New Year’s Eve with Al Capone

Ring in the New Year on notorious gangster Al Capone's yacht, the Isla Morada.

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January is a big month for Al Capone. The gangster was born in New York City on January 17, 1899 and he died on January 25, 1947 after battling syphilis and ultimately having a stroke in his home in Florida at the age of 33. The polarizing gangster (the public either loved him or hated him) made a name for himself during the Prohibition era and today, anyone looking for an unexpected way to ring in the New Year can do it onboard a boat Capone once used to run rum.

The 315 foot long Isla Morada (Purple Island) is a wooden ship built in the United States in 1912 as a luxury yacht. It has its share of mahogany and brass but it's not a particularly elegant boat. Still, at one point or another Steve McQueen, John Wayne, Errol Flynn and James Garner have all been onboard.

Originally christened the Santana, the ship was owned by millionaires before Capone got his hands on it in the 1920s. It was the height of prohibition and Capone saw profit in the face of a thirsty nation. He quickly re-named the boat the Isla Morada (after his favorite island in Florida) and began using it to smuggle rum and whiskey from Cuba and the Dominican Republic to the Florida Keys and then on to speakeasies in Chicago.

Capone went to jail in 1932 after being convicted of tax evasion and the Isla Morada was confiscated by the US government. Eventually, it was used by the US Navy, which is how it ended up in Panama in the 1960s. In Panama it's been used as a floating hotel for sport fishermen and as a tourist boat. The Isla Morada is currently owned by Canal and Bay Tours and spends most of the year taking passengers back and forth through the Panama Canal. The Isla Morada is said to have made more crossings of the Panama Canal than any other vessel still in use.

You won't find it advertised anywhere, but on New Year's Eve the Isla Morada gets loaded up with rum (and whiskey and vodka and beer and wine) once again for a one of a kind cruise.
The annual Isla Morada New Year’s Eve party cruise was dreamt up by Kevin O’Brien, a Massachusetts native who now lives in Panama where he started and runs a tour company called Barefoot Panama. O’Brien has visited Capone’s jail cell and watched the movies that have been made about one of the most iconic mobsters who’s been portrayed by Jason Robards, Robert De Niro, Rod Steiger, Eric Roberts and F. Murray Abraham among others.

After taking a Panama Canal tour on the Isla Morada O’Brien was inspired. “I loved the ship and I’m into history,” says O’Brien. In 2011 he started the New Year’s Eve cruise on the Capone’s boat as a nod to history and as a way of giving people an alternative to going out to Panama City’s expensive and packed clubs or bars to ring in the New Year.

For $120 about 100 guests—a mix of locals and travelers—enjoy a four hour cruise (9:30pm to 1:30am) with an open self-serve bar, champagne at midnight, snacks, a DJ and even an air conditioned cabin. While onboard look for Capone’s secret compartments for holding rum which are located in the engine room.

The cruise takes place in the Panama City Bay with its calm waters and perfect vantage point for the fireworks display put on over the Miami-esque skyline of Panama City. Passengers sip drinks, listen to music, wander around the boat and lounge or dance on her ample decks as the Isla Morada moves slowly through the bay past moored yachts and boats waiting their turn to pass through the Panama Canal.

At midnight corks are popped and the city unleashes a spectacle. For more than an hour and a half official (and unofficial) fireworks explode over the city. The breeze blows, the rum flows and one gets the impression that Capone would approve.