

Kuna Yala, Part II: Five Kuna Towns

Between May 2 and May 20 we anchored at or near 5 Kuna villages between Careto, near the Panama-Colombia border, and Nargana, near the western island groups most visited by cruisers. Here are some details of our inter-cultural adventures. I would like to have taken more direct pictures of people but I feel uncomfortable treating strangers like objects; furthermore if they allow you to photograph them, Kuna expect to be paid.

Carreto: We motor-sailed some 12 miles north of Puerto Obaldia, staying about 3 mi offshore, passing two 5-mile beaches without a single trace of human occupation. (Would Marriot love to get their hands on those!) We anchored about ½ mile from Carreto and by morning we were rolling in a 6' swell coming straight in the bay. We managed to get the outboard motor onto the dinghy (it is lowered by hand from the stern rail, which is why we have an 8 hp instead of a 15 hp motor) and after lunch we went ashore. The village (pop ~700) is said to be the most traditional of all the Kuna villages. Our dinghy was waved into to a garbage-strewn and malodorous beach area where items just unloaded from a Colombian coastal freighter were being carried by various men and women to the village. While we waited for the "Saila's secretary" to pay our \$5 to anchor (per guidebook instructions), an older man in a bowler, trousers and long-sleeved shirt smiled pleasantly and showed interest in the bowline I used to tie our dinghy to a canoe. I spent a few minutes demonstrating how to tie a bowline (much hampered by my inability to explain the rabbit and tree – he spoke no Spanish). Finally the secretary arrived, took my \$5 and then handed it to the Saila, one of 3 village chiefs: it was my bowline friend. We all walked to the village and we were invited to sit in the congreso, the Kuna version of an Iroquois long-house. We sat in plastic chairs placed at the ends of long plank benches set up theater-style. In front several elderly men swung gently in hammocks. We learned later these were the other Saila. After a brief consultation, an additional \$5 was extracted from us and an older man Luis, who spoke English, was assigned to us as host – or monitor. We chatted. Learning that I was interested in "looking at" a mola, he invited us to his family compound; there were 3 thatch-roof, bamboo-cane walled, dirt-floor huts inside a surrounding bamboo or cane fence. We sat in plastic chairs outside a hut, an old woman sitting on a log next to us. I was shown 2 molas. The conversation went like this: "\$40, . . . \$30, . . . \$20. " "\$20?" "\$25". In spite of my determination not to buy a mola, I bought the first mola I was shown. I hoped that the fact that few cruisers come here meant that the mola would be more "genuine" and of good quality. This actually turned out to be true – except for molas made by one of the Kuna master mola makers (see Kuna Yala Part III) my Careto mola is one of the nicest ones I saw and it also turned out to be a bargain.



With amused poise Luis showed great skill in extracting all the (few, fortunately) dollars I had brought. Mola commerce finished, he told us to wander freely around the village, take no pictures. We bought a big bunch of bananas for \$1, a big pineapple for \$1 and 2 big avocados for \$.30. We wandered briefly and respectfully among the family compounds to the river where a few women were bathing and/or washing clothes and some men and boys were swimming. Conversation was not possible since almost no one seemed to speak Spanish; smiles had to suffice. One young woman holding a baby was having trouble keeping her wrap on. Her brother (age 14) spoke a little Spanish and said she was 11 and the baby (over 1 year old) was hers. One of those two statements had to have been wrong. Maybe “hers” meant “in her family”.

The striking thing about the village was how quiet and tranquil it was. And there were no dogs. I learned later that to go to the bathroom people just walk over to the beach and squat. At night there were no lights in this village (although at one point a flashlight moved along the shore) and modern media was not allowed. Kuna tribal culture emphasizes the evening “congreso”, in which all families in the village send one or more men to the long house to socialize, discuss personal and village problems, keep the peace, etc. Sounds quite idyllic, until you learn that Kuna culture also includes the power of certain individuals, shamans, to declare that the reason Person A is sick or has some problem is because Person B is a witch or is casting evil. Punishment can go as far as banishing Person B from the village.



That night it rained heavily and by morning the bay was the color of bean soup. Here is a pre-rain picture of one of the more presentable trading freighters rolling in the swell.

Tubuala, Naradup, and Kuba: Our next anchorage was (too) near a mangrove islet about 1 mi across open water from the 3 villages of Tubuala, Naradup, and Kuba. Each village sat on its own island about 300m from the other two islands. The combined population of the cluster looked pretty big.



One of the villages had a long bridge to a building the guidebook said was a medical clinic and the blue and yellow of concrete school buildings was visible elsewhere. Otherwise, the buildings appeared to be traditional thatch construction.

Hoping to avoid another \$10 anchoring fee and planning to move on the next day, we decided not to visit any of the villages and just surveyed them from afar. But some children had interest in visiting us. Before we even had the sail properly attended to, a canoe with 4 bright faces (2 girls about 11 and 2 boys about 4 or 5) arrived. “Hola” – the universal greeting of Kuna children and Kuna vendors, as we have since learned.



Note the half soccer ball hat on the little boy’s head.

They were cute and we sat them in the cockpit and fed them juice and 1 candy each. The girls had a little Spanish – not much. They wanted to go below but we wouldn’t let them. Then another canoe with 2 boys arrived; they just got candy. After 30 min or so, tired from the day’s travel, I shooed everyone away and they said something about returning. Did they ever! 3 more times, with my insistence that they go away becoming ever more direct: no regalos (presents), no candy, no chiclets (sorry I didn’t think to stock up on these), finally vayase! (Scram!) At which point they left saying various rude things in Kuna, which I was spared understanding. Not much cross-cultural success there. Hey, I am not required to be Disneyland to bored Kuna children, especially when all I want to do is lie down for a few minutes.

Later zillions of midges and heavy rains trapped us below deck. I crashed early but woke up about midnight and read. Good thing I was awake: I heard one of the shrouds twang and then a light footstep. Another footstep a minute later. Went in and told Fred we had a nighttime visitor. I got out the 1,000,000 watt light and went on deck and nailed the guy with paralyzing light. He was middle-aged, thin, tired. Our visitor smelled of .. what? not alcohol, not pot. He had consumed something. He was half into his canoe but it was still tied to our boat; I checked the canoe and was relieved to see there was nothing in it. I doused the light and the following somewhat surreal conversation ensued in Spanish, our common language:

--You are a thief.

--No. You are the one who is a thief because you haven't paid to anchor.

--That is correct. No one came to collect. Come tomorrow and I will pay.

--No. Pay now.

--I will pay in the morning and you must bring a "factura" (stamped receipt issued by each village).

--The man offends me. (Fred sleeps naked and hadn't stopped to put something on).

--This is OUR boat and he can sleep as he pleases.

--You "veleros" are all thieves. You come and depart and never pay. This is Kuna water.

--It is true that all the land is Kuna land but the ocean belongs to god.

Mention of god seemed to make our visitor distraught. He left abruptly, saying that god would punish us.

After staying awake another hour, I decided he wasn't coming back and slept soundly.

By morning I was feeling pretty fed up with what I had seen of the Kuna up to that point. But hearing voices I went out and said hello to two men and a youngster in canoes headed out to sea through the mangroves to fish. Atypically, they had no interest in trying to sell us anything. We chatted. They were very concerned to hear about our incident and when I said what I remembered of the fellow's name, they knew who it was. I was pretty sure the incident would be discussed in the congreso that evening. The two men knew the outside world – Onal had worked several years on a Colombian coastal freighter and Arverio had been a policeman in Puerto Obaldia -- but both had chosen to return to a traditional village life. They were interesting, informative, candid, and amusing. After 20 minutes of chat over the gunnels, I invited them aboard and we talked for another hour over coffee. I felt that I had finally met the gracious Kuna people that others had written about. And I was gratified that even they were bothered by the *chitras* (no-see-ums).



Arverio and his helper



Onal

Los Pinos: A \$10! charge to anchor. We were met by David, a local “guide” for visitors. At a little tienda we bought tomatoes, fresh bread (good!) and a Digicel simcard (\$5) for the phone. David was in a state of high emotion, having been thrown out by his wife a week earlier. He arranged for Fred to have a Kuna meal of rice, lentils and lobster served at the twilit dim hut of the disgruntled wife but I wasn’t in the mood. The next morning a Colombian coaster arrived (“fresh” vegies!) but we were deep into an oil change and other maintenance and not free to get to the dock ourselves. So I gave David \$7 US to get potatoes, carrots, onions and peppers. For my \$7 I got: 3 half-rotten carrots, 8-9 dubious small potatoes, and 2 small red onions. I clearly got fleeced but I learned that it is possible to get basic food items in even the small villages.

The island of Tupbak where Los Pinos is located is distinguished by a 400’ high hill and I hired David’s services (\$5) to hike with me to the cell tower on top. I was glad to have his local knowledge of fauna: we saw a black frog with green-gold spots and a snake with black, cream and coral bands. I don’t know if the snake was poisonous but he treated it with real care, finding a 10’ long stick to lift and hurl it well away from the path.



While we walked I heard much about David’s adventures, jungle and sexual, with his clients. At the top we ducked under thick black cables and climbed about 40’ up the framework of the cellphone tower (C&W, not Digicel). The purpose was twofold: to see the view and to get a Digicel signal from the next island west to check that my simcard worked. As I clung to the tower with one hand and snapped photos with the other I kept thinking “at my age this is REALLY silly.” So I went down and sat in shade while David made various emotionally excited calls to wife and various family/friends, speaking in Spanish and in Kuna. I gave him lots of time to become less distraught while we walked down the hill.



Not typical but in Los Pinos a true gardener created this flowering arbor with bench. No nails – all tied with vines. Same is true for houses.



View from Los Pinos cell phone tower.

Note 3 things: the calm waters between Los Pinos and the mainland, the large village of Mulatupu in the middle distance, and the mining scar on the mountain on the left. In Ustupu there was a sign painted in Spanish on a building : “86 years after the Kuna Revolution we reaffirm our fight for our lands. No to mining! “

Ustupu: We arrived in rain and were charged \$15 to anchor! These fees are good for a month but we are only staying 1 or 2 nights. Ustupu is the biggest town in Kuna Yala and a seat of government. Nele Kantule is buried on a small island near the village. Nevertheless all 10,000 inhabitants use latrines over the water. Needless to say our salt water pump was OFF-LIMITS while in Ustupu. After the rain stopped, sounds of a sporting event lured us to shore. It was an inter-village teen basket-ball tournament, with big trophies for boys’ and girls’ teams.



Watching the announcement (in Kuna) of basketball team results and awarding trophies. Note team uniforms on group clustered at left.

Our escort was Feliciano, about my age, another really nice, really intelligent Kuna and excellent conversationalist. He had served in the Panamanian army in the 1960’s and 70’s, had traveled extensively,

including to Egypt and Israel for some diplomatic event and had received US army training in the southern US. Feliciano spoke excellent English. When Noriega came to power he left the army (he gets a pension) and then worked for several years as a civilian at the US Army base on the Canal. He was owed some kind of pension by the US government but had not been able to overcome Panamanian bureaucratic obstacles; a trip to Panama City to try to straighten things out was in the works. When Feliciano retired they returned to his wife's ancestral property in Ustupu. He was 18 or 19 when they married and she was 14; forty-two years later he clearly treasures/ adores her. They have 3 children: a 40 yr old daughter who teaches in Panama City, a son who stays mostly in Ustupu, and a 21 yr old son about to finish university in Panama and who intends to continue to medical school. We ate a simple but good dinner at Vicky Restaurant, with Feliciano and his wife as our guests; it was dinner in 3 idiomas, Kuna, Spanish and English, since his wife spoke only Kuna and Fred speaks only English. The menu was potato, boiled or fried, 1 roasted chicken leg with herbs, bottled water or soda. The total for all four of us came to \$12.30, not including a tip. Chicken arrives frozen from Panama City– same chicken legs as rest of Caribbean.

The next day an old woman corralled me and led me to a mola “shop” run by Eligaria – a never-married ! Kuna woman. Given my frame of mind, I high-fived her over that and we were instantly bonded. I swapped fabric for a chance to photograph her leg and arm bracelets, called chakira. Her sister Eliselina, mother of 5 children, dropped in and we chatted for a pleasant while.



Eligaria (L) and Eliselina (R) visited our boat to look at fabrics I had brought from Santa Marta. Eventually I swapped two pieces of fabric for two of their “tourist-grade” molas.

I heard later that Eligaria had to go to Panama City for medical reasons but did not hear the outcome.

Later I sat in a small plaza and watched Kuna children playing. Kuna children are friendly and unself-conscious about touching foreigners' arms, hair. They obviously receive a lot of physical affection and big kids pick up and carry little kids in a matter-of-fact way. In these secure island towns even tiny children are marvelously free.



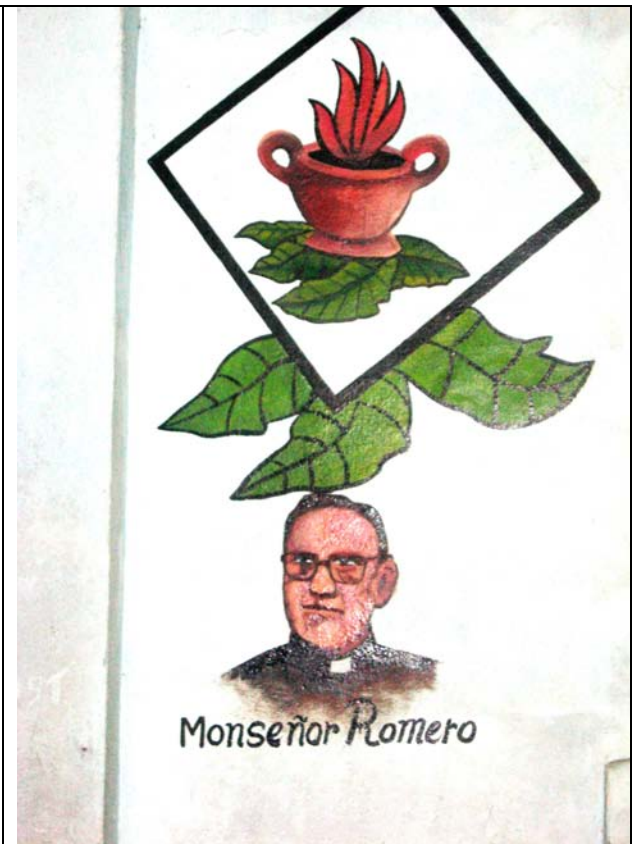
These two youngsters were walking on their hands, using fragments of flip-flop to protect their hands. The smaller one was about 4 years old.

Notice the Kuna woman on the left, in traditional dress and chakira

There are 6 or 7 flavors of Christian churches in Ustupu. As we passed the Catholic church, we realized Mass was being said and sat in a pew for part of it. After the gospel and sermon in Spanish, there was a very long (over 15 minutes) prayer in Kuna and we drifted away. Later I returned and got permission to take some photos inside the church. I learned that the Kuna decided to allow churches to come to Kuna villages provided they incorporated Kuna beliefs and traditions into their services and teaching. Here are some images from the Catholic church in Ustupu.



The Virgin Mary with Kuna head covering



There were 6 portraits in the church and I was moved to see this one of Bishop Romero, the murdered spokesman for the poor and dispossessed of Hispanic America.



The wall behind the very simple altar. I have no idea of what elements of Kuna beliefs and myths are represented in this altarpiece but it sure isn't European! I wonder if it is an intricate melding of Mary (holding Jesus) and Joseph with Olomaili and Olowaili, two founding personages in Kuna mythology. A book has probably been written about all this. Too bad our stay was too short to learn a little more.

Nargana/Corazon de Jesus: (\$10 to anchor) This was the last of the Kuna villages we stopped at – really two very distinct villages on separate islands connected by a footbridge. Corazon de Jesus has mostly concrete block buildings and (when we returned in November) a new big plastic McDonald's-type play structure in the plaza. Nargana has a mix of all-thatch, thatch and tin roof, and concrete block houses. For simplicity I will lump both villages under the name Nargana. There was actually garbage management—a smoldering garbage dump on the nearby mainland. Progress! Bauhaus says town has “abandoned traditional Kuna ways” but that is not completely correct. Congreso may no longer be mandatory but the Saila (a middle-aged albino) is important and active and men congregated in his office in late day to discuss things. The community might (or might not) have relaxed the ban on Kuna who marry non-Kuna being allowed to remain in Nargana but a clear sense of social cohesion and tranquility still existed.

I didn't expect to like Nargana but I did because of the people we met. Pablo and his wife Claudia came to the boat to sell molas and he asked for money to help “island children study at the school”. Both had handsome fine-featured faces and he was well-spoken but the money request was unusual and felt a bit off. Next day I found their thatch house and suggested a money-making idea that didn't involve molas: Claudia or one of her daughters could tie/weave chakira directly onto visiting boaters' arms, legs. I arranged to have a 2" arm chakira woven on me for \$8. It has lasted 7 months so far and I love it. (see below).

It was interesting sitting in their hut with family life flowing around me while my chakira was being woven. Genuinely beautiful, Claudia is only 33 years old and the mother of 9 children! the oldest boy studying in Panama. The floor was dirt and fabrics divided the large single room into separate areas. A small boy was playing solitaire on a small computer plugged into a haphazard electric cord. Cooking facilities must have been elsewhere.

By this time we knew we could find a number of items we needed in a town as “large” as Nargana: food, cell-phone minutes, a bank, water, gasoline and diesel poured into jerry cans from 50 gal barrels and filtered through a tee shirt. Fred had laundry done (electric washing machine, line dried) and a bracelet repaired by family members of Federico, a young live-wire personable fellow. We paid a dollar or two for an amazing little basket he wove using tiny cords made from strips from plastic bags.



My chakira. Each bead is added to the thread separately and a knot is added at each row.



Picking up the laundry, we met Federico's younger brother Lauriano, age 14. He was in a wheelchair and looked like a CP child but apparently he badly burned at age 2 and it left him essentially immobile with a mental age of 2. I determined to return to Nargana with dark glasses for the albino children we saw and with some kind of crib-type mobile for Lauriano. And we did just that -- Nargana was our last stop in November 2011 as we were leaving Panama on our way back to Colombia. I was able to deliver my items.

In Nargana we saw puppies and some small dogs for the first time in Kuna Yala. I suddenly wondered if they were food items. And why don't the Kuna raise chickens in their villages? It would be a big improvement on frozen chicken legs from Panama city. Curious.

The “Happy American Cruising Grounds”: Leaving the villages behind, our short remaining time in Kuna Yala was spent on a few of the many islands beloved by long-time San Blas cruisers. These islands have at most one or two Kuna families on them and are well-offshore, with clean clear waters and palm-covered tropical sand beaches. A few pictures will say almost everything about them that needs to be said.

