

# Square Rig in the San Blas



**The San Blas Islands are unique. JOHN CAMPBELL was able to visit these strange islands in a way that now, alas, is also unique, on board a brigantine that was straight out of the 19th century**

**T**HE BRIGANTINE *Romance* had been converted from a humble Baltic Trader into a 19th century trading brigantine by Alan Villiers. She and Julie Andrews starred in the James Michner film *Hawaii*. Now she was bound for the South Pacific with sixteen youthful charterers together with the Captain and his wife, the mate, sailmaker, and myself. Eager to sail on a square rigger, I had signed on as engineer, and it was my job to coax the antiquated and sometimes reluctant Danish engine to take us where the wind would not.

The 1,000 mile passage along the north coast of South America had passed uneventfully. The week had been spent with the crew members getting to know each other, and learning a few of the Captain's whims and dislikes.

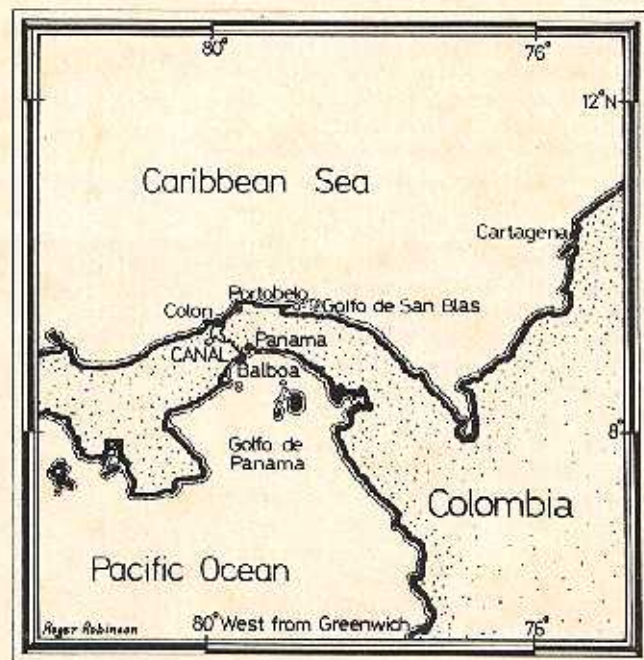
For many of the crew, the San Blas was their first landfall, and what a spectacular landfall it was. As we closed on the coast of Panama, huge mountains, looking blue in the haze, appeared all along the horizon. They towered upward, into and through the clouds, completely dominating and dwarfing the string of tiny islands that suddenly appeared before us.

There are supposedly 365 islands in the chain, which stretches along the coast for almost 100 miles. Some are mere outcroppings of the reef, covered with a little sand, and even the largest is a scant 300 yards across.

Fifty-two of these little islands are inhabited by the Cuna Indians, who are themselves something of a mystery. It is thought that the Cunas arrived from the Euphrates Valley in what is now Iraq. How or why they travelled to the San Blas is an unsolved puzzle, but they have lived in the islands since about 400 BC.

In the 16th century the islands were visited by the Conquistadors, who were collecting gold in the name of God and Spain. Balboa himself arrived amid much bloodshed, and 90 per cent of the Indians were killed. The population has slowly recovered until now there are about 21,000 Indians.

The Cunas were long to remember Balboa's visit, and when the Caribbean was being colonised by the British and the French, any attempted settlement in the San Blas was quickly wiped out before strength could be gained. This situation persisted right into the 20th century, when Panama claimed the islands in 1903. The Cunas chose to ignore this and lived by





their own rules. In 1925 Panama decided to explore her forgotten islands, but the visitors had a violent reception and thought it prudent to withdraw. The government adopted the Cunas' code and included it in their own constitution. Even now, the Cunas control the islands and a strip of land along the coast of the mainland.

As recently as 1964, visitors were welcome by day, but any white person found ashore after dark was ceremoniously put to death. It was decided at this time that this practice was bad for the tourist trade, and the forty-two tribal chiefs amended the constitution and the first of three tiny hotels was built.

Feeling our way slowly in through the reef, we anchored off the island of Porvenir. This has the islands' airstrip, one of the hotels, and the customs office. There is no room for anything else, other than a few coconut trees.

The Captain went ashore, leaving us to lay aloft and stow the sails. Before the job was done, a swarm of dugout canoes (or cayucas as we later learnt to call them) appeared, and totally surrounded *Romance*. We got our first glimpse of these mysterious people.

Like the islands they inhabit, the Cunas are tiny. At 5ft 8in, I towered over them, and they regarded Long John, one of the crew at 6ft 3in, as a positive freak.

Most of our visitors were women, and all were wearing a brightly coloured and patterned costume. We thought that



Working aloft on board *Romance*, a 19th century brigantine, converted from a Baltic Trader by Alan Villiers. She had starred in the film *Hawaii* with Julie Andrews

Bruce, the cook, yelled up from the galley that supper was ready. For the first time since leaving Grenada we all sat down for a meal together, and the boat was still.

Everybody was up early the next morning, eager to get all the shipboard chores done quickly so we could get ashore to explore. The Captain had announced over supper, amid groans, that the decks had not only to be scrubbed in the morning, but also had to be dried and oiled. That job promised to take several hours, and there were islands all around us waiting to be visited, with names like Wichub-Huala and Nalunaga. The sooner the job was done, the sooner we could be ashore.

Although the sun had just risen, it was already hot, and the sparkling water was positively dazzling. Randy was the first on deck, and we heard him gasp with astonishment then say, 'Come and look at this!'

The Cunas had beaten us to it. As we came on deck blinking in the bright sunshine, we were faced with a dazzling array of molas. The hatch covers, the bulwarks, and almost all the deck were covered in molas.

Some of the crew started buying, others of us stood back in quiet anticipation of the Captain's appearance on deck. The deck was not even scrubbed that morning, never mind oiled. We did not even wait for breakfast, but headed for the nearest island, leaving the Captain trying to explain to 200 Indians that he had all the molas he wanted.

The Cunas bury their dead in shallow graves covered by open-sided shelters made from twigs and palm fronds. It was very eerie and several graves had collapsed revealing their grizzly contents



Approaching the San Blas Islands. There are supposedly 365 islands in the chain of which fifty-two are inhabited by the Cuna Indians, others are mere outcroppings of reef

perhaps they wore this specially for us, but later found that they always wore it, whether they were trying to sell souvenirs to tourists, or were gutting fish, or clearing the house. The other striking feature was the heavy gold ring that was worn by every woman in her nose, and most had large gold earrings as well.

The women had come out to us to try to sell molas. These are squares of cloth that make up the front and back of their distinctive blouses. The molas are made by sewing together layers of various coloured pieces of cloth. They are then cut through to different layers, in intricate patterns, exposing the various colours. Every cut edge is hemmed with tiny stitches.

All of us were keen to buy some molas, yet reluctant to do so at the first opportunity. We had no idea as to the correct price to pay, and had little conception as to what constituted a good mola. By the end of a week on the islands, however, we were all mola experts.

With tropical suddenness, the sun went down, and so did the prices of the molas. All the women were anxious to make a sale before having to leave. We began to get a better idea of the expected price.

As the last of the Indians left, we settled down to the twice daily chore of scrubbing the decks to stop them drying out in the tropical heat. The last bucket of water was being thrown as





*Molas are made by sewing together various pieces of cloth. They then cut through the layers, exposing the different colours. These intricate patterns are hemmed on every edge with tiny slitches*

Wichub-Huala was our first landfall. The island was so small that we walked right round it in a bare 10 minutes. Except for a small square in the centre, it was completely covered in small houses. They were built of interwoven twigs and palm fronds, and built so closely together that there was barely room to squeeze between them. A peep inside one house showed a bare earth floor, a couple of hammocks, and a clothes-line stretched from wall to wall, from which hung all the family's possessions.

At every turn, there were more molas being offered for sale, and already the novelty was beginning to wear off, when Pete's keen nose found a little bakery on the edge of the square. Pretty soon the whole crew were hungrily devouring hot fresh bread, an item that had already become very much a luxury on board.

Right next to the bakery we found a little shop that sold very cold drinks from a paraffin burning fridge. The steps outside the shop were shaded by a canopy, and made an excellent grandstand from which to watch some of the more energetic crew members play basketball with the village kids. After the cold beer supply was exhausted, and we had walked right round the island again, we agreed to move on to Nalunaga, which was the next island along.

*The Cuna women appeared as if from nowhere in their hundreds. They covered the **Romance** in their brightly coloured molas, and although we were eager to buy some, we were not sure of the going price, and decided to wait a day or two*



Nalunaga was only about 50 yards away, across the bright turquoise water, yet we felt it had a different character from Wichub-Huala. The houses were packed even tighter; indeed, those nearer the edge looked to be in danger of being pushed off the island altogether. There was not even room to pull the cayucas up on to the beach. Platforms had been built for them, sticking out into the sea. Yet again, everywhere we went, there were molas. By the end of the day we were all ready to agree to the Captain's suggestion that we sail a few miles east the next morning to the uninhabited cluster of islands called the Lemon Cays.

While the islands around Porvenire were covered with houses, the islands of the Lemon Cays were equally densely covered with coconut trees. Coconuts form the basis of the Cuna economy, and one of the staple foods. No Cuna can own land, but all own several trees. For 3 months of each year, only the owner may have the coconuts off a particular tree, but for the other 9 months, everybody may gather the nuts as they fall to the ground. In the tranquility of the Lemon Cays, the Captain got his decks oiled, I changed the oil in the main engine, and everybody else got sunburned.



*The crew from **Romance** being canoed up the Carti River to the Cuna burial grounds. In the trees we could see monkeys and vividly coloured birds*

The next group of islands was the Carti Cays. They take their name from the Carti River that flows into the sea there. Before we had even anchored, the cayucas were swarming around us. As soon as the anchor was down, the Indians clambered aboard, and, I hardly need to say, started trying to sell molas.

The first aboard was the Chief of the Carti Cays. He introduced himself to us as Jimmy. Jimmy could speak English and Spanish, as he had worked in Panama City for the US Army. Until this point, communication had been a problem, and now poor Jimmy was bombarded with questions. The Cunas' own language is based on Arabic roots, and we could never before communicate beyond sign language. Jimmy obviously enjoyed being the centre of attention, and invited all to his house that evening for a sing-song.

After a hurried supper, we made our way shoreward. Everybody felt more than a little apprehensive as we squeezed between the houses, hoping that the news of the 1964 agreement had reached all the islands. Much to our relief, we found Jimmy's house, and were rather surprised to find it was built of concrete. We all crowded in, to be warmly welcomed by a beaming Jimmy and, it seemed, by the rest of the island's population.





*The houses on Nalunaga were even more tightly packed together than on Wichub-Huala, indeed some looked as if they were in danger of being pushed off the island altogether*

I was making a television film while on board, and was anxious to record some of the Cuna music and singing. Despite their violent history, they are a shy people, and seemed reluctant to sing. We worked our way through every sea shanty to the accompaniment of Randy on his guitar. Still absolute silence from the Cunas. We then decided to try to get the children interested, and raised a few smiles with *Old MacDonald's Farm* sung with appropriate imitations of animal noises. Then Mary suggested *Jingle Bells*.

She was reminded that it was October and we were only about 300 miles from the equator, but she insisted that she liked *Jingle Bells*. Something about the chorus caught the fancy of the children. They started to join in. However, something was lost in the translation, and it came back as *Dingle Fells*.

Much to the kids' astonishment, I played the tape back. They soon got the idea that anything they sang the machine would sing back. Several started off with their own songs, but alas, every song they sang had the same chorus — *Dingle Fells*.

A chance remark by Sharon led to an interesting trip the next day. She asked Jimmy what they did with their dead. There was no room for a cemetery on any island, and the sand over the coral base was only a few inches thick. Jimmy arranged for us to visit their burial ground, which was a couple of miles up the Carti River. He borrowed three cayucas and together with nine Indians, we set off up the river.

*We just had time to visit the Bandero Cays for a last swim and a picnic before leaving the Islands altogether. They are completely uninhabited and it made a refreshing change not to be sold a mola at every turn*



It was hard work paddling and poling the heavy cayuca against the current. Between breaths, Jimmy told us how they came up the river for water when there was not enough rain. They also had cleared small areas of the dense jungle and grew maize. In the trees we could see monkeys and brightly coloured birds. There was no mention of hunting, perhaps because there were so many fish to be caught.

At long last, we rounded a bend in the river and there was the burial ground. There was a small sandy beach which was the obvious landing place, but right in the middle of the beach was a gigantic crocodile. At least it looked like a crocodile, only in South America they are called caymans. None of us was too eager to get too close to the beast, which was well over 10ft long, and seemed to be smiling at us in toothy anticipation.

The problem was soon solved. In Jimmy's cayuca was a little old lady. She must have been well over 60, about 4ft tall, and about as wrinkled as a prune. She leapt out of the cayuca waving a paddle in the air, and shrieking at the top of her voice. To our utter astonishment, she ran up to the crocodile and started bashing it with her paddle. The crocodile gave us a long-suffering look, let out a sigh, and slid into the water. As we stepped out of the cayucas, we leapt out of the water as if it were boiling.



*The Cuna are a shy people, and only after a while would they break into their own music. Here some of the women folk, in their cheerful molas and gold rings in their noses, are dancing and singing to Cuna music*

The burial ground was eerie. The bodies were buried in shallow graves which were covered by little open-sided shelters made from twigs and palm fronds. It seemed like all the owner's possessions were placed under the shelter, including clothing, plates, and cups. The area was suffering from erosion, and several graves had collapsed to reveal grizzly contents. Nobody wanted to stay, and despite the fierce sun, shivers ran up and down more than one spine.

Keeping a wary look out for the crocodile, we got back into the cayucas. Everyone seemed anxious to get away and it developed into a race down the river, with the crew in the last cayuca buying beer for the rest from Jimmy's shop.

Our time in the islands was running out fast, so we decided to visit the uninhabited Bandero Cays for a last swim and a picnic on the beach before heading for the Panama Canal and a return to the 20th century.

