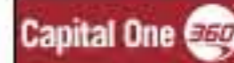


# Travel

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## Nicaragua's Corn Islands cast a peculiar spell of their own



View Photo Gallery — Islands of the Caribbean: From the Corn islands to St. Kitts and Nevis, the Caribbean offers multiple tropical paradises to choose from.

By Colleen Kinder, Published: October 17 E-mail the writer

The lobster trawlers bob like toys in a bathtub, tipping to and fro with every swell of gray sea. I watch from a crowd of Nicaraguans about to board the day's last panga, or public ferryboat, wondering whether the storm is as bad as it looks.

The word I keep overhearing is "angry." In Spanish, English and a Creole that sounds like English flipped inside out and set to a beat, everyone's calling the sea — our only highway — angry.

Such is the medley of languages 40-some miles off the coast of Nicaragua, on the Corn Islands. For centuries, these two landmasses — faint crumbs on the Caribbean map — had little to do with mainland Nicaragua. They were pirate territory, coconut-tree-lined refuges for the likes of the ruthless privateer Captain Morgan.

Details: [Corn Islands](#)

It wasn't until 1894 that Nicaragua claimed these fringe islands, but with no roadways linking the capital to the marshy eastern coastline, the Corns remained a world apart. To this day, islanders still bear surnames such as Quinn and Campbell, play more reggae than salsa, and every August, around the 27th, the day the slaves were emancipated, they crown another local beauty island queen at a festival featuring crab soup.

There's a Big Corn and a Little Corn, and the traveler's first quandary is to pick her Corn. I say quandary, because these islands are different in both style and scale ("big" means 6,000 people; "little" fewer than 1,000) and what separates them is about 10 miles of often turbulent sea. My plan was to depart for Little Corn as soon as my puddle jumper landed on the bigger island. The reason was simple: In every story I'd read about Little Corn, the writer sounded a little shocked by how totally the place calmed him. Clearly, Little Corn cast a particular spell.

But watching palm trees bend back in the rainy wind, I wonder: Do I really need to sleep in Eden tonight? Do I even believe in one? A place so calm it could chill even me out? I'm good at motion; I get off on reaching the map's outer edge. Hunkering down under a pretty tree once I get there, however, is a lot, lot harder.

"Hurry!" Our captain cuts off my doubts and sends us all running with fire-drill panic toward our thrashing panga boat. I'm seasick before it leaves the dock.

My seat puts me between a jumpy man and the open sea. Trying not to look at the great girth and rolling height of each gray wave, I clutch the flapping plastic tarp that is our boat's umbrella, very ready to hear "land-ho."

At last, the captain takes aim at a skinny band of beach, and we're told to leap off the back of the panga, toward the kelp-strewn sand. Someone points out the sunset, but heads are down, nausea pervasive. I take a quick look: The sun is a gold blotch, bleeding pink into the wooly wreath of clouds. It could hardly look more distant, well on its way to the west of Nicaragua.

### To the lighthouse

There are no cars on Little Corn. No buzz of motorcycles, no throttle or honk of any sort disturbs the air. You hear just two things as you wind around the cement footpath that is this island's only



Gene Thorp/The Washington Post



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Waves awoke me early, in a cerulean blue shack perched above the southern shore of Little Corn. Such is lodging at Casa Iguana, which borrows well from the palette of Corn Island homes — creamy purple, cool turquoise, the deep yellow of ripened mango. It's tucked back in a carefully manicured jungle, where hibiscus vines dome over damp dirt pathways. My shack-for-one, rustic and yet so ready for me (flashlight, mosquito net, three novels in a pile), invited the delusion that I could just stay here and live, overlooking an empty beach.

So did the mood at the communal dinner. A ringleted blonde on the staff handed me a basil mojito, then plantain chips (on the house!). The catch of the day was cooking somewhere, as guests pattered in, barefoot. A Californian named Blake struggled to tell me when he'd arrived — "Tuesday?" How soon I could feel the complete dissolve of home's priorities. Was it ludicrous to ask about a wireless signal here, where fireflies beaded the darkness and pirates once strung up hammocks?



Gene Thorp/The Washington Post

I did, only to wish that I hadn't. The last thing one should gaze into from Little Corn Island is a full inbox. I shut the hotel laptop and drifted back toward the dinner table, where everyone was talking scuba. Corn Island travelers chat about diving conditions the way bankers discuss stocks — everything here hinges on the clarity of the sea. A non-diver, I couldn't get into it, so I wandered off into the inky dark toward my abode, intent on exploring Little Corn first thing in the morning.

It's early — profanely early — when I step outside. With neither a watch nor a phone, I read the only available time clues: bare feet dangling from hammocks, and a few toes peeking out from shored boats. It's the crack of dawn on Little Corn Island.

Harris is the first alert person I meet. An older man with the muscles of a sailor, Harris is scraping the scales off a yellowtail snapper, as the waves curl toward the sand just behind him. A native of the island, Harris assures me that I've come to the better Corn. Why? "Children can run around without the scare of cars."

The foot traffic is gentle as I step back onto the path, and without meaning or trying, I merge with Ronald and Richard.

Both 21, both wearing baggy jeans to their shins, and both members of an Afro-Caribbean group called Garifuna, Ronald and Richard could pass for twins. Their native language, a mix of Arawak, Carib, English, French and Spanish, speaks to how many cultures fused along the Atlantic coast of Central America. It's dizzying to keep up with these polylingual young men. Ronald and Richard salute passersby in Creole ("Yow bigs!"), echo back a few holas, and flip between singing American rap, Latino pop and Bob Marley like a radio on scan.

There's something familiar about my dynamic with these two, and I put my finger on it only after we've wedged through barbed wire fences, crossed a cattle pasture, and lobbed bruised mangoes up at a tree until it gave us the fresh ones, and we're standing below a lighthouse that Ronald and Richard gently dare me to climb. Childhood: It all reminds me an awful lot of life at age 11. Maybe that's the sort of paradise I'm in the mood for, more than the Eden of escape, the one that loops you back to a simpler, playful time.



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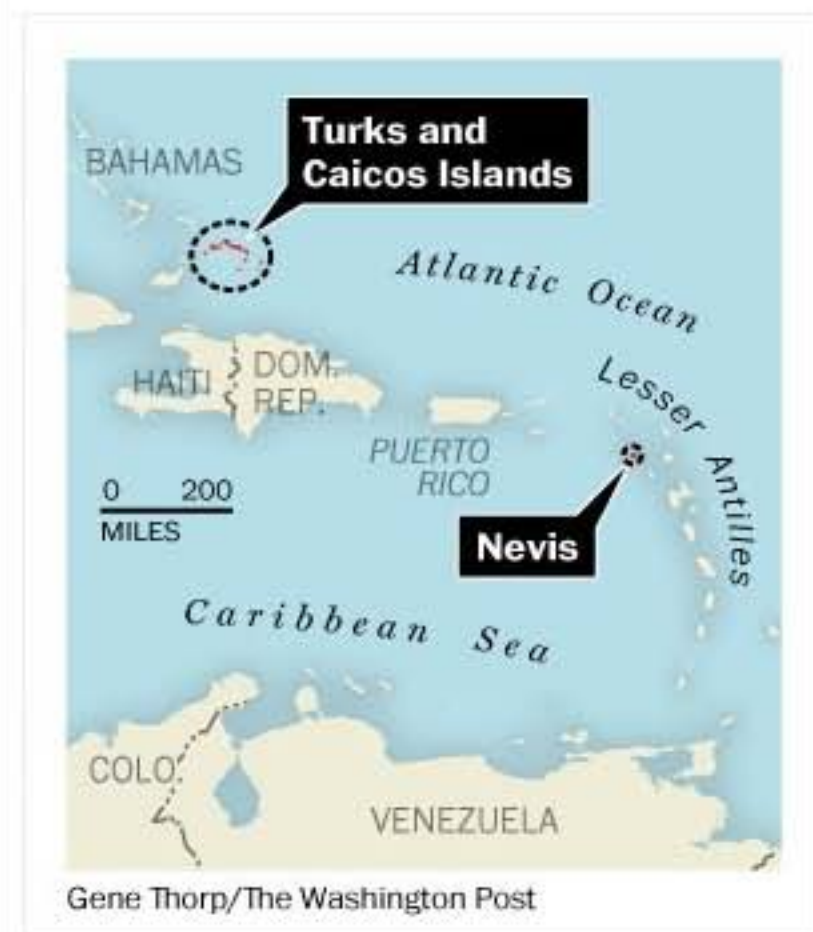
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The Little Corn lighthouse is no innocent dare, though. You climb it the way you would a ladder — straight up. And if you happen to have just peeled a sticky mango, it feels more like three grip-resistant ladders, back to back.

"Take your time, take your time," coos Ronald, ahead of me. Moving slowly is an expected theme on any Caribbean island, but I have to wonder, the sixth time Ronald repeats his mantra, whether slowness is more like a virtue on the Corns.



I'm doing okay until the brightness strikes. A wash of light means that we've cleared the tree line. We are higher than the tallest coconut trees on Little Corn Island.

*Take your time, take your time.*

My breathing gets loud, my pauses long. At last, my sticky hand finds the platform. It's round and towering, like a crow's nest.

Inhaling, I taste salt — the ocean is that close. Land hogs so little of this panorama, the island's outline hugging us tightly. Little Corn is a single comma on an otherwise blue sheet.

Many other things keep this Corn feeling little, and the lighthouse is a prime place to take stock: no hotel pools, no tennis courts, nothing taller than two stories. A boutique hotel called Yemaya is under construction, I'm told, but the plans sound small-scale, unlikely to upset the island's treetop-to-rooftop ratio.

My gaze drifts offshore, to the marbled waters that distinguish Corn Island beaches in photographs. It's a curious patchwork of navy and aqua, like two different oceans, about to mix hues. But the contrast only intensifies as the sun does; by midday it's a stunning patchwork, some mirage of the sea, or in my case, a summons to slip underwater.

### Getting it right

*Walk down the beach; look for a boat; find the guy who takes out snorkelers; bring \$20.*

The snorkeling guy isn't around, but I do find men drinking 11 a.m. beer in the shade. One of them is Harris, from the other side of the island, which felt like a great coincidence, until I remembered that the "other side of the island" was what we'd call, anywhere else, "next door." Little Corn is little more than one square mile.

I beam at my old friend (Harris!) and he responds in kind, offering to take me snorkeling. What makes hospitality in the Corns so disarming is how uncalled for, in context, it feels. In a place this idyllic, no one has to be nice. And Harris certainly doesn't need (nor will he accept) my \$20 bill. He owns both a hotel and the lobster trawler on the horizon. Is it possible? Could Harris just care that I snorkel?

The men in the shade set down their beers, rise to their feet, and push Harris and me off the beach in a motorboat called the Sea Prince.

The water glints with so much light that I have to visor my eyes with one hand, and it's clear enough to count the mustard-colored patches of corals, to see every ripple in the white sand below. Hours from now, I will



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feel like a cooked lobster — the skin on my back the most alarming shade of pink in the palette — but right now, barefoot and bikinied and leaning forward on the tipped-up bow of a speeding boat, I feel like the Sea Queen.

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I don't tell Harris about my phobia of ocean swimming — a fear of fish (and worse) nibbling at my feet. I don't have to, it turns out, because snorkeling in water this clear is the perfect cure. Head submerged, I can see it all, the swerving and darting and breezy wafting of every size of fish. How silly: to think that my plain white toes could garner any attention down here. A school of jet-black fish with long whiskers and shimmering blue stripes turns past me with the clean synchronicity of ballerinas, and my hands stretch right out. Apparently, I want to pet them.

Harris spots a barracuda, and that's enough to get me wriggling back into the Sea Prince. Besides, my time is short — I'm catching the afternoon panga boat back to Big Corn. This bothers Harris. "You'll have to come back," he says, shaking his head at my haste.



Gene Thorp/The Washington Post

But as I scamper down the beach and grab a loaf of coconut bread from the little pink house that everyone agrees is the place for the baked variety of "coco food," I feel secretly as if I got it right. Perhaps the perfect time to leave is just before the sunburn shows, before the waves dull into white noise, before I run into Harris a third time. Maybe it's best to get on your way, right when you're tempted to call a place perfect?

## A round of lobster

I'm encased in red heat by the time I reach Big Corn. New freckles are menacingly dark. Quick movements hurt. I give up all ambitions of meeting the island beauty queen and finding the descendants of pirates, and let the end of my journey be about one thing: lobster.

There's a dish called rondon that brings the flesh of fresh lobster together with the milk of local coconuts, simmers the pairing in garlic and herbs, adding a full medley of Central American starches and sometimes, another whole fish. It sounds to me like a dinner that I'll one day tell my grandchildren about.

I pick a hotel on the basis of the owner's culinary reputation, overlooking its position beside a fish-processing plant. The plant's constant thrumming reminds me that I'm now on the "working island," as people call Big Corn when differentiating between the two isles. I'm willing to forgo both scenery and serenity for a taste of the best lobster stew.

Rondon cooks so slowly that I have to put in my order at breakfast. Still, when I slide onto the barstool of the hotel restaurant after noon, I'm told to wait. I remember the warning I read on a local tourism Web site: "Order before you're hungry." Someone really should clarify: Order a full day before you're hungry.

Two bar stools down sits Cliff, a lumberjack of an American, here to study the practices of lobster divers on Big Corn.

Who better to prime me for my feast? We talk about the life span of the lobster: the 20 years that it might spend clicking across the ocean floor before venturing into a Corn Islander's trap. Nicaragua's third-largest export is lobster, and the bulk of it, according to Cliff, comes from the shallow continental shelf spreading around the Corns.

The kitchen door swings open, and my rondon floats toward me. I see no pink legs, no pincers, no shell whatsoever in my coconut broth. That's my first praise for how Corn Islanders cook lobster. They understand that the cracking and peeling, all the labor of flavoring, should be done behind the scenes. Nobody wears a bib here, or finishes with a moist towelette. I just slice each lobster morsel into four more, to savor as slowly as possible this expertly slow-cooked stew.

I patter back to my hotel room, lobster-hued, lobster-full. Without bothering to hit the lights, I fall right into the local pose, napping with my bare feet dangling off the bed, finally under some kind of spell.

Kinder is the author of "Delaying the Real World" and teaches travel and essay writing at Yale.



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