



A Mamitupu islander asks to have her photo taken.

CHAPTER 8

THE SURPRISING SAN BLAS ISLANDS

Ordeal or Adventure? Introspection under a Full Moon

The Gulf of Darien, Colombia

9° 37.8' N, 77° 47.5' W

February 8, 2001

Some say the sea is cruel. I agree. I say it is without mercy. Freedom at sea? Independence, managing your own municipality? Ha! Leave the shore, and you leave behind a certain degree of freedom; you must live by Poseidon's rules, pawns to the sea god's whims. And you're left with a burning question: Is the cruiser experience worth the loss of control over your life?

At the starboard helm, on my favorite 0300-0600 watch, I strive to renew my relationship with *Pacific Bliss* and the sea. I would love to regain that camaraderie with her that I felt during those blissful night watches of our Atlantic crossing: the shared wind against my cheek and her sails, the small vibrations in the rigging that she senses along with me, the rumble of the water sloshing her hulls, which I hear and she feels. I trust her. She came through the storm just fine, but I don't have the same emotional connection with her that I had before the storm.

During our five days of decompression in Cartagena, the moon had continued to grow. Now, it is full and complacent, with a pale sheen that fades whenever clouds pass by. The seas are still unpredictable. *Pacific Bliss* has been reined in much too tightly, double-reefed already. Our crew fears another Force 7-to-Force 8 escalation.

Attitude, the Difference between Ordeal and Adventure. I look down at this inscription on my tee-shirt from *Lats and Atts*, short for *Latitudes and Attitudes*, a California sailing magazine. *What is my attitude now, this first overnight since our Force 10 ordeal?*

Leaving the safety of port has been difficult—with each of us compelled to face those raging demons within. This short hop across the Gulf of Darien would have been a breeze before our night of terror, before we lost our innocence.

“Life is either a daring adventure—or nothing at all,” I whisper my favorite quote, the one from Helen Keller. *Hmm. This has been a key maxim for my life. Should it be? Must it always be like this? Must I always live life on the edge?* Rollers slap against the hulls of *Pacific Bliss* as she heaves onward, while answers elude me like a school of slippery eels.

I try talking out loud to *Pacific Bliss*, feeling a little foolish. “Do you hear me?” She fails to answer. Maybe she's just an inert hunk of fiberglass after all.

Cruisers at Club Nautico had assured us that the southern part of the Golfo de Darien would pose no problems. “You will face none of those horrific winds and high seas there.” Even so, we agonized. After a discussion fraught with emotions, the four of us decided to ease our nerves. Instead of our original plan of sailing directly across the gulf to the San Blas Islands, we decided to sail to Isla Tintipan. And that daysail would be followed by this single overnight. I checked and re-checked the NOAA website at the internet café a few blocks from the Club. It called for 25-knot winds and 9-12 foot seas, with swells still rolling in toward Darien from that cruel point off Barranquilla. Religiously, we followed all of the weather nets, as well as our on-board Navteq®. Everything confirmed the forecast. We knew in our hearts that *Pacific Bliss* could handle these conditions easily.

But could we?



Fisherman's family portrait Mamitupu, San Blas.

As usual, we played our ritual *Amazing Grace* as we set sail. This time, though, we bowed our heads in silent prayer: Please, God, keep us safe...and don't make us go through another Force 10 storm. *Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound...*

Our sail began yesterday under hazy, gray-blue skies and a benign Force 4 wind. It was an ideal sailing day, but my nervous stomach refused to calm. I became riveted to the display panel in the cockpit, a knot forming in my gut whenever a gust brought the multimeter display to a Force 6 or more, however intermittent. We sailed all the way close-hauled with a full main and jib, an easy voyage of only 47.4 miles. At 1730, we dropped the hook in a sandy bottom with good holding at 18 feet. The anchorage was deserted except for an occasional fisherman in a *panga* (a narrow boat) off the reef at the point. During dinner, we sat around the cockpit table in uneasy silence. I felt relieved, but the relief was only temporary.

"What's on your mind?" Phyllis prodded Günter.

"I'm thinking of every little thing that could go wrong."

"Like what?"

"For example, those fishermen could board the boat while we are all asleep...or the anchor might not hold, or the wind could pick up at night..." Günter worried out loud. "We'll need to set an anchor alarm."

If Captain Günter is concerned, how should we feel?

We continued our subdued discussion. We worked out what time to pull anchor in the morning so that—sailing overnight—we would arrive in San Blas in the daylight, with time to spare. Richard and I spread out the charts, carefully checking the waypoints we had entered before leaving Cartagena. Then we conferred with Günter again. It would be 171 miles to our charted waypoint, the wide entrance to the Cays Hollandes channel. At an average speed of 6.9 knots, we should arrive well before dark.

Shortly after 2000 (8 p.m.), we bid each other goodnight. Our customary *joie de vivre* had disappeared. A new respect for the awesome power of the wind and the sea had, indeed, replaced our innocence.

That morning, we awoke to a dead calm. We had set our departure for 0940, but when we performed our take-off procedures, we found that our flow-driven knot meter wasn't working. Richard dove underneath the starboard hull to scrape off the algae. That action freed the little paddle wheel, which is driven by the motion of the water. But our progress, which was then hampered now by coral heads rising 12-30 feet above the sea floor. Consequently, it was almost 1200 before we cleared the San Bernardo islands on a 285° heading toward the San Blas—a much later than anticipated start.

"We have got to get it together," I confide to *Pacific Bliss*. "I can't control Poseidon, but you and I can be a good team again."

To get through to *her* core, I turn off Ray, our autopilot and brains. I seize the leather-covered wheel to hand-steer, sensing the force of the waves on the rudder and the pull of the sails as they envelop the wind. In *my* core, I can feel the ship respond as she surges ahead. Once again, *Pacific Bliss* and I are one.

The moon bids adieu as the sky gradually lightens. This first overnight has come to a peaceful end. My spirit brightens. My attitude swings from binding apprehension to eager anticipation.

Another country. Yet another adventure. After all, isn't that why we continue on?

Exploring the Hollandes Cays

9°32.7' N, 78°53.9' W

During the late afternoon, we spend long, precious hours zigzagging, trying to find an opening through breakers in a NNE Force 6 wind. Foaming whitecaps top long rollers from the NE. My stomach returns to full alert. At the nav station, I note 200 on the Trip Miles Indicator; already, we are more than 30 miles over our estimate for this leg to the San Blas islands. Soon it will be dark. Finally, we find our opening, dodge through the protective, fringing reef, and anchor at 24 feet. We are near Tiadup, the only inhabited island in these remote cays. We are now in Panamanian waters.

I am totally exhausted; I sleep fitfully this first night in Panama. The calm waters in the cozy anchorage belie the crashing of waves against the reefs in the sea beyond. All night the wind wails through the window netting in the master cabin. My uneasiness escalates.

We haul anchor at dawn's light, intent on finding a better anchorage. Inside the reefs, the sailing is superb. We sashay in a Force 5 NNE wind, averaging 9 knots. Up at the pulpit seat on forward lookout, I am completely dry—not one splash of salt water accompanies the wind against my cheek.

By mid-afternoon, we turn into Cayos Limon. Phyllis spots a cruising powerboat plopped right in middle of the shallow channel. "A stinkpotter!" I fume. "Now, how are we going to work around that big lummo and into the deeper anchorage?"

But my worry is unnecessary. We manage to maneuver to the side of the vessel in the narrow, eight-foot-deep channel. As we pass, a man and woman wave from the stern. My frustration turns to joy. These are Jim and Jo, the cruisers from *Atlas*, who consoled us during our night of terror! Ensclosed on a 40-plus foot Nordhavn trawler, with a deep draft, they could proceed no farther. *Pacific Bliss*, however, eases past them, with the dagger boards up, over the shallow sand bank, and into the bay. We anchor in the sand.

Günter and I dinghy over to thank our new friends for their support during that long night. "That's what cruisers do," Jim says. We stay with them for an hour and are

The Kuna consider the art of making molas to be an integral part of their culture and important to their ethnic identity. When a Kuna woman marries, her husband usually moves into the home of her mother and lives with her female relatives and their families. The women in the family share the household responsibilities by allocating duties according to age. The oldest women take care of the heavy work such as cooking, a smoky and time-consuming job. Younger women care for the children, haul water, wash clothes, and hull rice. Girls also watch the younger children. This division of tasks by age enables women from their late teen-age years through middle age to spend many hours each day making molas.

Women who sew molas behave much as western women who knit. They sew while traveling, visiting, or by themselves. In villages larger than the ones we visited, a constable walks through the streets shouting "Mor maynamaloe" (go make molas), to bring women to the gathering house. There groups of women sit together sewing while listening to a visiting chief chant about the history of mola-making and women's arts.

Young girls are encouraged to sew as early as they seem interested, usually at the age of three or four. By the time they are five, they usually make sewing a part of their play, just as our children play with dolls. They begin by sewing small scraps of material together or by cutting pieces of cloth that the household that women in the household are working on. By the time they are seven or eight, they are sewing designs on a small piece of cloth for practice. As they improve, they allowed to stitch on small areas of "real" molas.

THE ART OF MOLA-MAKING

On the Panamanian mainland, molas sold by the islanders to retail outlets are fashioned into handbags for resale to tourists.

Mor gonicat, many colors, are the most complex and most popular molas. These are commonly used a part of the blouse.



Molas are sold to tourists as is on the remote islands of the San Blas archipelago. We framed one of ours for the wall hanging shown here.



The process of mola making is often described as embroidery or appliqué. It is actually a distinct technique in its own right. The basic sequence is draw, baste, cut and sew.

1. Draw the design on the top layer.
2. Baste carefully along the line and cut about 1/8" along the basted line.
3. Fold under about 1/8" along the cut edge of the top layer and sew the folded edge to the base layer with fine hidden stitches using matching thread.
4. Repeat the process for more layers.
5. Colorful molas with filler motifs require additional steps, including a wide range of finishing touches.
6. Completed fish mola, commonly used as a panel on a blouse.

Photos courtesy of UCLA Fowler Museum.



Mother, daughter, and new puppy, San Blas Islands, Mamitupu.

grateful when they give us what will later turn out to be a most valuable contact: the card of Peter, the agent they used to transit the Panama Canal.

One of the saddest sights in the world is a wrecked boat careened on a reef, the seas washing over its disintegrating hull. All night, our view is of a wrecked Halberg-Rassey monohull on the reef extending between two of the islands. The next day, to escape the sight, we visit the one inhabited island, named *Robinson's Cay* after a well-known English-speaking local. There we meet the tattered Mr. Robinson himself. He recounts the story of the shipwreck. The story begins—as usual—with a sailor coming in too late in the day to see the shallow seas and reefs. He had missed the correct channel, the one we came through. The rest of the story is memorialized on the reef for all to see.

We spend a couple of delightful days just hanging out in the Cays, beachcombing, swimming, reading, and relaxing. Refreshed and rejuvenated, we are ready to move on through a safe opening in one of those protective, yet dangerous, reefs.

Coming of Age in Mamitupu

9°32.84' N, 78° 58.04' W

February 10

We have chosen Mamitupu as our destination, using a recommendation in our guide book. As we reach the waypoint to turn toward the island, Phyllis is positioned at one bow and Richard at the other. They direct Günter and me through another shallow, eight-foot channel. Anchoring here, in a brisk wind, becomes another challenge: We want to position *Pacific Bliss* away from the reefs, yet close enough in to obtain some shelter from the wind, while allowing for adequate swing, if the wind should change.

This is clearly a one-boat anchorage. We are fortunate to be here, wedged near Mamitupu, an island so small that we can see three-fourths of its shoreline. Thatched huts crowd the island's perimeter; tall coconut palms and spreading breadfruit trees grace its skyline. Crammed into the center is a large *congresso* (meeting house) as well as a basketball court.

Fifty feet from our stern sits an island home, built precariously upon a small *motu* (sand-bar island), protected from the sea by a waist-high wall of stones. The bamboo house is no larger than our 43-foot catamaran. Should our anchor drag, we would demolish it. To our port, we have an unobstructed view of the village life of Mamitupu. Off our starboard pulpit seat lies the picturesque island of Korbiski. The principal activity here is the docking of the local, island ferry.

The ferry now being unloaded must have drawn passengers from the entire island chain! All morning long, it disgorges its load. The passengers step into *cayukos*, large dugout canoes, rowed by muscled, tank-shirted

DID YOU KNOW?

The Kuna Indians of San Blas



The San Blas Archipelago consists of some 360 islands, including 60 that are homeland to the indigenous Kuna people. "We have an island for every day of the year," they say.

Although their territory includes the narrow strip of land between the sea and the peaks of the Serrania de San Blas, almost all the Kuna live on the Archipelago, a chain of coral atolls that runs the length of the forested coastline like a string of pearls.

The Kuna people are the second shortest in the world, after the pygmies. They have the highest rate in the world for albinism. The society is matriarchal: The line of inheritance passes through the women. A young man, after marriage, must live in his mother-in-law's house and work for several years under apprenticeship to his father-in-law. Divorce is uncommon, although it requires no more than the husband to gather his clothes and move out of the house. The daughters of the Kuna people are prized because they will eventually bring additional manpower into the family. Ironically, the boys love basketball.

Officially, the islands are part of Panama, but as of 1925, after the Kuna Revolution, the islands have been administered as a "country within a country," led by the Kuna themselves. They are rich in tradition, following their own customs. Their laws enable them to preserve their natural environment and heritage. The Kuna have a custom for every event and happening in their lives. These customs are passed on to their children through dances and chants and are also documented in their *molos*, squares of cloth decorated with reverse appliques.



Mola Masks



Bamboo dwelling, Hollandes Cays.

Indians. They deliver precious cargos of gifts and food, and proud Kuna ladies, to Mamitupu. Disembarking girls and women are costumed to the hilt. They wear dresses sewn with colorful molas—squares of cloth decorated with reverse appliqué—and orange print headscarves. Jewelry covers them from head to toe.

I sit here in the cockpit watching the action, feeling like I'm living inside a *National Geographic* photo spread.

A raggedy, weathered Indian paddles up to *Pacific Bliss* in his dug-out canoe and humbly introduces himself as the owner of the home on the motu to our stern. He displays one mola after another—each sewn by his wife—and apologizes that she cannot come to us herself because of her lame leg. I choose a mola in a tropical fish pattern. The dominant greens and blues will complement the Australian Barrier Reef bedspread in our master cabin. Then, I select another square of fabric, a turtle in a multi-colored reef, that I plan to frame and hang in our home. Phyllis also purchases a few molas. Before long, we send the shy, gentle man happily on his way.

Next, a dark, tank-shirted fisherman from the main island of Mamitupu appears at our stern with his catch. He introduces himself as Antonio. He says he learned English years ago, as a single man working the coconut plantations on the Panamanian mainland. After we negotiate for our evening dinner, Günter inquires about his family. He is proud to have a grown family. His son and daughter-in-law have a little girl who is his delight.

“Antonio, why are all the canoes coming to the island?” Günter asks. “What’s happening?”

“Oh, they are here for Coming-of-Age Ceremony for my niece. She turns 12 today. Our relatives come from many islands.” He sweeps his rough worker’s hand like a fan. “Do you want to come for celebration? Big party. This afternoon. Right after hair cutting.”

“Hair cutting?” Phyllis asks.

Antonio explains the day’s festivities: they are the culmination of puberty rites, which begin with an ancient purifying ritual. For three days his niece has been isolated in a small hut. This is a protective enclosure, painted black from the juice of the *genipa* fruit (a large berry) to guard her from evil spirits. Attendants have bathed her with salt water several times a day. The isolation rite will end with a hair-cutting ceremony, signifying her entrance into adulthood and her readiness for marriage. Then the entire village and extended family will celebrate her coming of age with a big feast and plenty of *chica*.

“We don’t have *chica house* here,” Antonio adds, “so we use *casa de congreso*.” He explains that *chica*, a fermented mixture of sugar cane juice and corn, has already been brewed in large vats for this special occasion.

After Antonio leaves, we enjoy lunch around our cockpit table, right in the midst of Kuna Indian life. Children paddle up in their small dugout canoes, curious about the big ship that is our home. Teen-age boys splash and play alongside *Pacific Bliss*, cavorting like dolphins.



Lois towers above the grandmothers in Mamitupu.

If we fail to acknowledge them, they gain our attention by overturning their canoes, riding them upside down, then righting them again.

Later, we watch the ceremony on the beach through our high-power binoculars. Kuna women surround the niece. Every so often, the group parts, and we can see the face of the slim, raven-haired girl at the center. She bravely holds back her tears. An attendant performs the rite of passage by cutting the girl’s hair. Long chunks of ebony drift to the sand and scatter slowly to the sea. The attendant wraps the standard orange print scarf over the girl’s thick short hair. She is a woman now.

It is time to lower our dinghy, *Petit Bliss*, to go ashore.

Let the party begin!



I had purchased paper tablets, colored pencils, and crayons in Cartagena. Usually, the best way to assure an even distribution of gifts is to give them to the elders of a village. Since the Kuna Indian society is matriarchal, I assumed that the gifts should be given to the grandmothers. Wrong!

We leave *Petit Bliss* pulled up onto the sand. Antonio is waiting for us. “Antonio, will you direct me to the houses of the grandmothers?” I ask.

“Follow me.”

Scores of Kuna children crowd around me, pushing and shoving to get even closer. The grandmothers and great-grandmothers command the inner circle. As I pull the gifts from my bag, one of the grandmothers commands, “Give to me!”

I look down at her. She is a full head shorter than my 5’2” height. But she is no lightweight in spirit! Her eyes are stern and steady and her stance aggressive. I know that she will not take no for an answer. Realizing my mistake, I hand over all of the gifts in my hands, still protecting those in my bag. She grasps the gifts with greedy hands. Then she turns her back to me and shows them to the other matriarchs, ignoring the mothers and children. I stand by silently. Finally, she turns back to me with a brusque thank you.

Will she share my gifts with the island’s families? I think not.

As we leave the grandmothers’ huts, I sneak one set of supplies to Antonio, whispering, “For your family.” With an audible sigh, he jams the gifts into the pockets of his trousers. I get it. The grandmothers will probably *sell* the supplies—just as they hawk the intricate molas embroidered by the island’s women. These matriarchs are tough businesswomen.

The docile men of the San Blas, having married into their brides’ families, are confined to fishing and harvesting coconut—all the while showing off their beautiful women. The men wear practical tank tops, shorts, and sandals.



Trading Molas in the Hollandes Cays.

Strikingly beautiful and festive, the women and girls dress like royalty. They wear bright-colored blouses with puffed sleeves and intricate mola panels on the fronts and backs, combined with darker print wraparound skirts. A special sign of beauty is their face painting: a thin black line running from the forehead to the bridge of the nose so that it will appear longer. Gold earrings and gold nose-rings are common. Intricate beadwork, called *unni*, adorns the women's arms, from wrist-to-elbow, and legs, from ankle to just below the knee. The head scarves are always the same: bright orange with a small print design.

As we walk through the village, the younger women are eager to point out their mothers, their mothers-in-law, and their grandmothers. The grandmothers carry around bottles that look like white rum (perhaps *chica* poured into old rum bottles). They tend to hang out near their houses. All the women proudly show off their babies, all dressed up for the celebration. The little girls are already displaying the wealth of the family, wearing gold bracelets and necklaces or breastplates, the best their fathers can afford.

Phyllis maneuvers close to the honored birthday girl, who is now wearing the standard orange scarf as well. On the sly, Phyllis hands her a bag filled with cosmetics and a pair of earrings. Taller than the grandmothers, the girl lifts her bag high above the reach of the crowd and then moves away to look inside. The sudden smile that floods her face says it all.

I managed to sequester a package of crayons. Now as I take the children's photos, I hand out one crayon to each child. Not that they need coaxing! They all crowd around me *begging* to be photographed. *Thank God I've converted to digital!* When a few teen-age boys discover that they can see their image in the back of my Nikon, the word spreads. I become the Pied Piper traipsing through the island village, followed by a troupe of boisterous, laughing children.

"Where are the Kuna men?" Günter asks. This question is soon answered.

Antonio takes us to the *congresso*, where the men are heavily into drinking *chica*. Inside the dimly lit structure, groups of sweat-soaked men stir vast cauldrons of steaming rice, the staple food for the feast to come.

After walking through the village, we spend some time conversing with Antonio's family. I ask whether I can take a family photo. Antonio meticulously sweeps the sand in front of his bamboo house. Then he arranges plastic chairs before the door. The entire family poses for a formal photo, taking the event very seriously. The resulting image reminds me of the sepia photos of my grandparents, posed woodenly for the "professional" photographer. After obliging them with formal photos that I promise to print out, I ask a special favor: May I take a candid photo of Antonio's daughter-in-law, granddaughter, and the new family puppy? The photo turns out perfectly and tugs at my heartstrings. I know this is one photo I will treasure



forever!

The children of Mamitupu have been waiting. Now they swarm the beach to see us off. As Günter and Richard launch our dinghy to motor back to *Pacific Bliss*, I continue to snap photos of children, tears streaming down my cheeks. I don't want to leave them.

My day with these islanders is the very essence of cruising. THIS is what I came for. Ordeal or Adventure? Daring adventure or nothing at all? All I know is that for this day, I have braved the ordeal of a Force 10 storm. For more days like today, I will brave the entire world. My attitude has changed forever.

Back on *Bliss*, I am reminded of another quote from Helen Keller:

"No pessimist ever discovered the secret of the stars, or sailed to an uncharted land, or opened a new heaven to the human spirit."

A Kuna Leader Speaks to His Followers Concerning the Quincentennial Celebration of Columbus' Discovery of America

Now then, we are sitting together here. We sit listening. We sit here feeling our pain. We sit here knowing our sorrows. This five hundredth anniversary that is coming, this great day that is coming, it is our pain. Why is it our pain?

When the Europeans came here, they abused us, you see. They beat our grandfathers, they killed our grandmothers, they cut open our grandmothers, you hear. They came here and killed our wise men, you see. So now they say, "Celebrate the day," you see. "We discovered this land." But we say, "They didn't discover it." Well, we've always been here...

Therefore this day that is coming, they're coming to celebrate the day of our grandmothers' and grandfathers' death. Our pain, you see. As for them, they feel happy...

Cacique Leonidas Valdez
February 1992



Children of Mamitupu.

