



Living With Pirates

by Cynthia Cudmore-Mulder

Modern day pirates can be found all over the world, but on Taboga they easily drop their guard for an ice-cold beer.

A few years ago I moved to the Caribbean where I fell in love with one island and its people. There I began the challenge to open my own business. Early on in my adventure good friends explained that many of the first Europeans in the area were pirates, and still nowadays locals are reputed to continue the pirate tradition but updated for this century. The new pirates portray themselves as business people. My friends advised me to step very cautiously. To make a very long story short, fortunately I heeded their advice and was rewarded in the end with success.

Years later I find myself in Panama, and soon thereafter on the tropical island of Taboga; islands and their people attract me like sirens of the sea. Recalling my early lessons in tropical life I was on alert for any modern-day pirates. I have met many sly types in Panama City, but fortunately those would-be pirates on the island of Taboga have not yet graduated to the highest levels of pirate-craft.

Taboga is not tainted by mass tourism and the influx of foreigners flashing dollar bills, although it may be inevitable on Taboga as the interest in investment there increases. They do have an ever-present 'charge the foreigner more' attitude, but that is found easily all over Panama and in most Latin countries. One must come well-armed with the will for negotiation or to learn; it is part of life in Panama. While it can be an irritation and tiring for those of us used to a set price, it is entertainment and a necessity for Panamanians.

Tabogans are true tropical islanders, so they are not highly aggressive with their pricing schemes. Whenever we have bought cold beer it disappears very quickly and everyone easily kicks back to drink it—negotiation can wait, cold beer cannot. Kids kick soccer balls on the beach after school, men fish when their families are hungry, and nowadays people who were unemployed are laborers. Then many take their hard earned cash and buy more cold beer. One day a local said to me that the water has been so rough the fishermen aren't going out—but the Chinese beer supplier (who ships his beer by fishing boat) makes his trip without fail. I wonder how that can be? People will risk their life to deliver beer on Taboga.

As much as the laziness brought on by beer drinking is irritating when someone works for me, it is preferably to the constant pirating one lives with in the city. So when I asked a trusted local friend for advice, she said, "keep your eyes wide open!" I have found it to be wise advice. Even though I was commercially trained for years as a wholesale buyer, my skills have been honed here like they never were before. The world changes, but human nature doesn't.

So getting back to Taboga and its pirates, what an interesting history it enjoys! Numerous pirates of days gone by frequented Taboga: Henry Morgan and Francis Drake used Taboga as a base to attack Panama City and ships passing through the strait. In 1671, after attacking Panama City, Morgan sent his pirates on to the island in search of more gold, silver, and pearls. Pirate John Hawkins, Francis Drake's cousin, was said to have used Taboga as a base to trade his booty.

A gory tale, on August 22, 1686, Captain Townley and his English and French buccaneer crew, anchored in Taboga Bay, were attacked by Spanish ships. Townley blew up one ship and his men were able to take the other two vessels and another that had arrived as reinforcement. Although there was only one casualty for the pirates, Townley was injured. They sent a message to the president of Panama demanding supplies and release of five prisoners; if they didn't comply Townley said heads would roll. The president ignored the request and sent only medicine. Townley was infuriated and promptly sent a canoe with the heads of 22 Spanish prisoners he had held. Immediately the governor released the five prisoners, sent the requested supplies and paid a ransom. Townley had won another battle but died soon after from his battle wounds on Sept. 9.



The island was such a popular spot to sack that the Spaniards built a fort with three cannons to defend Taboga on tiny Isla Morro, connected to the main island by a sandbar at low tide.

Pirates continued to haunt the little island for many years; as late as 1819, pirate Captain John Illingworth and his Chilean crew landed on Taboga and sacked and burnt the village. Three of Illingworth's crew were killed and their graves were marked with wooden crosses. Years passed and the crosses were replaced with iron embedded into a concrete base and the area took the name 'Las Tres Cruces.'

Island legends are steeped with pirate tales. In fact, the popular Tabogan festival of the 'Virgin of El Carmen' is based on the story that when pirates attempted to attack Taboga and arrived at the shore, they were met by an enormous army led by a beautiful woman. The pirates were spooked and quickly retreated to their ship. Tabogans believe that the Virgin of El Carmen saved them and every year on July 16, a colorful festival is held in her honor when she blesses the fleet in Taboga Bay.

The rich history of Taboga has left its trail and in recent years pirate treasure was unearthed in 1998 when the new health clinic was being built in the town; workers unearthed 1000 Spanish silver pieces.

So if you are searching for buried treasure from pirates of old, or to bargain from modern day pirates, 'keep your eyes wide open' and with time and patience you will be rewarded. Or just kick back, sit on Playa Honda, enjoy an ice cold beer and let your imagination go wild . . . do spirits still roam the island?



Taboga is a quaint, old fashioned fishing island 40 minutes from Panama City. Although it is not utopia, it is a lovely place to stop, smell the flowers it is so famous for, to play soccer on the beach, to fish on the pier, and to swim when the tide is in. Life is relaxed and on island time.

BEACHES

From time to time people ask me about Taboga beach cleanliness and water safety; I know a lot about beaches and tides - the beaches are cleaned up on a regular basis but sometimes there is debris which washes in from the ocean. The beach by Hotel Taboga - the nearest beach to the hotel entrance - is quite safe for kids but always keep a watchful eye when the tide is rising over the sandbar between Isla Morro and Taboga; the incoming tide can cause a strong and dangerous current between the two islands. The beach Playa Honda has little to no current, sandy when the tide is up and great for beachcombing when the tide is low. As many of the Pacific Beaches up the mainland Panama coast can have strong riptides Taboga is good for those of us who like swimming in the ocean.

SAFETY

On Taboga Island, kids can play on the streets, and wander around without great fear. Their biggest problem will be how to survive without a game center, and how to treat a toe cut at the beach. This is special. I have never heard of any robberies except some petty theft from weekend houses; although I think if you leave your wallet on the beach, it may be gone.

FERRIES

Calypso Queen (507-314-1730; 507-226-1991), leaves from their pier at Amador Causeway near Mi Ranchito Restaurant; there is a new ferry schedule and it is much improved with departures and return trips several times daily. It is best to call to check the schedule and get there 30 minutes early as sometimes there can be quite a line for the tickets. If you don't want to take the ferry, you can always arrange for a fisherman to take you - count on a minimum of \$60 one way for the boat.

Compiled by Cynthia Cudmore Mulder

Contact Cerrito Tropical!

www.cerritotropicalpanama.com, info@cerritotropicalpanama.com, 507-6489-0074, 507-390-8999