



Little Corn Island ¡Viva Nicaragua! *Diving the Old Caribbean* -2004

WHEN I NOTICED THE STRANGE brown shapes rolling a few feet offshore, I was sitting outside the Dive Little Corn shop talking with its managers, Waz Meredith and Elle Schneider, about the scuba diving around this 1.2-square-mile jewel 50 miles due east of the mainland. Little Corn is the Caribbean of a half-century ago. Everything is simple, distilled so you can look around and know you're in paradise. Meredith, a big, friendly Aussie, described how he and Schneider, his soft-spoken Israeli wife, had scouted the reefs for the best dive spots when they arrived two years earlier—she drove the boat and towed him on a glorified piece of wood. "It works just like an airplane; lean on the edge to angle down into the water and—zoom!—down you go."

With its incredible underwater wildlife, remote Little Corn Island (a 30-minute panga ride from Big Corn Island) has emerged as a diving hot spot. Undamaged reefs harbor giant groupers, eagle rays, nurse sharks, and sea turtles. The diving is relatively shallow, around 30 feet, so divers have a lot of bottom time to explore the reef passageways and get their minds blown by the sheer volume of fish.

Personally, the only fish I wanted to see were the ones hooked to the business end of my fly rod. Another Aussie had described huge schools of bonefish that come from the north and end up in a little lagoon below some cliffs on the windward side of the island. He said they circled around in such a mass that when you dropped your fly in, you weren't sure whether you'd hooked one or the crush of fish was simply taking it away. I was contemplating this when I saw the boil.

"Oh, that," said Waz. "They're tarpon. Right in front of the hotel, just like clockwork."

Excusing myself none too gracefully, I ran to grab my rod. I got a few clumsy casts in before they disappeared. Still, it was a hell of an exciting 15 minutes.

I retired to the balcony of a hotel nearby to see whether the tarpon would return. An island man—whose ancestry, like that of a good number of the 900 or so other Little Corn Islanders, is English and African by way of the Caymans—approached and asked if he and his uncle could help me net some tarpon the next day.

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"But I warn you," he said, "tarpon are no good to eat."

"I wasn't planning on eating one. I was going to catch and release one."

"Then why you want to bother that fish for?" he asked, genuinely puzzled as to why anyone would waste their energy and the fish's time in such a pointless pursuit.

It was a good question. An indication I was in paradise—or damn close to it.

SEASON: January to May, September and October

OUTFITTER: Dive Little Corn (www.divelittlecorn.com) offers two dives for \$78, a four-day PADI course for \$315, and a seven-day Dive Master course for \$675, all with gear. Bring your own rod and tackle, plus flies for tarpon, bonefish, and yellowtail.

WHERE TO STAY: The 11 guest rooms at Casa Iguana (www.casaiгуana.net) are situated in breezy pastel casitas and priced from \$25 per night, for an efficiency with shared bath, to \$85, for the secluded Grand Casita. Casa Iguana has its own beach and an outdoor rainwater shower.

WHERE TO EAT: It takes 30 minutes to hike from town to Farm Peace and Love (farmpeacelove@hotmail.com), Paola Carminiani's home and restaurant (take a guide), but her three-course meal of fresh seafood pastas, thin-crust pizza, and dessert (\$10) is worth the schlepp. A reservation is required.