



SCORING PETROL AND PASTA ON THE REEF

*Casamarina
Francisquis, Los
Roques, Venezuela*

By Louise Wollman

Cantankerous December northerlies stall our three-day Bonaire-to-St. Croix passage. We detour to Los Roques, frankly thrilled to have extra time in this breathtaking, quasi-uninhabited Venezuelan archipelago, some 300 small land and sand masses.

We anchor in Carenero, on the outermost hem of the giant reef's skirts. After busy Bonaire, I'm ready to read, swim, practice Yoga—and keep the anchor dug in.

But my prototypically unflappable spouse Gary abruptly flies into a tailspin. We need diesel! Although a straight shot, we hadn't fueled in Bonaire. No wonder—diesel there approaches \$4.

Next morning, despite a 28-knot

wind, we're off to inhabited Gran Roque island. Neighboring boats predict scoring 200 gallons will be tricky. Mechanical failure has beached the itinerant fuel barge—maybe for the entire Christmas season, which in Venezuela lasts a whole month.

In our conjugal duet Gary takes the Eternal Optimist role. His archetypal luck holds. We find the supply ship *Normandia* in port, with even an English-speaker to translate. This affable fellow negotiates a 200-gallon buy at 25 cents a gallon, including, presumably, his cut. (Diesel on mainland Venezuela usually runs about five cents a gallon.) We're ecstatic.

Except now I'm in a tizzy. *Normandia* is a blue-and-red (but-mostly-rust) behemoth. How will we rendez-

vous in this choppy harbor without our *Lulu* acquiring a similar coat of red, blue and rust? Gary is unfazed.

"No problema," agrees our translator, who remains on the case—possibly expecting another financial windfall. He sets the transfer for next afternoon in adjacent—and tranquil—Francisquis.

Ugly scenarios plague me. Next morning I remove the fender covers—paradoxically, more important to protect than the fenders. I fret all day, scanning the horizon.

Pointless: *Normandia* never shows. Maybe they found a more lucrative fuel gig. I'm relieved but simultaneously realize Gary's point: with a long enough hiatus in this fuel desert, charging our 12 batteries would exhaust our fuel.

He's still unperturbed. Sunday morning in "town," he locates two Venezuelan fishing ves-

Sailing On Your Stomach In the wake of an insatiable food sleuth

BLUE WATER DISPATCHES



Casamarina langoustines, left, and an entertaining lobster display



surf, a glaringly white beach strewn with colorful umbrellas. And—can it be?—a restaurant! Incredible because, except for several largely mediocre Gran Roque cafes, Los Roques' splendors don't normally extend to restaurants.

Now, my (entirely self-appointed) duty is sampling almost any Caribbean dive. But in this case, provisioned for only three days, I can almost-honestly plead Dwindling Food Supply.

Alas, Casamarina is pricey for Venezuelan islands, where seafood is locally caught—and

doubtless priced—by local fisherman, a group not notable for its high tax bracket. Considering the captive audience—well-heeled (though barefoot) Venezuelans zipping in from the mainland—this remote bistro's owner has a genuine entrepreneurial bonanza on his hands.

In the shallows outside is a Volkswagen-sized cage chockablock with hefty lobsters, but I prefer the langoustinos—large prawns. They are fortuitously seasoned and grilled to proper bite-consistency. Gary, no shellfish fan, habitually orders fish—that is, unless he can find some tough Caribbean steak or, even better, a hamburger-alien-hockey puck.

Sadly, both barracuda and snapper

filets are: A) teensy and B) overcooked but C) not all-that overpriced because D) accompanied by tasty fresh cucumber salad and creamy mashed sweet potatoes.

Casamarina is worth the tariff because it's so welcomingly there. And beguiling in a sweet, teaky way. Inside, real wood tables and chairs; nifty, glazed, blue-speckled Venezuelan pottery; fancifully plated entrees. On a beach with a Technicolor reef view.

Add off-Broadway ambiance: you watch the waiter wrestle a lobster from the trap, flap him past his customer for weighing and finally—Ta Da!—present him at her table with a grand flourish. He even suggests she might want to hold this menacing, multi-spined creature.

All this drama takes place while you slurp an icy frozen drink or sip a demitasse-sized glass of Chilean wine—regrettably, at French wine prices.

Then, a fortuitous finale—a plate of pasta wafts by enveloped in Santa Claus-red tomato sauce. Perched atop is an ample seafood hillock, assorted tidbits dribbling down to the plate. Each fish chunk, octopus tubelet, shrimp curl and squid frill looks—and turns out to be—tender and shockingly fresh.

This Vermicelli Frutti del Mar is possibly sharable by all but the most profligate of eaters, but because I belong to that Decadence Is Me category and since sharing food has always been a problem for me, I got my very own.

Yes, we'll eventually tear ourselves away to explore Los Roques' other 287 islands, islets, sand bars and mere smudges of reef. But we need one more spaghetti fix—and Casamarina deserves another chance at fish. I'll try ordering it "jugoso," meaning juicy. Maybe even "muy jugoso."

Is there a Spanish word for sushi? ~

sels. (Mercifully, all Venezuelan fishing boats are painted white—regardless how dirty.)

Using Spanglish and hand signals, he settles at 40-cents a gallon. An hour later Luciano glides up flawlessly instead of chopping *Lulu* in half—my expectation whenever any large boat approaches.

We save a whopping \$720 over Bonaire prices. It'd be hard spending this fortune on beer or baubles in Los Roques but there'll be little problem in St Croix. (Gary is only minimally amused by my little joke.)

FOOD FIND

Now available for scouting sorties, we discover myriad Francisquis' charms: impossibly aqua water, lacy