

Kuna Yala



By Louise Wollman

We leave Cartagena early in January provisioned for at least a circumnavigation. The refrigerator bursts with perishables—vegetables, fruits, lettuces, cheeses; no room in the freezer for so much as a Snickers bar; every available drawer stuffed

with chips, sodas, wines—and breads so laden with preservatives they'd likely float on their own. Plus 60 eggs that need turning every other day. Cabbages, limes, onions, mangoes and avocados ride in net hammocks stretched across the starboard cabin.

It's more than the sailor scarcity mentality operating. We're en route

to the San Blas Islands, a low-rise mass of some 350 islands, islets and sand dollops and adjacent mountainous coastline, more officially called Kuna Yala. An autonomous region within Panama itself, it's the homeland of the Kuna Indians, a gentle, primitive people, who—remaining faithful to their age-old customs and traditions—live in bamboo dwell-

BWS's insatiable food sleuth explores the charted and uncharted—but almost always unfamiliar—region in the San Blas Islands



ings, largely without electricity.

Markets will be rarities, marginally stocked with canned corn, sardine tins and unfamiliar soaps. Mainland vegetable deliveries are irregular and most cruisers fish for their dinner. As for restaurants? In Tony Soprane, “Fuggeddaboutit.”

Without fuel docks, locating diesel fuel to run our engine, generator—

peasants, business people and travelers. The capital, Bogota, and former enclaves like Cali and Medellin, are now safe for touring.

Uribe had to cut some deals, we’ve heard, to keep peace in areas where the government isn’t (yet) as powerful as the bad guys. But bottom line, there’s Coast Guard and Army presence (obvious but non-

and maybe even a nostalgic burst of conditioning—will also be problematic.

A PASSEL OF SURPRISES

By January 21, we’ve traveled a mere 150 miles and are in Sapzurro, a small Colombian town at the edge of banana forests, jungle and mountains. Immediately beyond are actual FARC guerrillas or paramilitaries (I always forget which are which).

We are, nonetheless, quite safe. Alvaro Uribe, a fledgling president in 2002 when we last visited, galloped ahead despite death threats and assassination attempts and played an enormous part in making Colombia more secure for city-dwellers,

intrusive) in all the villages along the Colombian coast. Sapzurro sits at the Panamanian border and—guerrillas or no—normalcy reigns. We’re told the Panama and Colombia military play non-stop cards at the top of the mountain (maybe the guerrillas are the bookies).

Sapzurro is a passel of surprises. Greeting us at the shoreline, plunked prominently amid the village’s 50-yard “commercial center” is Doña Triny: a woman, a two-room inn and an actual restaurant!

I declare a temporary halt to a relentless cooking program that’s thus far nourished us and staved off Cartagena produce spoilage.

It’s Inauguration Day back home, and we’re acutely aware that we’re without TV out here in Nowhere-land. We know we’re missing something akin to the moon landing.

Meanwhile, families are gathered in bungalows watching; Colombians, too, are huge Obama fans. But the proceedings are truncated for this foreign audience—and in English dubbed with Spanish. And we are, after all, strangers, 24-hour drop-ins. Not exactly new-best-friend material even for this effusive people.

But Doña Triny herself invites us behind the restaurant to watch the Inauguration coverage. Her kitchen is operating-theater clean, as is the rest of this tiny immaculate pueblo, where everyone is everywhere sweeping windblown dust and sand from front doors, stoops, streets and even around a pig tethered to a tree. The kids, barefoot mostly, wear clean, clean clothes. The girls’ unruly hair is combed, braided and snapped under a million or so barrettes. People flash wide smiles at you—no matter how few teeth.

The succulent whole pan-fried snapper Triny serves me hadn’t even been caught when I ordered it



Top, Dona Triny standing in her “operating-theater clean” kitchen; bottom, an unexpected (but very welcome) visitor to *Lulu*

at 2pm. Better still, she must have taken me for a guy, because I get at least a two-pounder.

More good luck: Triny turns out to be the *tía* (aunt) of a man who can sell us 130 gallons of diesel fuel and transport it to *Lulu* in his skiff. We submit to his price of \$5 a gallon because we’re truly apprehensive about finding future fuel, plus we’re horrific bargainers. We also indulge ourselves in the delusion (clearly self-serving in supporting our negotiating torpor) that our overpayment

boosts the above-the (but-not-by-much) poverty-line economy. Thus, we further advance the perception that we are rich, stupid Gringos, thereby further inflating prices and reinforcing the cycle of ripping off other cruiser dolts.

Sorry, guys.

The nephew, is affable and engaging—and why not at such prices? While pumping—and possibly seeking forgiveness for this fleecing—he tells me (in Spanish) that four years ago, during the guerilla (or the para-

military) heyday, he was rounded up, bound, gagged and tortured. Today, thanks to Uribe, he and the village are safe. He is not only free to commit smiley-face usury on rich cruiser-capitalists, but as the recent purchaser of a *finca* (farm), he is now one himself. It’s likely that he also financed Triny’s restaurant, hotel and—what with our contribution to his bottom line—maybe a future golf course.

Or maybe he’s telling me the coffee’s burning.

MOLA REPRIEVE

The next day, we tuck into Kuna Yala. Puerto Perme is the proverbial port in a storm, a peaceful circle of calm amid turbulent waters, exquisitely green with a picturesque Kuna village nearby.

Within minutes, an “ulu” dugout glides up under oar-power, bearing two adorable Kuna boys and their tiny father, the helmsman. Almost hard to tell the difference. Kunas, after pygmies, are the smallest humans; our 5-year-old granddaughter might tower over a Kuna 9-year-old.

The kids climb onboard, smiling like crazy. The dad, *Andrès*, soon joins them. We’re thoroughly nonplussed—“permission to come aboard” clearly isn’t in their vocabulary—but we find it fun. I give the kids Tootsie pops and water. I take pictures and *Andrès* promises to return later with pineapples.

But the pineapples aren’t ripe; when he returns it’s with one of the original boys and two tiny girls. Plus, *regalos*—gifts—of a huge conch shell and basket that we have no space for and a small primitive carved figure, which I buy for two dollars. Later I learn such figures are called *Nuchus*. Every Kuna household has at least one, usually considerably larger; they are good-luck charms and sacred objects, links between the spiritual



Clockwise from top left: a well-dressed Kuna woman; local kids following the pied-piperish author; molas, molas, everywhere!



and physical worlds. I do not yet know that paying for one robs it of its fortune-bringing clout.

So far it brings us luck, for no one approaches to sell us a single mola.

Recognizable by sight, if not by name, worldwide, the mola is a multiple-layer stack of colorful cotton cut into patterns—like stencils—and reverse-appliquéd by miniscule hand-stitchery. Typically the designs are representational figures of animals, birds, fish, Kuna archetypes and tribal rites of passage.

For the most part, the Kuna have had little use for traditional money. They farm and fish largely for their own use, deriving outside income from selling coconuts to foreign dealers and collecting small tourist taxes from visiting boats.

But civilization, in the form of ever-increasing cruising boats and tourism—coupled with the mola’s near-universal appeal—has trans-

formed what was literally a cottage industry into serious business for the tribe. From our previous visit we recall two- and three-deep lineups of ulus and mola hawkers astride the boat. Thus we’re grateful for the momentary reprieve.

THE SUPER-DELIGHTFUL VILLAGE

Finally, we sail to our first big Kuna village—Caledonia—1004 souls, most of them kids. Everyone lives in thatched-roof, bamboo-sided, circular huts, all laid out in an actual grid of packed dirt and sand streets. The woody “slats” of homes and fences are strapped together tightly with sugar-cane twine or jungle creepers and sometimes lined inside with molas or other fabric, but in any event provide a surprising degree of privacy and rain protection

The one-room family homes combine bedroom, kitchen and living room. “Bathrooms” are outback huts hanging over the water. Beds don’t exist because Kunas sleep in hammocks: mother, father, four—maybe five or six—kids, plus grandparents, sometimes from both sides. Clearly the Kuna have worked out a way to make babies in hammocks while the whole family sleeps...or maybe just listens and learns.

Every family owns an ulu, carved from a single tree. And behind every

house, suspended on stilts over the water, a slatted wood cage for the pig—a clever self-cleaning strategy. The pig is fattened all year and finally slaughtered for Navidad and New Year’s. A few cats and dogs prowl about. Laundry hangs everywhere, draped atop the spokes of bamboo or cane “picket” fences, which function as both clotheslines and front-yard landscaping, like, say, our rhododendrons.

Few Kuna families have propane stoves. Women smoke fish and cook hot food over wood fires on packed earth inside the huts.

Kuna society is matrilineal: women control the money, and wives frequently select husbands, who move in with their families. Stress doesn’t seem to figure into a lifestyle where men fish and farm mornings, while away afternoons sailing or resting and women quietly sew. Tenderness towards children seems universal.

A certain amount of worldly style has crept into Kuna dress. Men and boys sport Yankee baseball caps and Brazilian Jujitsu tee shirts, the girls wear “Hot Chick”-type tank tops

But most women past puberty still wear the unique, riot-of-color traditional Kuna dress. Molas incorporated into print-sleeved blouses, wraparound skirts of different patterns and colors, headscarves of still other clashing prints, plus striped

“leggings”—the women wind long strands of bright glass beads up their legs from ankle to knee—and similarly bead wrist-to-elbow bracelets. Incredibly striking and accented further by dangly earrings and necklaces of hammered gilt. Plus striped facial tattoos and gold nose rings.

Somehow this Missoni-gone-tropical mishmash works—the Kuna women are mesmerizing and unforgettable.

We walk the village, slowed considerably by hordes of kids who follow: babies riding on older siblings’ hips, youngsters poking, smiling and leaping at us, asking our names, yelling, “Foto, Foto!” and entreating us, in Spanish, to take their pictures. They’re amazingly well behaved, seem rarely to fight among themselves. Adults as well: everybody gets the joke, whatever it is. Peaceful and

temperate, they flash genuine smiles as we traipse through their village. How super-delightful.

This village includes a decent size concrete school—four hours a day for five years is required. A porchy wood construction is the village “hotel.” Rudimentary, but it offers a cool terrace and dazzling palmy water views for \$5 a night. We’re also surprised by Cable & Wireless phone booths and several billiard “parlors.”

We pass women making molas on two or three old treadle sewing machines, thereby learning “modern” technology’s got its mitts in the old handiwork art form.

As the afternoon wanes, some quasi-scary-looking dudes appear, wearing dark, wraparound shades, baggy shorts and earphones (probably unconnected to MP3 players of any sort). They’re trying very hard

to glare, but the stance just doesn’t mesh with the Kuna way, which is otherwise about welcome, smiles and relating to strangers. And sure enough, soon they’re vamping for the camera.

IMPORTANT HOMBRES

Though clearly much is changing, a hierarchy of chiefs keeps order in Kuna Yala. The three big chiefs are called Caciques, village chiefs “sahilas” (pronounced sigh-lahs). Chiefs frequently dispatch two or three families to tend smaller out-islands for a given tour of duty, usually six months to a year.

In smaller nearby Isla Pinos, we meet Demetrios, the wizened (probably 35) sahila. Arriving Panamahatted, bare-chested and wearing orange plastic flip-flops, he plops himself in a net hammock. Some-





Opposite: Isla Pinos sahila Demetrios. This page, clockwise from top left: Kuna bread torpedoes; local mother and child; Sapzurro Street

how we expected ermine robes and a throne, with maybe a bugle accompaniment...

The sahila may look like a beachcomber, but he is an important hombre. He presides over the congreso, or counsel, which in the traditional villages is a daily event attended by the entire village. There, individuals have their say, tribal problems get ironed out and the sahila pronounces, explains, adjudicates and may even hand down wisdom gleaned from dreams.

Some villages have more than one sahila. We don't ask who then presides; they seem to have worked all this out peaceably, without Donald Rumsfeld.

KUNA FOR DUMMIES

The small Isla Pinos tienda stocks—and I use the term advisedly—Palmolive soap, the “Other Brand” corn flakes, Rayovac D batteries, rice, saltine crackers, mosquito coils, vegetable oil for frying, and, oddly enough, lots of Tang. But not flour. Still, it's there that we buy our first Kuna bread.

Depending on the baker's style, Kuna bread comes in rounds—from biscuit- to hamburger-roll size. Or Torpedo shapes—from croissant to hot-dog to just-shy-of-baguette. It's surprisingly good, frequently out of stock, but when available, always just-made.

We learn quickly to buy all we can. I ask one baker-lady, “Can I freeze these?” She clearly doesn't understand. Maybe it's my Spanish—perhaps “congelador” is the wrong word for freezer?

Eventually I get it. How would a Kuna know what a freezer is?

As if that's not enough Kuna for Dummies, I ask for canned coconut milk (leche de coco en lata). Lots of tee-heeing. More giggles as the comment gets passed around the counter. Not till I leave and trip over my first coconut do I understand their astonishment. Why would anyone put coconut milk in a can when they're everywhere for the hacking?

Speaking of coconuts, which are strewn everywhere, each one apparently belongs to someone or

everyone. One never, ever picks up what looks like a stray coconut; this is one of the few behaviors that can provoke a sahila's wrath.

Cruisers are, for the most part, not allowed in villages after dark, thus we frequently forget this stone-age mode of life is without electricity. We'll gaze across the water at sunset and see a lively village of anywhere from 100 to 7000 people and then look up a few hours later and find only inky black water and dark sky. It's easy to believe you are alone on earth—you could be Balboa or Columbus.

And in some sense, as we wend our way around charted and uncharted, but almost always unfamiliar waters, deep down in our heart of hearts, isn't every cruiser his or her own Balboa, Columbus or Sacajawea? ≈

For 11 years, Louise Wollman and her husband Gary have been living full-time aboard their sailing vessel Lulu. Louise can be found anywhere aromas tempt—look for someone juggling a fork, a notebook, a camera and a glass of wine.