



San Andres Hymnal

By Louise Wollman

Regular readers, familiar with my dual roles—gourmet groupie and gourmet grump—allow me the mantle of speech pathologist; indulge a peevisish outburst in defense of proper pronunciation.

Just like lackluster cookery (in general) and tepid entrees (in particular) tick me off, there is no such place as CartagenYA. It's CartagenAH (the

"g" pronounced like "h"). Also, in CartagenAH, you eat empen-AH-das, not empa-NYAH-das.

Similarly, radio net controllers and weather gurus notwithstanding, there's no such place as San An-DRAY-US. It's San Andres, just plain San Andres, the "DRES" rhyming with "chess."

As long as I've raised the cudgel in defense of San Andres, let me add that this island deserves better press.

Cruisers are always sweet on its sister island, Providencia. San Andres is saltier, a more acquired taste—like, say, anchovies. Cast in New England nautical terms, San Andres is Oak Bluffs to Providencia's Menemsha Pond; on the West Coast, Venice Beach to Santa Monica.

I didn't expect to fall in love with San Andres either. At first glance, it's clearly off-putting. Just steps from your boat is hot, steamy downtown.



Touring an oft-overlooked Colombian island with a landscape and cuisine as colorful as its locals

and occasionally even a pet. The odd sole passenger is an anomaly.

Next, the retail hullabaloo assaults: about every fourth enterprise is a glossy Duty-Free, selling a hodge-podge of perfumes, soaps, watches, cameras, small appliances, Pringles, liquors and luggage. Intermixed are cheap shoe stores and small, cheesy outlets hawking flimsy plastic containers, uninteresting fabrics, and, for some reason, photocopies.

The large, inviting bay at the northeast end is hardly more user-friendly: anchor there in front of the Sunrise Beach Hotel and you'll be treated at least once a sunset to packed party boats blaring salsa and showcasing bikini'ed revelers bashing butts. No, better to be a little more squashed in front of Nene's Marina, where there's a bargain dinghy dock and—sometimes—even Internet.

So what's to love here?

Naturally, there's a food angle, and I'll get there. But first, solely from a communications standpoint, after you can say "San AnDRES," you won't have to wrestle much with

Spanish.

Your sociable "hola" could be answered by, "Welcome...how do you like our beautiful island?" Especially surprising delivered by a grinning gentleman of obvious Afro-Caribe descent, who proceeds to prove his point with an impromptu poem:

"In the Caribbean, truly best...is the beautiful island of San Andres."

(See why you have to say it right?)

In 1629, English Puritans muscled their way here—one reason the King's English is still the official language. In another quirk of history, the entire outpost San Andres archipelago is some 500 miles from Colombia, but just 90 miles from Nicaragua.

Still, the islander friendliness is genuine and typically Colombian.

"No, no, no, not this bunch," says a gray-haired matron, gently yet firmly removing a cilantro clump from my hand and nuzzling me down the produce aisle to a different display. Diving in earnestly, she surfaces brandishing her own bouquet. "Take this one," she advises. To me it's an identical twin, but to her trained eye

Called El Centro, it's riddled with uneven pavement, treacherous high curbs—tripping grounds for the average klutz—plus impossible-to-cross streets. And it is crowded, both night and day, with the island's primary form of transportation: whizzing, clattering, honking scooters, carrying sets of girlfriends trading must-share secrets, husbands and wives with toddlers, sometimes entire families of four—including groceries, laundry



A prime example of San Andres at its finest: friendly faces and fragrant food



From the top: Mount Zion Baptist Church, a typical quaint island cottage and a view of the "Impressionist sea"

it's clearly a superior specimen.

PARADISE FOUND

Rent a golf cart and follow the 18-mile ribbon of road banding the seahorse-shaped island. Dramatic terrain and a kaleidoscope of views. Miles of palm-lined beach fringed by lacy surf and lazy ripples of sudsy white froth. Alternately, boisterous waves crash on swaths of pebbly coral, limestone rubble and craggy volcanic outcroppings. Interspersed with stretches of emerald farmland, grazing cows exposing the rich red topsoil beneath. In fact, nuzzling cows, yard cows and be-ready-to-brake street cows.

Popping up everywhere, a restless Impressionist sea passes over the island's 58-species coral reef, creating a mottle of pale aquas, deep turquoises, smoky lavenders and vibrant cobalts.

Tour San Andres on a Sunday morning and you'll discover the modest maiden hiding behind the strumpet makeup. You'll pass families on their way to church, freshly scrubbed in carefully ironed finery. Stop and listen to the rollicking hymns pouring out of the low-slung concrete sprawl of the Mount Zion Baptist or the spare clapboard-sided First Baptist perched high on its hill. A more solemn Catholic mass, in Spanish, issues from the frilly blue and white, many-buttressed Catedral Sagrada Familia.

The San Andres linguistic stew also features Spanish-speaking Colombian ex-pats and a Creole-dialect contingent that considers itself the authentic indigenous populace.

Inland and uphill are the villages of La Loma and San Luis, their streets lined with hybrid English-Caribbean cottages, each colorfully painted, one-storied, with a rocking-chair porch. Your nose may lead you to a cluttered front yard, where a



Top, seaside dining at El Paraiso. Bottom, the restaurant's generous portion of heavenly seafood casserole. Right, the author taking a break with a couple of her newfound friends

cheery family presides over a smoking oil-drum barbecue. For pennies they'll pack you a pre-lunch boxed snack—hot dog, chicken, slaw, lettuce, tomato, coconut rice and plantain. Share it, thereby saving room for the significant lunch that comes later, say around 3.

Next, find the inland lagoon to view its panoply of wild birds and, with luck, a lazy alligator that sometimes surfaces. Then work your way to the island's southern tip. Stand over the rumbling Soplador blowhole while slurping an icy pina colada from a coconut shell and waiting for a seawater geyser to erupt through the coral rock.

Now head up the east coast, watching carefully for the seaside restaurant El Paraiso, while taking in the picnicking families, children screeching through the waves, volleyballs scorching over nets, even bareback riders streaking down the shoreline.

El Paraiso—sitting on a heavenly beach—couldn't be better named: a seafood worshipper's paradise. Portions are plentiful and popping fresh. Hard to choose, though appetizer "musts" are shrimp ceviche and "coctel" (shrimp or shrimp and octopus floating in a proprietary cocktail sauce.)

Request the English menu and go with a crowd of incorrigible tasters, because every entree amazes. "Casserole Seafood" is so thick with fish chunks and shellfish there's little room for sauce on your spoon. "Whole Fried Fish" is usually snapper, priced by size, scored, deep-fried but greaseless, with soft white meat and crispy skin; be sure to dive into those tender cheek morsels. Fish filet (Milanese) is a paradigm of the genre, usually a sweet local fish called lenguado. "Filete Paraiso con Camarones" is so thickly blanketed in a shrimp coverlet it threatens to

spill off the plate. As sides, yellow disks of plantain, a cupcake of rice. For dessert, the Sweet Ladies will pass the dining porch: buxom matrons balancing head-trays laden with typically Colombian pastries, which always feature sugar in dentally aggressive concentrations. Wash this feast down with glacially cold Aguila beer and you will trundle home bloated, bleary and wholly sated, then tumble into bed and hear not a note of party-boat bacchanalia.

ASSHO DISCIPLES

Whether Pirate Henry Morgan stashed his spoils in a water-laden western shore cave is moot, but there is a dining treasure buried downtown: the unfortunately named Assho. Adding the "le" is a recurrent temptation; however, pronounce it "Acho," (like "achoo" without the second "o") and it is an acronym for Asistencia Hoteles.



Owner

Humberto Hamacho Mejia, who holds a degree in hotel administration, once worked for the supply conglomerate SYSCO, teaching Colombian hotels to avoid waste and use the company's commercial-sized canned produce. His sister Monica is co-owner. "It was natural," says Humberto. "Always as kids we played cooking and recipes."

Exquisite dishes sally forth into the woody dining area, set up as a gourmet-products shop with shelves of imported delicacies in jars and tins that are truly too expensive or too industrial-sized to buy.

No matter. Assho is really about

eating, whether lunch or dinner. Frequently, we chose both, keenly aware that we must pack enough of these treats into a few-week stay so as not to feel deprived when we finally moved on.

Unparalleled sandwiches, though on an unpromising soft torpedo roll. A far cry from a baguette, yet somehow complementing the succulent innards—slices of house-made beef, lamb or pork, each roasted after long baths in different piquant marinades.

Our Assho Favorites category expanded exponentially, as aromatic, tantalizingly displayed platters passed by us and we'd hear blissful moans. Thus did we move off our sandwich fixation to try boulder-sized lasagna surrounded by a robust puddle of memorable tomato sauce. Melba, an Asian-inspired chopped

salad of lettuces, five-spice seasoned pork, almonds, sesame seeds and crunchy noodles. A thick shrimp gratin served in a hollowed-out bread loaf. Cherna—a delicate grouper-family fish from nearby Nicaraguan waters—flawlessly browned and minimally sautéed in white wine is my all-time Assho favorite; though, true, I haven't tried the meaty spare-ribs slathered in I-can't-yet-imagine-just-how-terrific barbecue sauce.

Post-lunch and pre-dinner activities might include a dinghy ride to Johnny Cay—a lush smudge of a tropic isle complete with iguanas—or a review of the myriad exotic spices, condiments, dried delights and nuts at the Mini-Rey Market, a selection easily shaming Whole Foods and Zabar's combined. Or, a stroll down Playa Sprat Bight, two-and-a-half miles of town beach, all alabaster sand and soaring palms, where you can watch local fishermen

bringing in the daily catch for weighing. Don't expect to buy, as they're all co-op members awaiting their share. After dinner, walk the town promenade, a brick strip hugging the waterfront offering multiple ice-cream stops. But skip DuDu's. It's another ill-considered name—though, true, easily pronounced. ≈

Louise Wollman, a former New York features writer, retired with her long-time love to pursue an even older love—gourmet gluttony. Louise and Gary have lived aboard Lulu for 11

years, finishing two circumnavigations of the Caribbean while reporting on the best opportunities for island eating. She can be found almost anywhere aromas tempt—look for

someone juggling a fork, notebook, camera and glass of wine. Plans are to relocate to the Med in the fall for the one-two punch of stupendous food and anything-but-Chilean wines.



Opposite, Assho restaurant with one of its many tasty dishes (inset). Middle, a horse frolicks on the alabaster sand at Playa Sprat Bight. Bottom, Mini-Rey Market, the Zabar's of the Caribbean

