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ISLAND:** Tahiti
of the Caribbean

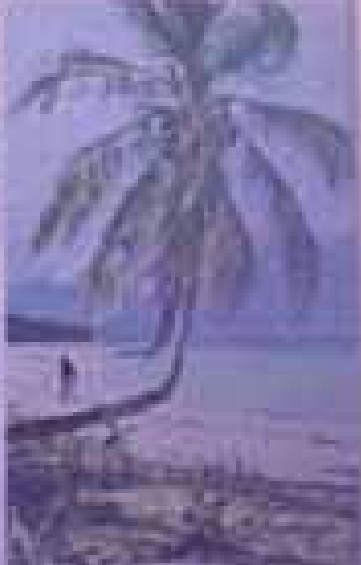
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THE CORN ISLANDS: SOUTH PACIFIC ISLES IN THE CARIBBEAN

These emerald islands off the coast of Nicaragua have to be experienced to be believed. It's like finding a Tahiti on your doorstep — and even Howard Hughes may be making them his future hideaway

ARTICLE BY JAMES WARD

IN DECEMBER, 1968, I wrote to Howard Hughes suggesting that he might be interested in Corn Island, Nicaragua, and Lanica Airlines, the national airline. In February, 1972, Howard Hughes left his sanctuary in the Bahamas and flew to Managua, Nicaragua, installing himself on the top floor of the Managua Intercontinental Hotel. Managua is the gateway to the Corn Islands, and it was rumored that Mr. Hughes was interested in investments there.

I do not know, of course, if my letter sparked Howard Hughes' interest in Nicaragua and the Corn Islands, or even if he personally read my letter. But I did receive an answer from an officer of Hughes' Enterprises, indicating interest.

If Mr. Hughes never read my letter, his sudden interest in Nicaragua and Corn Island would seem to be a gigantic coincidence. In any event, if you are seeking privacy and really want to get away from the cares of the modern world for awhile, Corn Island is the place to go.

There are actually two islands: Great Corn and Little Corn, eight miles apart. They lie just forty miles off the Central American coast, near Bluefields, Nicaragua, and about a thousand miles south, southwest of Miami.

I first discovered these islands quite by accident about seven years ago. I was flying in a light plane with a missionary from Puerto Cabezas to Bluefields, when a sudden tropical thunderstorm forced us off course and out to sea. Suddenly we found ourselves over this beautiful island, and decided to land for lunch. I immediately fell in love with the place and have since returned many times. I have lived on the island for months at a time and have even bought property there for when I retire.

It is almost impossible to describe the raw, physical beauty of the Corn Islands. They more closely resemble the tropical islands of the South Pacific than other islands in the Caribbean. Located in an area of high rainfall (more than a hundred inches a year), the vegetation is lush, green and tropical. All tropical plants and fruits thrive in the very fertile volcanic soil. Bananas, plantains, limes, avocados, koko, cassava and breadfruit grow wild. The big island is covered with coconut palms, growing down to the water's edge at crazy angles, as if blown by the wind. Little coves with beaches of white sand and patches of black volcanic rocks strewn about, are gently lapped by the crystal-clear sea, made calm by the protection of a coral reef on one side of the island.

Although Great Corn Island is inhabited by about 2,000 friendly, English-speaking people, there are no paved roads, no traffic, no television, no taxis and no telephones on the island. Except for the daily landing of the Lanica airplane and the occasional passing of a jeep or motorcycle, you might imagine you were living in the last century. The natives go about their daily tasks of harvesting coconuts, making copra and fishing lobster much as they have for hundreds of years. Except for a friendly "Good evening," in the middle of the afternoon, they don't pay too much attention to visitors. There are no outstretched palms and there is no commercialism of any sort.

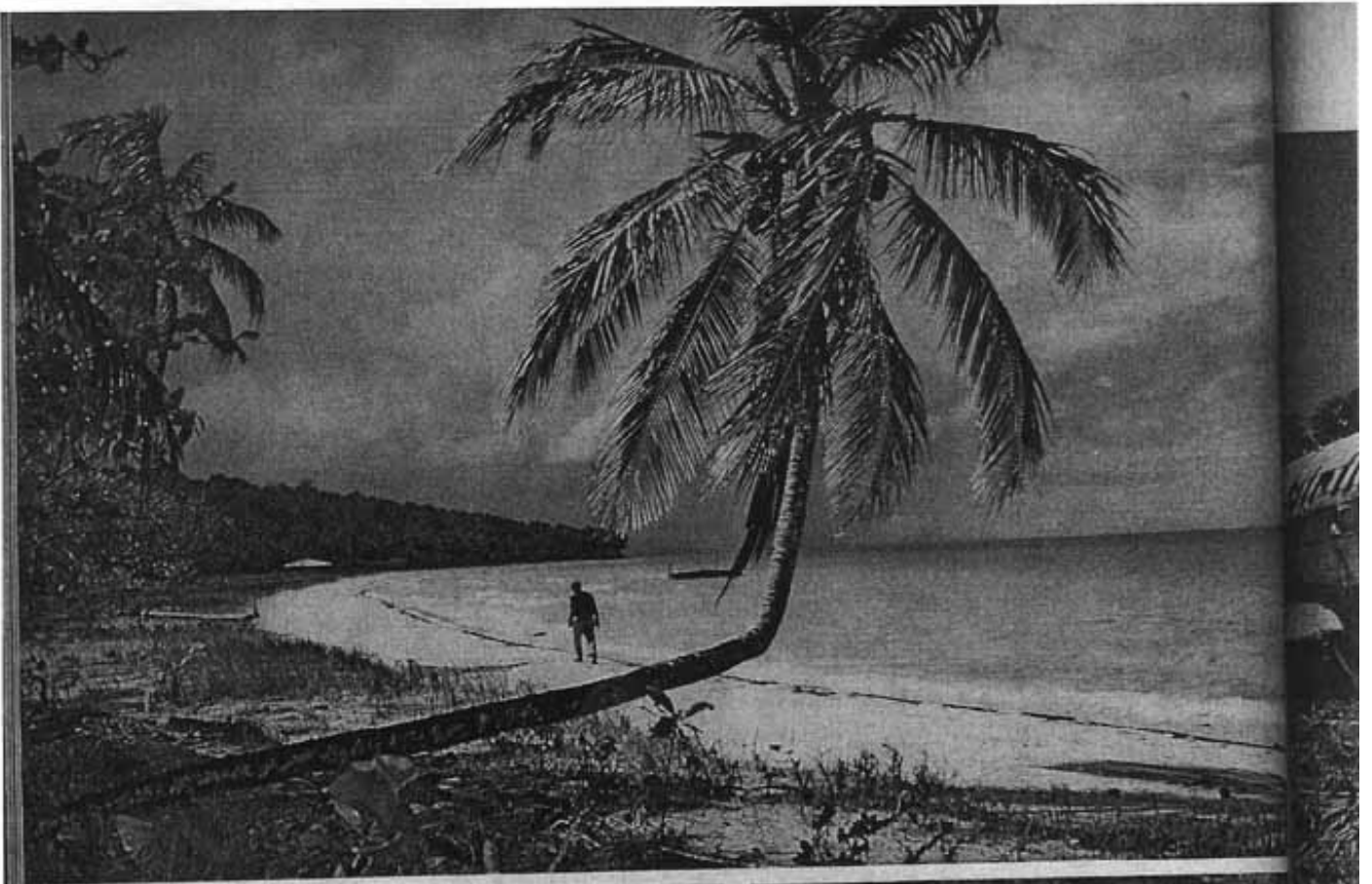
This has its drawbacks. The tourist who is accustomed to obtaining a taxi or anything else he wants with a snap of his fingers and a fistful of dollar bills will have difficulty adjusting to Corn Island. The visitor to Corn Island must be prepared to be self-reliant. If you don't enjoy hiking, you should bring your own trail bike, as transportation can be a problem. If you must have your martini or your bourbon before dinner, you should bring your own ingredients as only the local rum and beer is available everywhere. If you plan to spend a day or two on Little Corn Island, eight miles away, you should bring camping gear and a supply of food to supplement fish and coconut water.

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ONE OF A SERIES ON Islands in the Sun

Photos by the author



Top: Islander sets out to harvest coconuts on beachfront property purchased by the author in Southwest Bay, Great Corn Island.



Above, left: Lobster fishing is a principal occupation on islands. Above: The islanders build and repair their own fishing boats.

Below, left: Itinerant natives use this abandoned fuselage for shelter. Below: Freighter wreck marks excellent spearfishing site off Great Corn Island.



There is one ten-room hotel on Great Corn Island, owned by an American, and three native hotels or rooming houses. The food varies from quite good to not-so-good, and there is no hot water in any of them, but the cold water is tepid and in this climate you don't really need hot water.

Despite these drawbacks, the rewards in exploring these islands are great.

There are no towns as such on Corn Island, but rather strung out settlements or concentrations of population, the main ones being Brig Bay, North End and South End. The road that goes about three quarters of the way around the island is unpaved and by stretches, rocky, sandy and muddy. It is fraught with the perils of collision with pigs, chickens, dogs and barefoot children. A walk or a motorcycle ride around the island is a good way to spend the first day. The road goes from the Playacoco Hotel on Brig Bay, to North End where most of the natives live. There you will find the Morgan Hotel, run by Captain Roberto Morgan, a retired seaman. It is a good place to stop for a beer and listen to Captain Morgan spin a few yarns of island lore.

The Morgans are one of the larger and more prominent families on the islands, and they are often asked if they



Giant sea turtles abound in these waters, providing islanders with a primary source of meat.

are descendants of the original infamous pirate, Captain Henry Morgan. They do not deny it, but actually no one knows.

Past North End, the road deteriorates with each bend in the road as the scenery becomes more spectacular. The coconut palms become thicker and grow at wilder angles over the sea. The beaches become rockier and the sea bluer. You can see the breakers on the outer reef, the wreck of an old freighter, and Little Corn Island beyond.

Soon the road forks and if you stay on the left you can take a side trip down a road that is cut like a tunnel through a profusion of coconut palms to a place called Rocky Point, on the extreme northeast corner of the island. There the sea is rough and breaks with full force on the rocks. It is one of the most beautiful spots on the island, especially at night with a full moon silhouetting the crazy-quilt of coconut palms and lighting up the wild sea. The islanders have built a native dance hall on the spot called the Rocky Bar, which is open only on Saturday nights and holidays.

Returning from Rocky Point late one afternoon, I came upon an old man of the island walking down the road. He said his name was Arthur Downs and he was eighty-three years old. At my invitation, he sat down on the stump of a coconut tree and started to reminisce about his grandfather's time, and spin yarns about slaves and pirates and buried treasure. All the while, I was taking his picture, but I do not think he realized what I was doing or what the camera was for.

After you have familiarized yourself with the island as a whole, you will probably want to spend a few days skin diving and exploring the wrecks around the island. The water is warm and crystal clear and the spearfishing is excellent.

There is no doubt that Corn Island was a hiding place for pirates, but to my knowledge no treasure or buried gold has been found yet—probably because nobody has seriously looked.

There is a wreck, about a quarter mile off Walla Point, the southern point of Brig Bay, where there are numerous cannons, chests and two big anchors, in about two fathoms of water. Some years ago, John Cussen, the owner of the Playacoco Hotel on Corn Island, working with Johnson, Airbouy diving gear, raised two of the cannons and two of the chests. The chests were found to contain horseshoe nails of a very ancient manufacture.

Also, off Little Corn Island, there is rumored to be a mysterious World War II German airplane under the sea. Native divers raised the two propellers and they can be seen on the little island today.

A trip to the little island makes an interesting day's outing. It takes about an hour to get there in a little dory with an outboard motor. About 200 people live on Little Corn and it is much less developed than Great Corn. There is no road at all and there are no vehicles. If you want to see the place, you had better be in shape to do some hiking.

It is perhaps strange that nobody now living on the Corn Islands knows the history of the islands. Who first settled these islands? And what country governed them in the centuries past? There are indications that they have been inhabited for perhaps 400 years by pirates and their slaves.

It seems that the earliest inhabitants of Corn Island were Mesquito and Cukra Indians from the mainland, who established, periodically, temporary settlements on the island. From time to time they abandoned them, perhaps because of disease, or hunger due to crop failures. In between these visits, the islands were uninhabited except for the occasional visit of a pirate ship. It is known that around 1670, a group of Cukra Indians, after a fight with English pirates in Bluefields, escaped to Corn Island and established a settlement. It is also known that these Indians occasionally practiced cannibalism. One report tells of an unfortunate pirate that was captured, cooked and eaten by them. Some years later it appears that these Indians abandoned the island, and it was probably shortly thereafter that the first white man arrived on the island.

In 1776 or 1779, Great Corn Island was visited for a few days by Lord Horatio Nelson when he was a young officer.

During most of the nineteenth century, the islands were under control of the British. For this reason the islanders speak English, even though Nicaragua is a Spanish-speaking country.

Life on Corn Island is so relaxing, the pace so slow, that the days become weeks and the weeks become months before you realize it.

It is easy to see how an infusion of Howard Hughes' money could change a place like this overnight. A jet runway could be built, and resort hotels and casinos would spring up all around the island. Or perhaps, he could just buy all of Little Corn Island from the few private landholders and the government, and establish a sort of James Bond-type headquarters there; an island fortress secure from the outside world.

However that may be, or whatever the future holds for the Corn Islands, I fervently hope that over-commercialization will not ruin the place, because there are very few places like this left in the world. □

OVERNITE SNO-TRIPS

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Only the most fickle of fishermen get their fill of fishing. No wonder then that winter fishing is often mixed with winter camping. Tip-up, spear, and polefishing through the ice are centuries-old. The snowmobile has only extended the fisherman's range, and winter camping extends his time on the ice. But in some states, stream fishing with fly or spin tackle is enjoying new popularity thanks to the snowmobile. Winter trout fishing is legal in some states. The lowly whitefish, often considered a trash species by summer anglers, is both challenging and tasty in icy water.

Snow camping has been called a season-extender by some snowmobilers. This is true for both ends of winter. Fall storms often leave enough cover for snowmobiling, but not enough depth for unrestricted cross-country touring. Established trails are often quickly packed to the dirt, uncomfortable to both man and machine. Rather than punish the spine and spindles with a full day on the trail, try a short trip to a favorite camping area. This is also a good time to get the feel of winter camping before midwinter temperatures make mistakes dangerous.

Most outdoor enthusiasts know that with the increasing use of forests and mountains, strict discipline is required of those who use and love the outdoors. Recreational use pressures are so heavy that burying or sinking garbage is sometimes legally, and always morally, prohibited. Pack it out, all of it. That white eggshell doesn't show on the snow but it sure will on the summer grass! The speed and mobility of the snowmobile carry new responsibilities for the users. Check with local game officials for information on sensitive calving or nesting areas to be avoided. In climates where snow compaction damages ground cover or threatens burrowing animals, use established trails. In deep snow climates, vary routes and spread out to avoid excessive compaction. Don't power up bare slopes even if the machine will make it. The spinning track can strip ground cover and start erosion patterns that are irreversible. Give winter-weakened wildlife plenty of space. A panic run burns the calories that might make the difference in survival. Good outdoor citizenship by all snowmobilers is the best protection for the future of the areas we love and the best defense against the critics of the sport.

And now you are on your own. No crowds, concessionaires and civilization in general to bother you. With modern equipment, proper planning, and common sense, winter camping can offer you both safety and solitude. □