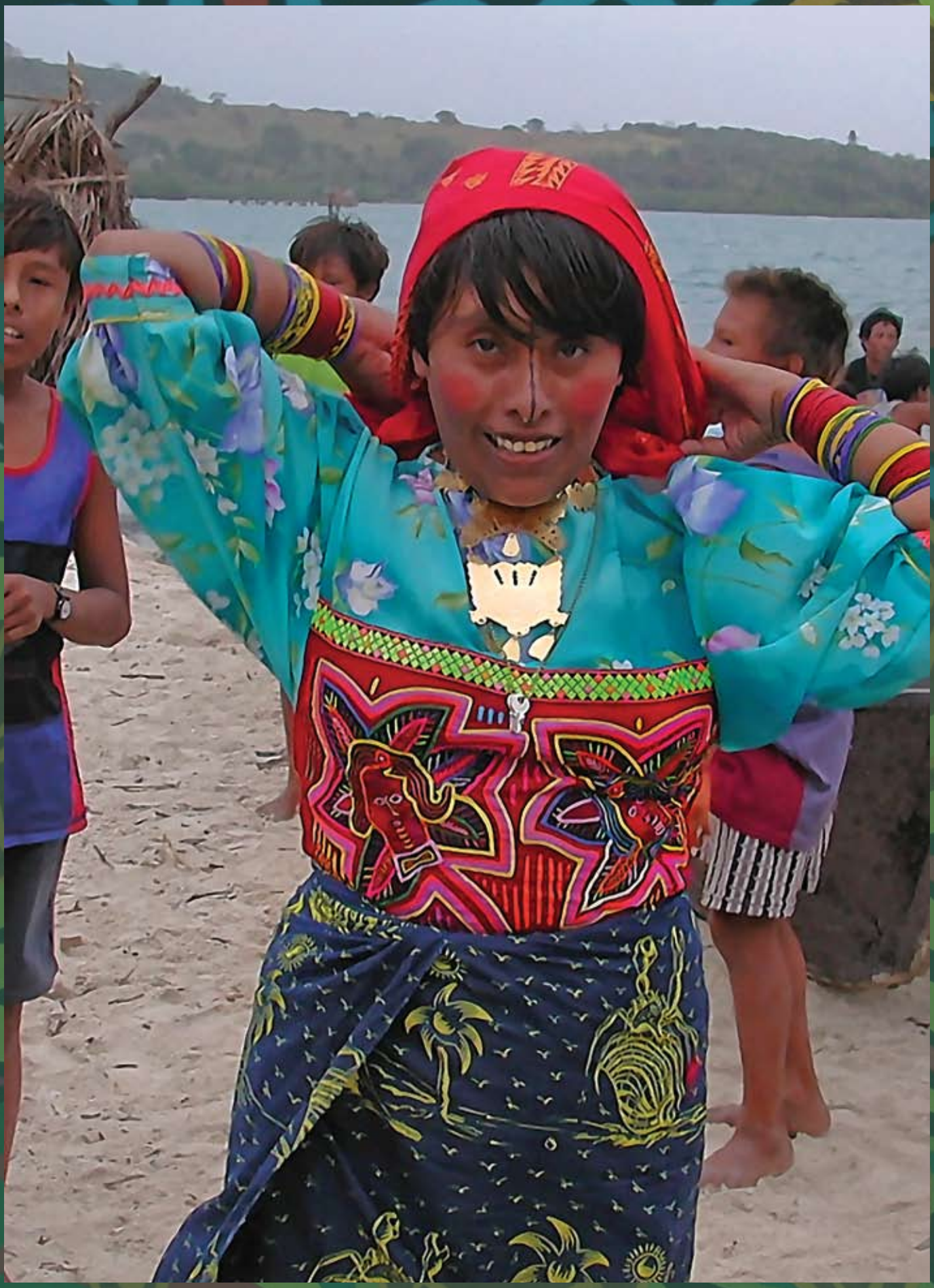


THE SURPRISING SAN BLAS ISLANDS

February 8, 2001
The Gulf of Darien, Colombia
9º 37.8' N, 77º 47.5' W

Ordeal or Adventure? Introspection under a Full Moon on the Way to San Blas.

At the starboard helm, on my favorite 0300-0600 watch, I try to renew my relationship with *Pacific Bliss*. I would love to regain that camaraderie with her and the sea that I felt during those long, blissful nights of our Atlantic Crossing. But it is just not there yet.

During our five days of decompression in Cartagena, the moon has grown full and complacent, with a pale sheen that fades whenever the clouds pass by. The seas are still confused, with unusually large rollers for a Force 6 wind. *Pacific Bliss* has been reigned in much too tight, her crew fearful of another Force 7-to-Force 8 escalation. My thoughts pull me back like a rubber band to that dark night seven days ago. I force myself to snap into to the present, to this brighter, saner night.

Attitude, the Difference between Ordeal and Adventure. I look down at this inscription on my tee-shirt from *Lats and Atts,* a sailing magazine. *What is my attitude now?*

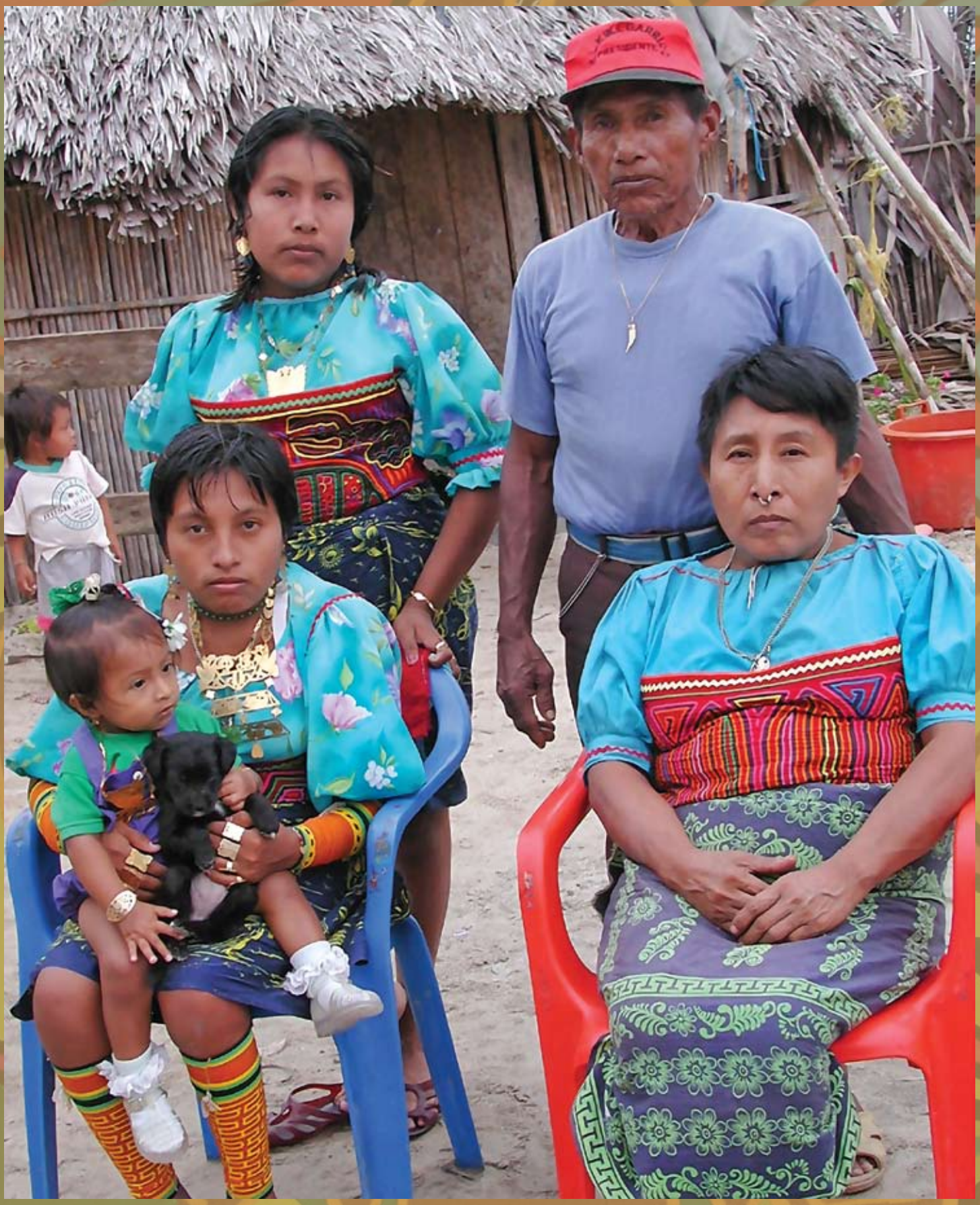
It is our first overnight since our Force 10 ordeal. Leaving the safety of port has been difficult—each of us forced to face those raging demons within. This voyage across the Gulf of Darien would have been a breeze before our night of terror. But that was before we lost our innocence.

"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?* Chaotic rollers slap against the hulls of *Pacific Bliss* as she heaves onward while answers elude me like a school of slippery eels.

Cruisers at Club Nautico 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." Even so, we agonized. After a discussion fraught with emotions, the four of us decided to shorten our crossing to only one overnight.

Instead of our original plan of sailing directly across the gulf to the San Blas Islands, we decided to sail to Isla Tintipan, part of the Islas de San Bernado. 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 from that cruel point off Baranquilla. All of the weather nets we religiously followed, as well as our on-board NAVTEK, confirmed the forecast. We knew in our hearts that *Pacific Bliss* could handle these conditions easily. *Could we?*

As usual, we played our ritual *Amazing Grace* as we set sail. This time, though, we bowed our heads in silence as the first line rang out of the cockpit speakers. *Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound…*



Our sail began under hazy gray-blue skies and a benign Force 4 wind. It was an ideal sailing day, but my nervous stomach refused to calm, most likely a Pavlovian response to the danger that wasn't even there. I had become riveted to the display panel in the cockpit, a knot forming whenever a gust brought the read-out to a Force 6 or more, however intermittent.

We sailed 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 panga fishing off the reef at the point. At dinner we sat around the cockpit table in uneasy silence.

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

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

"Like what?"

"For example, those fisherman could board the boat while we are all asleep…the anchor might not hold, since the wind always seems to pick up at night…we'll need to set an anchor alarm," Gunter mumbled.

We implemented our safety precautions, then continued our subdued discussion, determining 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 Gunter 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 *joie de vivre* had disappeared. We had replaced our innocence with a new respect for the awesome power of the wind and the sea.

We awoke to a dead calm. We had set our departure for 0940, but when we performed our take-off procedures, we found that the knot meter wasn't working. Richard dove into the tropical water and quickly fixed the problem by scraping off the algae. But then, our progress was painstakingly slow, hampered by coral heads 12-30 feet high. It was 1145 before we were clear of the San Bernardo islands and on a 285º heading toward the San Blas.

Exploring the Hollandes Cays.
9º32.7' N, 78º53.9' 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 is again on full alert. At the nav station, I note that our Trip Miles indicator already shows 200, 30 miles more than our estimate.

Finally, we anchor at 24 feet near Banedup, close to Tiadup, the only inhabited island in these cays. We have entered Panamanian waters. Totally exhausted, I sleep fitfully during our first night on the hook in San Blas. The calm waters in the cozy anchorage belie the fury of the winds and the crashing of the waves against the breakers outside. All night, the wind screams through the window netting, increasing my uneasiness.

At dawn's light, we pull anchor to search for a better anchorage. Inside the reefs, the sailing is superb. We sashay in a Force 5 NNE wind, averaging 9 knots in protected seas. Up at the pulpit seat on forward look-out, I am completely dry—not one splash of salt water.

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

We manage to maneuver past the vessel in the narrow eight-foot-deep channel. As we pass, a couple waves from the stern. My frustration turns to joy. These are the cruisers from *Atlas*, those consoling voices on the SSB during our night of terror! Ensconced on a 40-plus foot Nordhaven, they could go no further with their deep draft. With the dagger boards up, *Pacific Bliss* easily motors past them, over the shallow sand bank, and into the bay. After anchoring, Gunter and I dinghy over to thank our friends for their help that night. In return, they hand over a valuable contact for us: the card of Peter, the agent they used to transit the Panama Canal.

One of the saddest sights in the world for a sailor is a wrecked boat careened on a reef, the seas washing over its disintegrating hull. The view from our cockpit this night is of a wrecked Halberg-Rassey monohull on the reef extending between two of the islands. The next day, we visit the one inhabited island, named *Robinson's Cay* after a well-known English-speaking

The Art of Mola-Mak

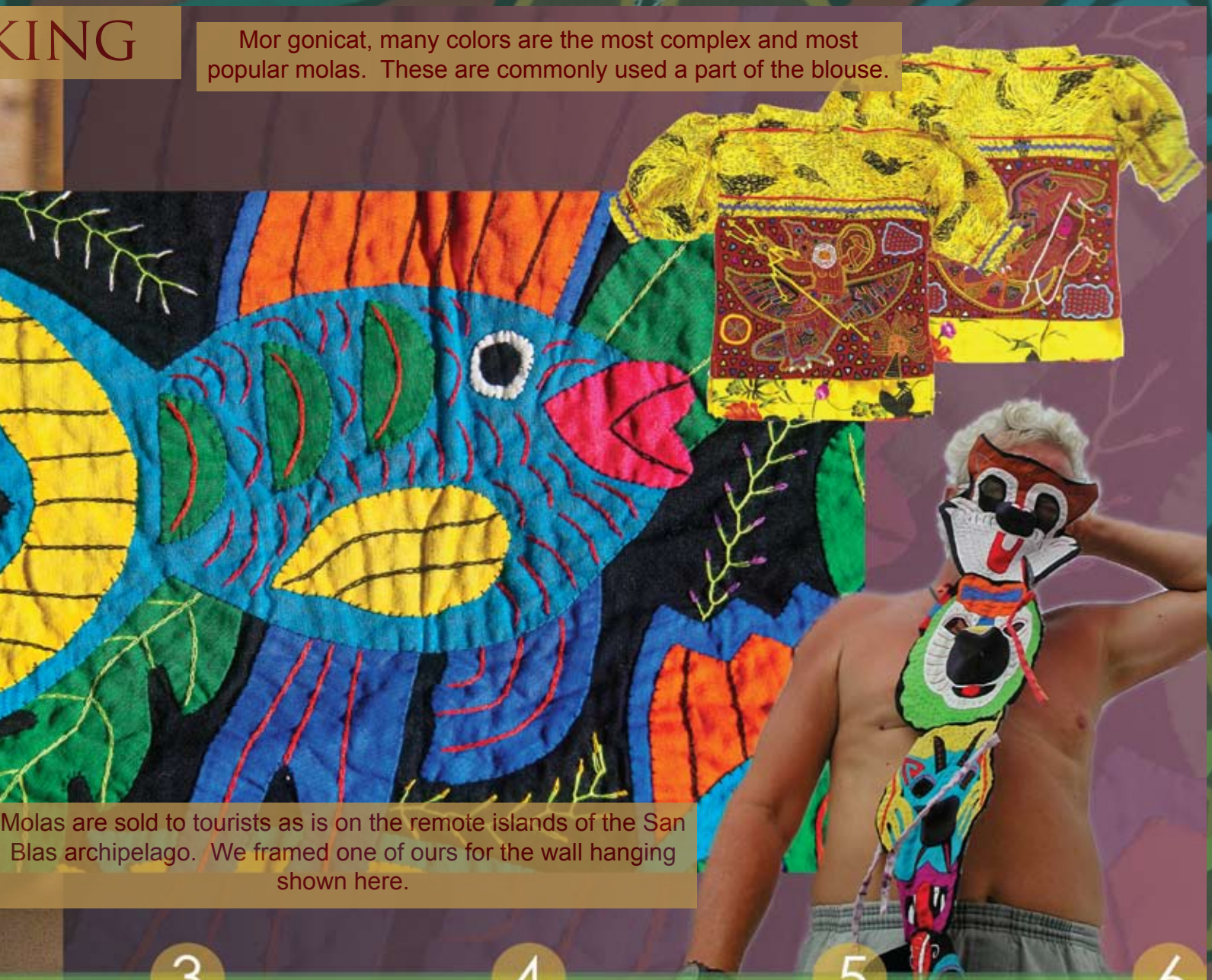
The Kuna consider the art of making mola to be an integral part of their culture and important to their ethnic identity. When a Kuna woman marries, her husband usually moves into the home of her mother and lives with her female relatives and their families. The women in the family share the household 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 spend some time taking care of the children in the household, hauling water, washing clothes, and hulling rice. Girls 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.

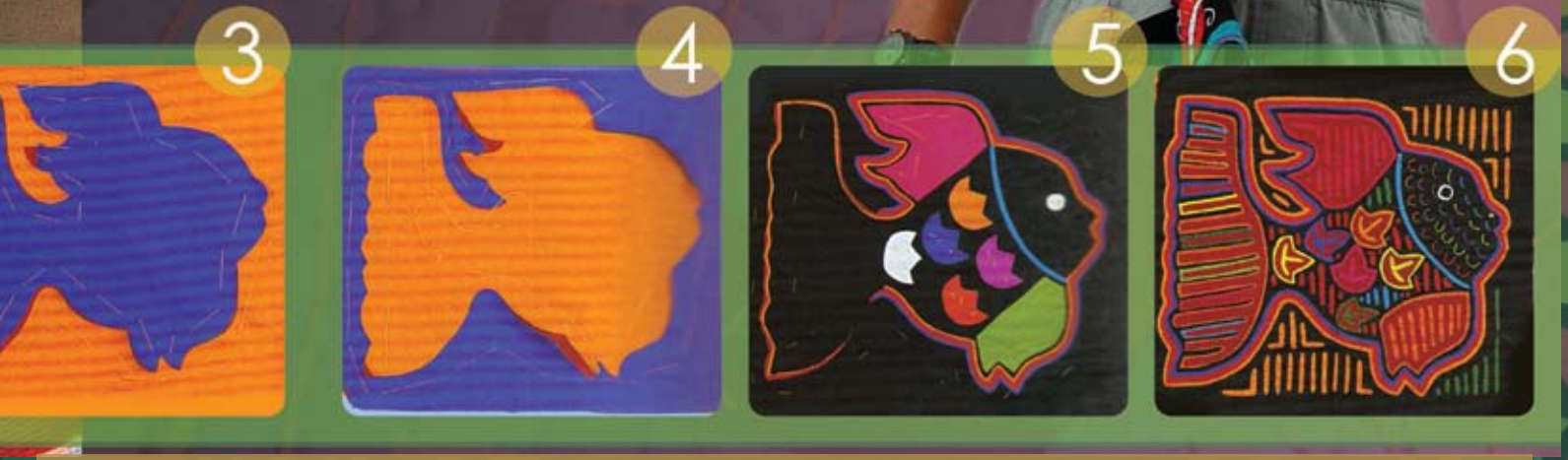
On the Panamanian mainland, molas sold by the islanders to retail outlets are fashioned into handbags for resale to tourists.

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.

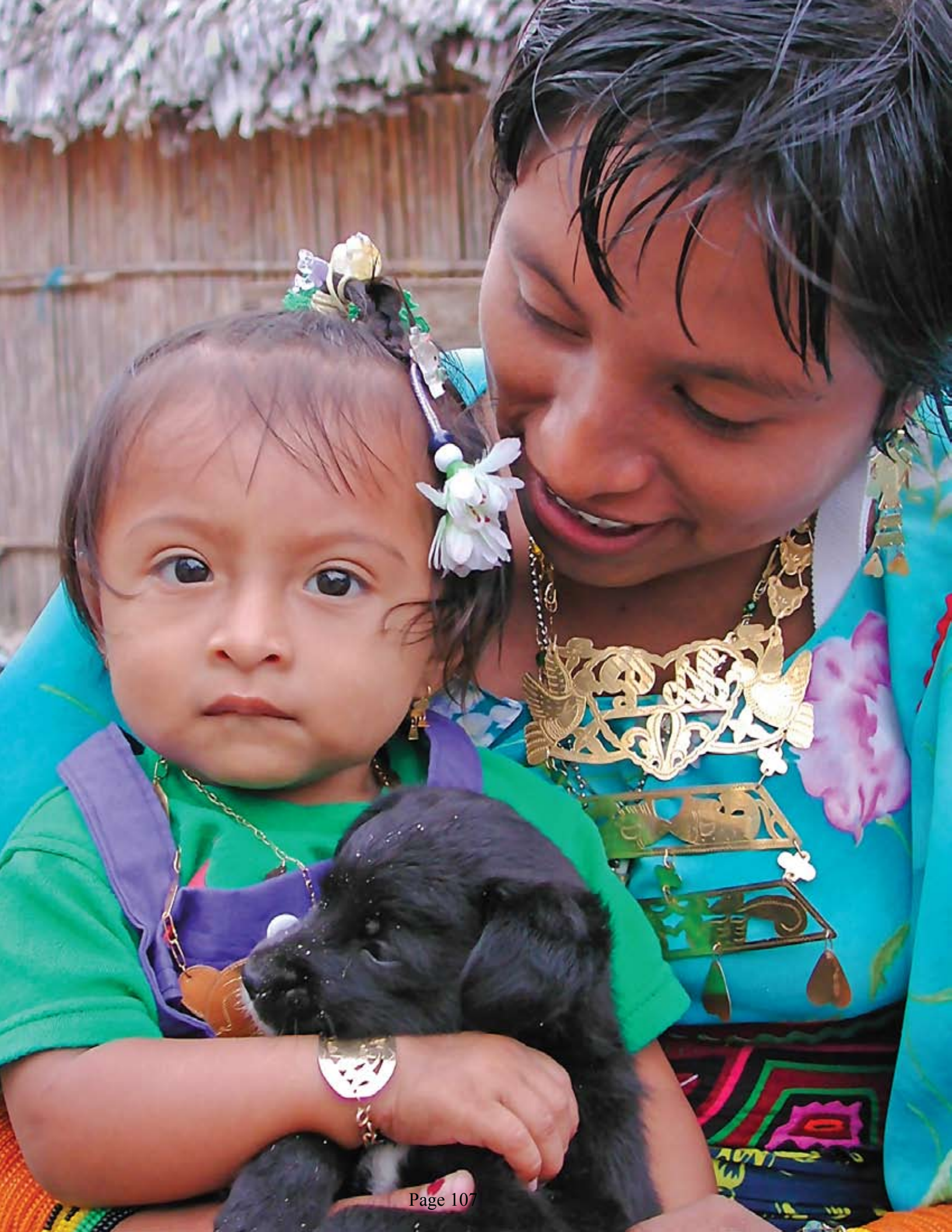
Mor gonicat, many colors are the most complex and most popular molas. These are commonly used a part of the blouse.



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.



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 inch 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.



local. Mr. Robinson recounts the story. As usual, it begins 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.

We spend a couple of days just hanging out in the Cays, beachcombing, swimming, reading and relaxing. Then it is time 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

Anchoring here in a brisk wind is a challenge. Phyllis is positioned at one bow and Richard at the other as they direct Gunter and me through yet another shallow eight-foot channel. We attempt to position *Pacific Bliss* far from the reefs that surround most of this island, yet close enough to obtain some shelter from the wind. Allowing for adequate swing, should that wind change, there would not be room for one more boat like ours.

Pacific Bliss is wedged into a small bay off the south side of Mamitupu, an island so small that we can see three-fourths of its shoreline. Thatched huts crowd around 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. Within fifty feet off our stern sets an island home built precariously upon a small sand bar; protected from the sea by a waist-high wall of stones. The bamboo house is no larger than our 43-foot catamaran. In fact, 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, where the local island ferry docks.

This last ferry must have been crowded with passengers from the entire island chain! All morning long, one after the other, the *cayukos*, large dug-out canoes rowed by muscled, tank-shirted men, delivers their precious cargo of gifts, food and proud Kuna ladies to Mamitupu. The visitors are dressed to the hilt, festooned with jewelry and wearing colorful molas and orange print headscarves. Sitting here in the cockpit watching them is like living inside a National Geographic photo spread.

A humble, weathered man paddles up to *Pacific Bliss* in his dug-out canoe and introduces himself as the owner of the motu home to our stern. He displays one mola after another—each made by his wife—and apologizes that she cannot come to us because of a

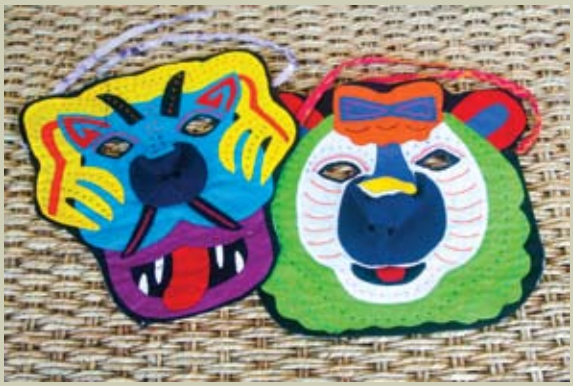
DID YOU KNOW?

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. Ironically, the boys love basketball. 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.

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 life. These customs are passed on to their children through dances and chants and are also documented in their Molas.



Mola Masks

lame leg. I select the perfect mola, a tropical fish with dominant greens and blues that I know will compliment the Australian Barrier Reef spread in our master cabin. Then I select another square of fabric—featuring a turtle—that I plan to frame and hang in our home. Phyllis also purchases a few molas before we send the shy, gentle man on his way.

Next, a fisherman from the mainland of Mamitupu appears with his catch. After negotiating for our evening dinner, we ask about his family. His name is Antonio. He learned English years ago, as a single man working the coconut plantations on the Panamanian mainland. Now he has a grown family, and his son and daughter-in-law have a little girl that is his delight. We ask him why all the canoes are converging on the island. Is there a special occasion today?

"Oh, they are here for the *Coming-of-Age Ceremony* for my niece. She turns twelve 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."

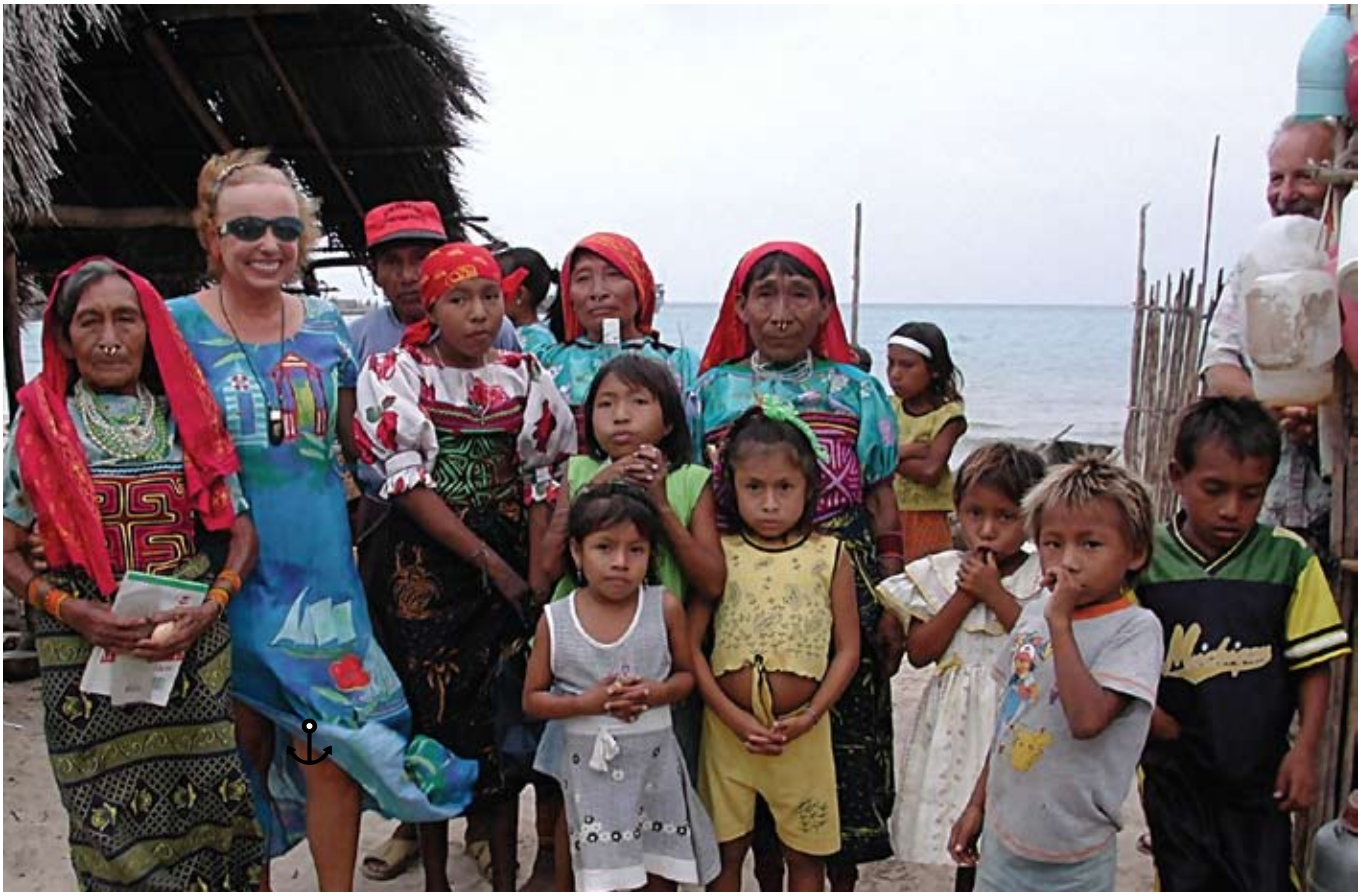
"Hair cutting?" Phyllis asks.

Antonio goes on to explain that the day's festivities are the culmination of puberty rites that begin with an ancient purifying ritual. For three days, his niece has been isolated in a small hut, in an enclosure painted black with the juice of the *genipa* fruit to protect her from evil spirits. Attendants bathed her with salt water several times a day. The isolation rite ends with a *Hair-cutting Ceremony* which signifies that she has become an adult and is ready to be married. Then the entire village and extended family celebrates 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 the *chica*, a fermented mixture of sugar cane juice and corn, has already been brewed in large vats for the occasion.

After Antonio leaves, we eat 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*. Teenage boys splash and play alongside *Pacific Bliss,* cavorting like dolphins. If we fail to acknowledge them, they show off by overturning their canoes, riding them upside down, then righting them again.

Later at the bow, we watch the ceremony



through our binoculars. On the beach, Kuna women surround the niece. The rite of passage is performed by a specially-trained attendant. Every so often, the group on the beach parts, and we can see the face of the slim, raven-haired girl at the center, bravely holding back her tears. Long hunks of locks drift down 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 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 assume that the gifts should be given to the grandmothers.

"Antonio, will you to direct me to the houses of the grandmothers?"

"Follow me."

Scores of Kuna children crowd around me, pushing and shoving to get even closer. The grandmothers and great-grandmothers are in my face. As I pull the gifts out of my bag, one of the grandmothers commands, "Give those to me!"

I look down at her. She is a full head shorter than my 5'2" height. But she is no lightweight. 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 turn over all of the gifts in my hands, but not those in my bag. She grasps them 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 the gifts with the island's families? I think not.*

As we saunter away from the grandmothers' huts, I sneak one set of supplies to Antonio, whispering, "For your family." With a sigh of relief, he jams the gifts into the pockets of his trousers. I get it. The grandmothers will probably *sell* the supplies—just as they merchandise the intricate molas embroidered by the island's women. These matriarchs are into big business. The docile men, 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; the women dress like island royalty.

The women and girls are strikingly beautiful

and festive. They wear colorful blouses with bright puffed sleeves and intricate mola panels on the front and back and darker print wraparound skirts. A special sign of beauty is the face painting—a thin black line running from the forehead to the bridge of the nose, so that it will appear longer. Gold rings in the noses and gold earrings 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.

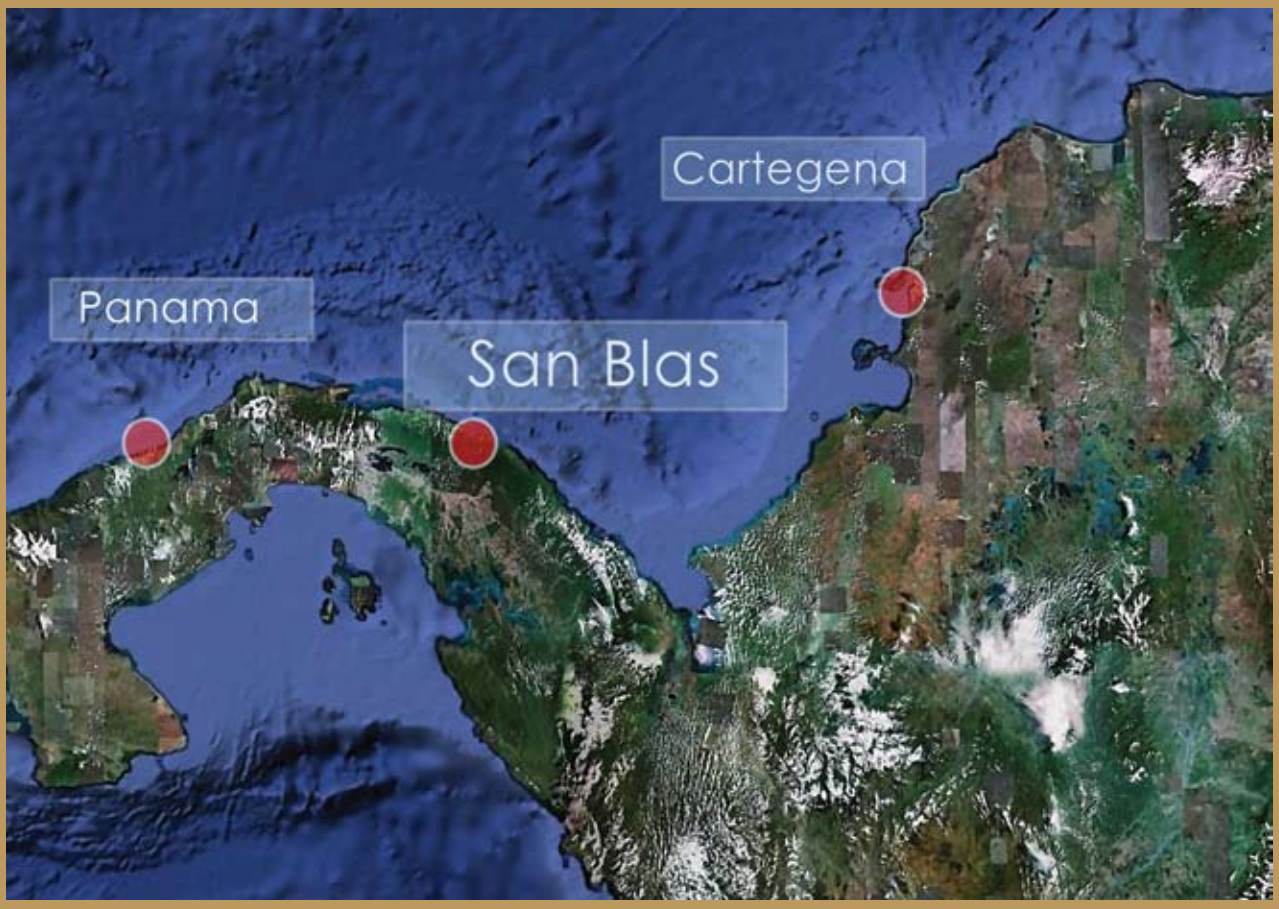
As we walk through the village, the younger women are eager to point out their mother, their mother-in-law, and their grandmother. They proudly show off their babies, all dressed up for the celebration. The little girls are already displaying the wealth of the family, wearing gold bracelets and necklaces or breastplates, the best their fathers can afford.

Phyllis maneuvers close to the honored *birthday girl,* now wearing the standard orange scarf as well. On the sly, she hands her a bag filled with cosmetics and a pair of earrings. The girl lifts her bag high above the reach of the crowd and then moves away from the group to look inside. The sudden smile that graces 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 to each. 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 with a troupe of boisterous, laughing children.

It is difficult to meet many Kuna men. They are heavily into drinking cups of *chica*. Inside the dimly lit congresso, they stir vast cauldrons of rice being cooked for the feast. The grandmothers carry around bottles that look like white rum, but perhaps it is *chica* poured into old rum bottles. They tend to stay near their houses.

After walking through the village, we spend some time with Antonio's family. They pose for a formal photo in front of their bamboo house, sweeping the sand in front, taking the event very seriously. The resulting image reminds me of formal sepia photos of my grandparents, posed woodenly for the professional photographer. After obliging them with formal photos that I promise to print out for them, 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 that it is one I will treasure forever.

The children of Mamitupu have been waiting. Now they swarm the beach to see us off. As Gunter 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.

I realize that 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.

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's 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 grandfathers, 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 our grandmothers' and grandfathers' death. Our pain, you see. As for them, they feel happy…

Cacique Leonidas Valdez
February 1992