartagena by boat. The boatyard has a 50 ton boat lift and 12,000lb forklift.

Eduardoño is the biggest boat builder in Cartagena, with marinas in two locations. One has 60 berths and the other 280, split between wet berths and drystack storage. The marina has plans to install an additional 120 wet berths.

Another large marina in Cartagena is Marina Santa Cruz, a private marina not open to the public. It has 300

The long established Club de Pesca de Cartagena is a proven favourite for international visitors and has berths for large vessels.

berths at 100% occupancy. It intends to expand its berth offerings, but space is proving problematic.

Two smaller facilities in Cartagena are Manzanillo Marina Club and Nautica Integral Marina. Manzanillo has 20 mixed wet and dry berths, a 40 ton boat hoist, seven ton forklift and all modern services. Its average occupancy is 99%. Nautica Integral has 20 berths for boats up to 90ft with additional drystack storage for 130 boats. It owns a 10 ton hoist, has all modern services and enjoys an average occupancy of 90%.

Elsewhere in Colombia

Santa Marta Marina is Colombia's newest marina. An Island Global Yachting (IGY) marina with 256 berths, it can accommodate four megayachts with a maximum length of 132ft. Services include electricity, water, WiFi, bathrooms, showers, laundry facilities, a pump-out station, restaurants, a fitness centre and a hotel, with apartment buildings under construction. The marina has an on-site port authority office offering immigration and customs services.

MARKET REPORT: COLOMBIA



Photo: Procolombia

Santa Marta is the only marina in Colombia with a shipyard. Shipyard director, Michelangelo Marchini, explains that, barring haul-out, all repairs are available for superyachts. Currently, he says, 110 berths are occupied, 20% of which are tourist boats and the remainder permanent.

Marina Puerto Valero is located 15 minutes from Barranquilla, the largest city and port on the northern Caribbean coast and an hour from Cartagena. It has 460 berths, although just 208 currently have full services, and accommodates boats from 20 to 130ft. It is undergoing a project to build a drystack with space for 500 boats. The marina has a 150 ton hoist and, by the end of the year, will offer a maintenance and repair shop. Average occupancy is currently 30-40%, but this is expected to fill up rapidly. An additional project to build a hotel with 36 rooms is being floated to complement the 72 houses and restaurant that are already in place. All modern services are available at the marina.

Plans in place for more

With most marinas at almost 100% occupancy, particularly in Cartagena, the need for more space is paramount. Plans for up to 22 new marinas have been rumoured, but many in the country have labelled this a "paper fantasy". However, if all the projects currently planned were to come to fruition, in five years' time Cartagena would have a further 1,000 berths.

Details of new projects are sketchy

Eduardoño is the biggest boat builder in Cartagena and has 340 wet and dry berths split between two locations. Further wet berths are being added.

and, with so many rumours, it is hard to obtain accurate information. One thing is, however, certain; it is pivotal that Colombia attract foreign investment for marina development. With no financial backing from the government and limited private funds, the country relies on foreign companies to recognise its potential and invest in facilities.

One new project is Marina de San Andres, which will comprise 151 berths for boats from 25 to 164ft. It will provide full services for both boats and crew, and offer a repair and maintenance area.

Next up is the Marina of Providencia, with 50 berths catering to boats from 25ft to 160ft. According to sources, the development of the project will depend on the completion of dredging of the access canal and specifications are subject to technical studies.

The Marina of Riohache will have 180 berths and provide full services to boats and crew. Barbacoa Marina in Barú will have docks, a restaurant, pool, bar and 63 houses. Multicentro Nautico

Manzanillo Marina Club is a small, fully occupied facility with associated modern services.

– with a first phase of development scheduled to complete by the end of April this year – will have a marina, drystack storage area, restaurants and commercial offices. A further 12 regions in Colombia are earmarked for development.

Colombia is looking forward to an interesting decade of nautical development. Observers are cautious, however. Esteban Biondi, associate principal at US-based marina consultancy Applied Technology and Management, gave a keynote presentation at the Cartagena Boat Show conference on the development of sustainable marinas. He is positive about the future for the country's nautical facilities but takes a realistic stance. "It's uncertain whether the next ten years will see Colombia reach its full potential," he says. "There's a lot of activity, ideas and plans, but it's still a new and developing market."

"Colombia's ultimate international success will depend on how quickly it can develop high quality boating infrastructure. It has huge potential and all the ingredients for success are there: industry, commerce, recreation and tourism," he adds.

Julie Balzano, export development director at the US National Marine Manufacturers Association (NMMA), agrees. She says: "People want to come to Colombia; demand is exceeding supply. The government is well aware of this and the focus needs to be on development. There needs to be a commitment at federal level and also at department and city level."

Photo: Jaime Borda Fotografía Aerea

