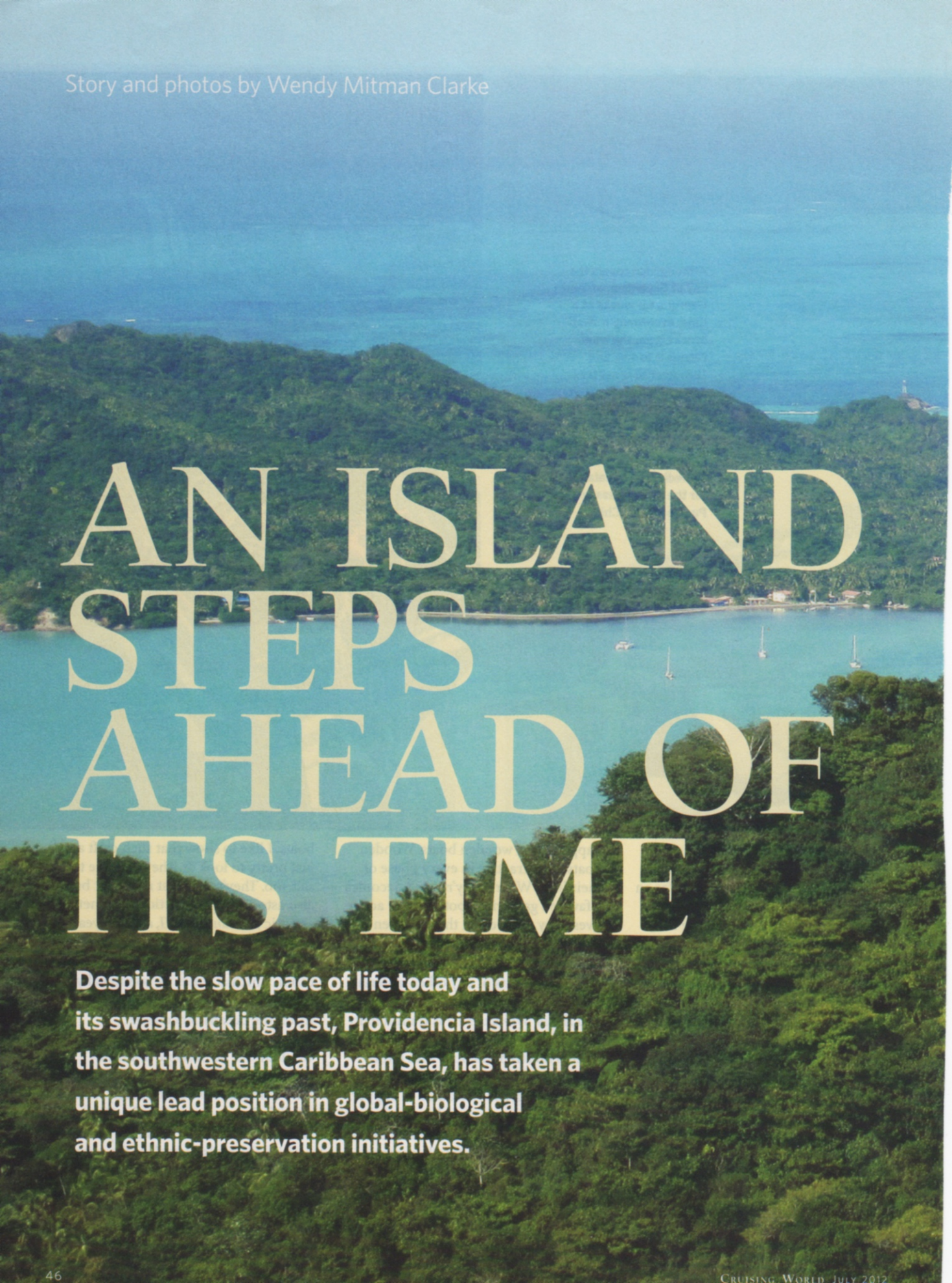
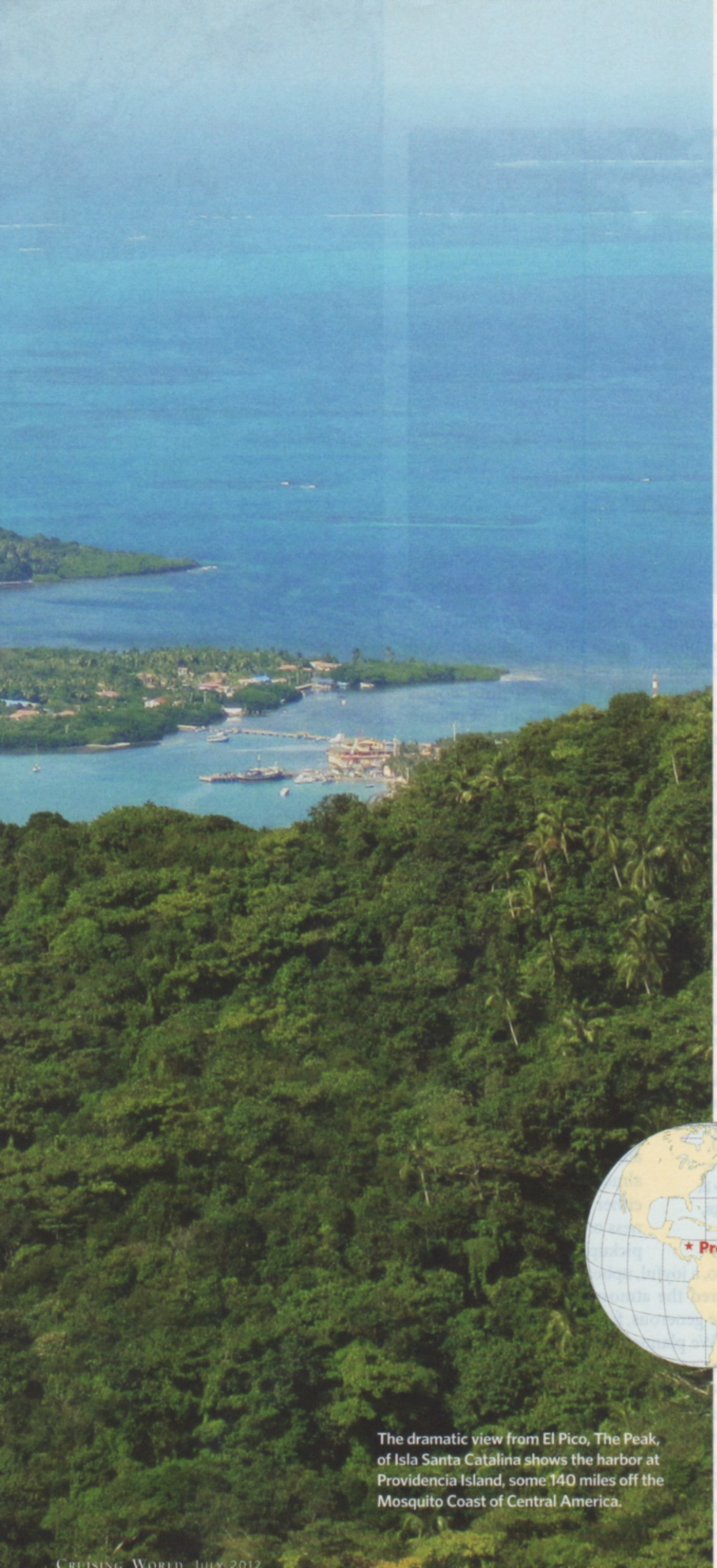
Story and photos by Wendy Mitman Clarke



AN ISLAND STEPS AHEAD OF ITS TIME

Despite the slow pace of life today and its swashbuckling past, Providencia Island, in the southwestern Caribbean Sea, has taken a unique lead position in global-biological and ethnic-preservation initiatives.



The dramatic view from El Pico, The Peak, of Isla Santa Catalina shows the harbor at Providencia Island, some 140 miles off the Mosquito Coast of Central America.

Lying halfway between Honduras and Panama, the island of Providencia is a world of its own.

We were sitting in Honduras' Islas de la Bahía, cooling our heels until we could make the jump to Panama, when we got to talking with a cruiser named Jim. He and the wife, he said, were northbound after four years in the southwest Caribbean. Outgoing and friendly, he gave us a couple of charts he wouldn't need anymore: San Andrés and Providencia, a pair of islands some 140 miles off the Nicaraguan coast that were territories of Colombia. Good stopovers, he said, if you needed a rest to or from Panama.

Later, I studied the Providencia chart. It was a U.S. Defense Mapping Agency chart, but this note caught my eye: "From British survey in 1835." Let's see. The Civil War hadn't yet happened. The War of 1812 was a fairly close memory, as were the Napoleonic Wars. Unlike so many modern charts, which are all business, this chart was pretty, as much artwork as guide. The cartographer had denoted topography not in hard lines but in soft shadings, the highest mountains darker than the flatlands. There was "High Pk," listed at 1,190 feet, "Split Hill," "Watering place," and "Spanish Saddle."

Reefs wreathed the island. To the north was Low Cay, and beneath it, written in script, "good anchorage" in six to eight fathoms of water. To the east was "Wreck of *Jackdaw* 1835;" I wondered whether it'd been the surveyor's ship, or one he knew. Perched on the northwest corner was another, much smaller island, Isla Santa Catalina. And in the cup made by the proximity of the two landmasses, an anchor symbol.

It was all rather romantic and intriguing, this chart with its old symbols and scripts. Providencia wasn't really on the itinerary; in fact, until we had started exploring Central America and the southwest Caribbean, I'd never heard of it. But when we came off soundings after a rollicking, 360-mile sail from Guanaja, Honduras, past Cabo Gracias a Dios and turned *Osprey*'s bow into that very harbor, the island's verdant, embracing hills rose like distant offspring of the mainland's mountains, hundreds of miles away. I thought this might be what it's like to fetch a Pacific island, a royal-green gem in the middle of a cobalt sea.

A couple of cruising boats were sharing the anchorage with a fishing boat or two. The heights of Split Hill—aptly named, with a gigantic cleavage down its middle—and, in the distance, El Pico (The Peak), loomed over all. At the government dock in the village of Santa Isabel, the island's only town, people swarmed around the freighter *Miss Isabel*. With Christmas only two weeks away, they hustled to offload freezers, fridges, propane, televisions, sacks of potatoes, outboard engines, pallets of soda, and crates of produce into small pickups that raced off the dock and up the street.

There was much to admire in the Central American countries from which we'd sailed, and much to be wary of. As soon as we set foot in Providencia, we knew we'd entered a new world.

The port agent seemed offended when we asked whether we should lock our dinghy to go and clear in.

"We haven't had a dinghy stolen here in years," he huffed. "This is a safe place."

Walking past the bank, we were astonished to see the front door wide open and people standing in a companionable line, chatting and laughing, not a lethal weapon in sight. In Guatemala and Honduras, by contrast, we'd typically waited uneasily before guards who, after unlocking the doors to let us in, clutched pistol-grip pump-action shotguns while they eyeballed us. The streets here were clean, and trash cans and recycling bins—a novelty we hadn't seen since the States—stood at the corners. Motorcycles and small pickups buzzed up and down the main road through town, and at one point we had to jump out of the way of three horses galloping past, a wrangler in hot pursuit on a scooter.

A little park at the junction of the town's two roads was decorated for the holidays, and though the benches and berms were made of concrete, they were all colorfully painted, complementing the bright hibiscus and oleander alongside. In the town square next to the dinghy dock, a mosaic compass rose pointed to the cardinal directions, a sailboat pushing along in turquoise tile at its center.

Public art was everywhere, from an undulating metal barracuda to a mosaic tile-and-glass sculpture of a lizard the size of a tractor-trailer. Music was coming from someplace, a reggae beat, and we'd find that there was almost always music playing, either from a home or business or one of the ubiquitous pickups. It was always good, too, a joyful, upbeat soundtrack that mirrored the atmosphere of the island and the generous, friendly people.

We planned to stay maybe two days. It was easy to let that stretch into 10.

Covering only about eight square miles, Providencia and Santa Catalina originated as an atoll some 80 million years ago and developed their current configuration after volcanic eruptions that happened about 50 million years later. Today, they're connected by a colorful wooden footbridge that's called Malecón de los Enamoradas, or Lovers Lane. Santa Catalina has no roads at all, only walking paths, while a single main road circumnavigates Providencia, connecting Santa Isabel with the neighborhoods of Bottom House, Iron Hill, Fresh Bay, and others. You can circle the island in a day by bicycle or rented scooter. The main road often closes during spring when the giant black land crabs migrate from the mountains down to the sea to spawn.

"It's spectacular!" Samuel, our cab driver one day, told me. "They come down and go to the sea. This whole place is filled. You cannot see the road. The crabs are over the road and in the bushes and on the houses. It's spectacular! Beautiful."

The islands' political background is as turbulent as their geographic past. Even

Kailani Clarke (above) takes to the trails on horseback. Public art, like this sculpture (facing page), is everywhere; that's *Osprey* in the anchorage.

though they lie nearly 500 miles northwest of Colombia, they became that country's domain after Spain in 1803 placed them under Cartagena's control. In 1818, Louis-Michel Aury, sailing for Argentina, captured the islands, but by 1822, they were under Colombian administration again.

Nicaragua has long laid claim to the islands, though, and that dispute continues even today. The people are descendants of white Protestants, black slaves, and mainland Colombians.

The language is a similar jambalaya, a mix of Spanish, English, and a Creole-sounding patois that is truly its own vernacular, in which words like "oil" sound like "isle." Musical and fluid, it was a pleasure for us to listen to and entertaining to try and understand.

We got our first taste of it when we inquired at the local tourist office about hiking up El Pico, which led us to our guide, Karen Livingston, and her cousin—the cab driver Samuel.

Karen had literally tracked us down, since we didn't have a local cellphone, while we walked on the path through the woods on Santa Catalina the day before.

We arranged to meet the next morning at the dinghy dock, and she was right on time. The taxi was a small pickup truck with bench seats in the bed for outdoor riding; this was a huge hit with the kids as we sped along the coastal road, wind whipping their faces, free as birds.

I rode up front with Samuel and quizzed him about his home, learning that school here goes to 11th grade. He said that if you want to go to a university or make a career outside of the traditional paths—namely fishing—you have to go to Colombia, and "then you come back someday." Fishing and tourism are the most reliable industries. "Those are the two that give the most income here," he said. "The biggest problem we have here is the work opportunity."

He was shocked when I told him how much trash we'd seen in other countries. "That's very bad," he said. "This island is very clean."

In fact, Providencia is nicknamed the Green Island as part of Colombia's effort to promote it as an eco-friendly tourist destination, and the regulations to maintain that status are strict. Down in Fresh Bay, Samuel pointed out the small, neat hotels that blended in with the foliage. "You see we don't have the tall high

buildings, just this style, cabanas," he said, explaining that by law, buildings over two stories tall are prohibited.

Foreigners may purchase land, but they can't stay on the island more than four months a year, he added. This precludes the influx of ex-pats looking for a warm piece of paradise in which to retire and the gradual changes they inevitably bring to the local culture, government, and atmosphere. I got the sense that for some locals, even mainland Colombians fall into the outsider category. When asked if she considered herself Colombian, Karen said, no, she's from Providencia.

We jumped out of the cab at Bottom House and from there walked through the woods and up. The trail led us past high meadows rich with thigh-high grass and grazing cattle, up rocky streambeds that now, in the dry season, were only quiet trickles and silent pools. There's always water on The Peak, Karen explained, and one of the island's projects is to better capture it in the dry season and deliver it to Bottom House so the people have a more secure drinking-water source. They do this by building small cement catchments and piping it down. We came across an area that looked like an outdoor gardening space, tables covered with pots, trowels, and potted grasses and plants. This was part of an ongoing project to help native foliage thrive by growing indigenous plants from seed and then planting them.

Both programs stem from The Peak's status as part of the Seaflower Biosphere Reserve, designated in 2000 by UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere program, which aims to preserve a region's biological and ethnic diversity. The entire archipelago of Providencia, Santa Catalina, and San Andrés, and most of the waters and reefs surrounding them, share this designation. An article in UNESCO's *International Journal of Island Affairs* describing the reserve states that while development policies in San Andrés have "resulted in massive environmental degradation," this isn't the case on Providencia, and the islands as a whole "could serve as models of small-island development and recuperation if their biologic and ethnic diversity could be protected, respected, and allowed to flourish in future development planning."

Karen clearly believed The Peak to be a special place, pointing out local flora and fauna and describing challenges that face the land. We wound upward through a forest of flowering trees, coconut palms, palmettos, immense ceiba and leafy mango trees, bromeliads, hummingbirds, and brilliant blue and green lizards dashing for cover under the leaves. We climbed until the trail grew flat and wide open, and it felt like we were walking in the bowl of an ancient volcano, which, in fact, we were. Then another short, final climb up a rocky spur and we were at the top, with a 360-degree view of the island and its surrounding reef, *Osprey* a speck of white against the blue pocket of the harbor to the northwest.

The next day, my son, Kaeo, and I visited Santa Catalina, walking along the strand that parallels the harbor front. Again, I was pleasantly surprised at how much attention was paid to the local ecology, as we passed colorful interpretive tiles denoting mangrove and bird species. The community here was made up of cottages, some one-story concrete-block buildings, and others wood-framed on stilts with louvered windows and wooden shutters. Outdoor kitchens stood in the back, hammocks hung along the front porches, and gardens bloomed with vegetables as well as bougainvillea, oleander, and hibiscus.

We met Luis, a boatbuilder, in his tin-roofed shed where he and another man

were working on a fiberglass *launcha*. In Spanish he explained how expensive it was to bring fiberglass to the island and how much he envied materials like carbon fiber that are available in the United States. Next to the *launcha*, a lovely wooden sailing skiff called *Miss Ruby* rested on the concrete floor. It was a traditional island fishing boat used for racing, which is wildly competitive on the island. It sounded much like the Bahamas' one-design boats, Bermuda's fitted dinghies, or the Chesapeake's log canoes: small boats with ridiculously huge sail area and lots of large men to hold them down when the wind comes on.

A few steps past Luis' shop and we had to stop again, this time to talk with a man seated on the edge of the path and methodically cleaning algae from the chicken wire on his fish traps. Handsome and well spoken (he preferred English to Spanish), he explained that he kept 13 traps about nine miles offshore and checked them three times a week. Stood on their ends, the traps were nearly four feet tall and about two feet in depth. Framed of local wood, they had varying geometric shapes, with multiple sides and angles. I asked him whether he'd always lived on Santa Catalina.

"Born in that blue house over there," he pointed. "And then I built my own house, right there." His well-kept home was concrete block on the first floor, wood frame on the second, and painted a bright yellow. Multicolored fish were cut into the fascia boards, and an RCA satellite dish jutted from the wall. The lawn was immaculate, with potted flowers lining the tiled walkway. "It's a good place to live," he said, his big fingers picking at the dried green goo fouling his traps. "Quiet. Not much violence, very little violence. People are good."

He asked if we were from one of the yachts in the harbor, and we explained that we'd just sailed down from Honduras. "You had plenty of wind then," he said, with a knowing look. Yes, we did, I said, plenty. "Plenty more coming on Monday, you know. Maybe 28, 30 knots of wind, 50 kilometers per hour." I said yes, we knew about it; a cold front was on its way. We'd decided to stay here and let it pass, then leave next week. He nodded. "You go out there Monday, you'd have too much wind. By Wednesday, Thursday, it will be nice, back to about 20."

"He could do that a lot faster with a power sprayer," Kaeo commented as we walked on. I said I didn't think that was the point. Sitting there along the walk, next to his dock and his house, he could clean his traps quietly and steadily, see everyone who comes by, and talk to them and say hello.

On our walk, we also saw men playing checkers with the traditional slamming done by anyone in the islands from the Bahamas on down. We watched a man push a wheezing Briggs & Stratton lawnmower around an emerald-green patch of lawn, while 20 feet away, fiddler crabs the size of tennis balls skittered among the mangrove roots bordering the walkway. The walk ended at Milta Point, where a sign in English read: "Area where pirates were hung and Protestants burned. Habitat of mangroves and seagulls." And another sign, in Spanish: "Respect the Ecosystem."

We walked back across to Providencia and met my husband, Johnny, and my daughter, Kailani, for lunch. We had a delicious, enormous meal of soup, whole fried fish, fried chicken, rice, and salad. With three Presidentes and two sodas, the tab for the four of us was the equivalent of a whopping $28. Try finding that in the eastern Caribbean.

The word among cruisers was that if you needed to get fuel, parts, or do major provisioning, San Andrés was by far the better place, with its myriad stores and shopping malls. Doubtless this was so, but I enjoyed poking about the small stores of Providencia, where I found the prices reasonable and which were, after *Miss Isabel* came in again, well supplied with everything from canned goods to fresh produce. My favorite purchase was Seaflower honey made by bees at a farm at the base of The Peak that Karen had showed us.

As beautiful as the island itself was, the laid-back, trusting, and friendly nature of the people is what made this place so special. When I asked about WiFi, the fellow at the tourism office said I could pick up the network everybody else used, but I'd need the password; he didn't know it, but if I looked for the guy with the blue shirt on the motorbike, he could help. As it turned out, Blue Shirt couldn't (he was a PC man and didn't want to mess with my Mac), but the local computer store's owner offered to let me take her Comcel wireless card out to the boat for the night so I could get online, as long as I brought it back the next morning by 8:30, when she opened for business.

I tried to think of anyplace we'd been that had the same combination of natural beauty, environmental awareness, security, affordability, openness, and friendliness. I came up empty. And I sent up a silent thanks to Jim, his hard-earned advice and his well-traveled chart, and to the wind that had blown us this way.

Santa Isabel, Providencia's only town (facing page) is like the rest of the island: well kept. A local fisherman (below) cleans algae from one of his 13 traps.

By July 2012 the crew on board *Osprey* expected to be well on their way toward Nova Scotia and the Canadian Maritimes.