

Quiet in the Caribbean

Escrito por Fredda Moon (The New York Times)

Domingo, 26 de Enero de 2014 03:24 - Última actualización Lunes, 27 de Enero de 2014 08:33



El prestigioso periódico The New York Times publicó este miércoles 22 de enero en su edición digital, una bella y atractiva crónica firmada por Fredda Moon, reconocida escritora experta en viajes, que narra su corta pero intensa estadía en Providencia y Santa Catalina. Una versión titulada “In the Middle of Somewhere”, de la misma nota, se publica este domingo en la edición impresa del acreditado rotativo.

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I wrapped my arms around Leonardo, our “moto” driver, as he pushed our overloaded Yamaha across the hot, potholed concrete.

“Did you understand anything,” he shouted over his shoulder, picking up speed and launching us into the thick night. I had not. I’d sat through a 10-minute roadside conversation between Leonardo and his shirtless, and apparently apologetic, friend. Insects had menaced my ankles, the motorcycle’s scorching exhaust pipe had threatened my right calf and I had made out exactly one word: “Sorry.” My husband, Tim, sat behind me, hugging my back, his feet crushed beneath my own. He hadn’t understood either. “Some say we speak patois,” Leonardo said. “But it’s English — Creole English.”

It was Saturday night on “Old Providence,” as the local, Afro-Caribbean Raizal people call the second-largest island in the remote Colombian territory of San Andrés, Providencia and Santa Catalina. Tim and I had arrived a few days before, after taking a circuitous route: three flights in three days, each airplane smaller than the last, like so many Russian nesting dolls. When we finally touched down, our first sight was the prop-less, wheel-less wreckage of a less-fortunate flight; the second was my father, waving from the open-air greeting area of a two-room terminal. Even through the obligatory palms of a Caribbean airport, and with a video camera pressed to his eye, I could see he was beaming.

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Tim and I had come to meet my father and his girlfriend, Robin, who had stopped here en route to Panama from Belize in a 44-foot sailboat. They had been there for nearly a month before we arrived on this five-mile-long island, a mountainous speck of land that I had never heard of just weeks before. One hundred and fifty miles from the nearest country on the mainland — Nicaragua, it turns out, not Colombia — Providencia has one real town, a population of around 5,000, and a transit system that relies upon a small cast of Leonardos: men (and more than a few women) circling the island, picking up passengers at the driver's convenience.

On the night in April that we were straddled on the back of Leonardo's motorbike, Tim and I were heading to a rooster fight; our driver, sweating through his white button-down, was on his way to church. We had risen that morning in our temporary home, Coyote — the two-mast, two-cabin fiberglass sailboat that my father bought 20 years ago — and we spent the day seeking solitary beaches and tiny outer islands, which we explored by sea kayak, inflatable dinghy and snorkel-fin feet.

This was a trip of close quarters: of three adults pressed together on a compact motorcycle, of two couples cohabiting in a space not much larger than an average R.V., and of Tim and me awkwardly sharing the single lime green, sit-on-top ocean kayak that the Coyote carries on its deck. From the boat, we paddled the southwest edge of Santa Catalina, an island so small it's practically an appendage of Providencia — connected, as it is, by a long, brightly painted, wooden walkway over a shallow channel. We passed beneath the Virgin Mary, who shares a hilltop perch with weathered, pirate-era cannons at a ruined fort built by 17th-century pirates to defend their outpost; we pulled the kayak ashore, and after a swim at a rocky, seaweed-choked beach, we made our way to just shy of Morgan's Head, the island's notable rock formation at the entrance to the wide Catalina Harbor.

That afternoon, we took the dinghy to another, peripheral island, Crab Cay, a saucer-size key in the barrier-reef-protected waters of McBean Lagoon. The island, which was cut with dirt pathways, wore a bushy mane of mango trees, coconut palms and "Seven Year Apples," a shrub that produces fruit shaped somewhat like a pear. We nodded hello to the group of young Colombian mainlanders drinking beer in the shade of the dock's roof, then climbed to the island's summit. There, atop a mound of boulders, stared at the sea with its many shades of blue and green.

It had been a satisfying, exhausting day. But having heard that the big, weekly event — the cockfight at Gallera Pata Suave, the rooster arena — would be held that night, I didn't want to

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miss it. At dusk, after a galley-cooked dinner, Tim and I pointed the dinghy to shore. On the frictionless bay, I opened the throttle, and sped toward Santa Isabel, Providencia's modest hub. In the near distance, bathed in the muted orange of a fiery sunset, were wooden, two-story buildings with balconies painted in washed-out Easter egg shades of blue, green and yellow.

From the water, the town squatted against a buckling, blazing topography — a mountainous landscape, made golden by drought. Unlike its nearby sister island, San Andrés, which has all the character of one large duty-free shopping plaza (which it is), Providencia has no multistory concrete hotels or vendors selling trinkets made in China. Having scheduled just one night on San Andrés, I had left it behind without regret.

Again and again during our week on Providencia, locals told us the cautionary tale of San Andrés. It's a story that gains strength with each repetition. Fifty years ago, lamented the retired fisherman, the radio journalist, the Rasta bar-owner, and the taxista, San Andrés looked just like Providencia. It had the same stilted clapboard houses with rusted, corrugated metal roofs, and was populated by the same Creole-speaking Raizal: the descendants of African slaves and the British Puritans who brought them to the islands in the 1600s to harvest cotton, as well as the Dutch colonists, French pirates and Spanish conquistadors who vied for the islands in the intervening years. But as "the Colombians" — the name the Raizal invariably call the Spanish-speaking mainlanders — arrived in ever greater numbers (they now make up two-thirds of the big island's population of about 55,000), the native people became a minority, isolated in a few small enclaves on the 25-square-mile island, which offers domestic tourists a beach vacation with duty free shopping for cheap perfume and imported liquor.

On Old Providence, anger over the loss of fishing grounds, traditions and the Raizal language was close to the surface in April, six months after a decision from the International Court of Justice in The Hague gave a third of the archipelago's maritime territory to Nicaragua. The ruling, which came after a long dispute, was devastating for islanders, for whom fishing is both an industry and a way of life. As Luz Livingston, a former radio journalist turned farmer, told me, "We were born on the sea. We live on the sea. What can we do without the sea?"

In 2005, the archipelago's ecological and cultural significance was recognized by Unesco, when 25,096 square miles of its territory was christened the Seaflower Marine Protected Area. Around the island, this conservationist ethos is seen in wide murals of crashing absinthe-colored waves, concrete benches with raised cookie-cutter images of sea creatures, and bus stops built to resemble coral clustered with tropical fish.

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During our visit, strong spring winds caused us to turn back from the archipelago's barrier reef — one of the largest in the Caribbean — so we stayed closer to shore, snorkeling above the less dramatic reefs just offshore. I would bob at the surface, transfixed as a mustard-colored orb grew from the sandy bottom 10 feet below, like the oozing wax in a '70s-era lava lamp. When the sun moved from behind a cloud overhead, the orb was revealed as a head of coral that became as bright as a sunflower, with patterns leaping from its surface, mysterious as Peru's Nazca Lines.

One afternoon, as I was being hypnotized by these shifting colors and strange, foreign shapes, I felt a tug on my arm. It was Tim, muted by his snorkel, grabbing for my attention. He pointed hard into the underwater distance, where out of darkness came a winged creature of alien grace, a spotted ray with an almost doglike face.

At the end of our trip, my father, Robin, Tim and I rented motorbikes. We had already circled the island twice before — first by "mule" (a rugged version of a golf-cart, which my father had rented to retrieve us from the airport) and then on the back of Leonardo's taxi. Our sunburned, sandal-wearing motorbike gang drove slowly, stopping where a view, or a shop, or a side road struck us.

At the head of the trail to Almond Bay, there was a gazebo shaped like a giant octopus, each tentacle curled upward, creating uncomfortable stools. Along the steep, brick path to the bay's small sandy beach, there were hand-painted tiles scrawled with affirmations: "Environment is the future, respect it," read one. "Time off ... Think, Dream, Read," read another.

By then, on the second to last day of our trip, we knew better than to expect action on Providencia. The island is a place where the largest annual festival comes in June, when the black crabs emerge from the ground like swarming cicadas, click-click-clicking their way from their hillside burrows to the sea, stopping traffic and inundating houses. (Far from being viewed as pests, the crabs are protected by armed guards and celebrated with music, homecomings and a horse race.) Our evenings were spent in meandering conversation in a bobbing cockpit, with the occasional breeze bringing a slight nip to the air.

Which isn't to say that we didn't try to find excitement, but every effort was met with failure. Earlier in our visit, my father, Tim and I made it our mission to see the live band at Roland Roots Bar, on the far south end of Providencia, at Manzanillo Bay. From Santa Isabel, we begged a ride from one of the few four-wheel taxis on the island. It had a begrudging driver, a stuffed fish

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hanging from its rearview mirror and a pile of empty beer cans on the passenger seat. Fifteen minutes and \$20 later, we were deposited at a wild, windward beach, where a Rasta flag waved its welcome, emblazoned with an image of Bob Marley. The crowd was sparse. But it was early. Three hours and four beers later, we sat on bamboo benches under palm-thatched canopies as UB40's "Red Red Wine" played, the fire smoked and our host napped in a hammock behind the bar. The reggae band we had come to see never did materialize, though one of its five members leaned against the stage, a guitar slung across his chest, a joint at his lips.

"This is what it'd be like," my father said, "if you went to a rooster fight and the roosters didn't show." As always, he was prescient.

Later, when Leonardo, Tim and I finally made our way to the gallera, we found the round arena dark and empty. The depiction of a screeching rooster on a dusty blue wall was the only fighter we would see that night. Leonardo asked a man sitting across the street what happened to the fight. The roosters, the man said, had gone to San Andrés for the weekend.

WHERE TO STAY

Many of Providencia's accommodations are modest, family-run posadas with one or two rooms. Among the most charming is the hilltop **Refugio de la Luna**, run by a local papier-mâché artist, Carmen Correa (57-317-527-5362); 85,000 Colombian pesos, or \$45 at 1,900 Colombian pesos to the dollar, including full breakfast.

For a more traditional hotel stay, the 12-room **Hotel Deep Blue** (Maracaibo Bay; 57-321-458-2099; hoteldeepblue.com) has a waterfront restaurant and bar, a small rooftop pool and tasteful rooms with balconies; from 345,000 pesos.

WHERE TO EAT

Owned by a Canadian expat and her Providencian husband, the open-air **Café Studio**

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(Southwest Bay; 57-8-514-9076) serves local dishes like Wellington's Recipe Conch in Creole sauce or Island-style black crab, shredded and seasoned with fresh basil (both served with coconut rice and plantain chips; 23,000 pesos), pasta dishes and excellent house-made pies.

On the beach at Southwest Bay, **El Divino Niño** (no address; ask any local for directions) is a simple, toes-in-the-sand restaurant where the specialty is a one- or two-person mixed seafood plate (30,000 and 44,000 Colombian pesos). The two-person serving is a comically large platter with an entire large lobster, two whole fish and a pile of conch, fried plantains and rice.

For tropical fruit ice pops, potent European-style coffee and excellent house-made tamarind wine, stop in at **Frenchy's Place** (just north of Southwest Bay, look for the colorful facade painted with "Arts & Crafts").