



## CARIBBEAN CLOSE-UP

—Horace Sutton.

# Some Enchanted Islands

HORACE SUTTON

**ISLAND GOING BOOM:** I remember San Juan before it got into the big time, which is only a question of four years or so. Mostly I remember the buses, faded and dented, like old soup cans on wheels which one had to catch and leave on the run, for they merely slowed down for passengers, never stopped. The auto horns were an orchestra forever tuning up. The best hotel was the Condado Beach, and in its nightclub there were hundreds of silver-painted chairs that were meant to be gay but were as sad as old champagne corks and the ashtrays from last night's party. I recall walking on a grassy plot near the San Geronimo fort and being told a great new hotel would rise here. And I remember that a few steps away the Yanks were in spring training, and staying at the Normandie, a hotel that got not only its name but its shape from the French liner.

Aside from the Yanks, the Normandie's claim to eminence was that, while built like a prow, it was only a triangular shell of a building. In its hollow center, right in the lobby, was a swimming pool, and the rooms rose

in tiers around it. Substantial rumors had it that U. S. sailors were fond of refueling at the poolside bar, taking the elevator to the third floor and executing swan dives into the tank.

Now, in San Juan's new social dignity, a lid has been placed over the pool to forestall such levity, the pool-

side bar has become a genteel restaurant, and the Normandie is merging with the once locally swank Escambron Beach Club to form an elegant resort. The horns still blow, but the buses are new and require of one a less acrobatic approach and departure. On the grassy plot has risen, according to promise, the modern magnificence of the Caribe Hilton Hotel. Other hotels and apartment houses, white and unfettered, cast unfamiliar modern shadows along the lagoon. New restaurants have sprung up in the city, new clubs in the suburbs, new cabs with two-way radios cruise the palm-shaded streets. The click of roulette and the stab of the neon sign stir the tropical night. San Juan is a new Miami with a Spanish accent.

About all that is left of that five-year-old picture of San Juan are the auto horns whose every blast remains an echo of Latin disdain for that useless appendage, the brake pedal. I was sitting just a few weeks ago with a Puerto Rican lady in the new air-conditioned bar of the Condado Beach Hotel, part of its new eighty-room air-conditioned wing. Four mobiles floated

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Frontispiece—Pigeon Point, Tobago

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over the heads of the bartenders. Ten glass panels provided daytime imbibers with a vista of the sand and the sea. Glass doors gave us a view of the Fiesta Room and it was plain that, inside, the silver chairs had long since given way to tropical modernity.

My friend was having nostalgic misgivings about all this, recalling Sunday afternoon *thé dansants* that were the elegant moments of her Puerto Rican adolescence. Pictures of social Puerto Ricans fluttering their fans in an elaborate *danzon* blotted out the wavering mobiles, the chrome, and the glass.

Yet, on the other hand she spoke proudly of the American products that were streaming from new Puerto Rican factories. Already the revolution, which seemed to have been ignited by the Caribe Hilton, had come full circle, and Robert Caverly, the Caribe's new young manager, has announced a quarter of a million dollar improvement program that will add fourteen rooms along the pool. Last winter the tourists were sleeping in the cabanas.

Near the Condado is the new La Rada, which opened this summer. It is a gem of a little hotel that can take 150 winter refugees, putting them up in air-conditioned apartments, some with fifteen-foot glass windows. La Rada will extract anywhere from \$9 to \$12 for two, and for an extra dollar a day guests can have use of an efficiency kitchenette which is built between every two apartments. La Rada's restaurant, run by M. Guillaume, former maître d'hotel at the Caribe, is pure Parisian elegance, and vies with the Caribe itself for the best fare in the Caribbean. San Juan, which had been limping along for years on a tired establishment called La Mallorquina, now also has in addition a totally un-Hispanic bistro known as the Swiss Chalet serving Swiss cheese pies and fondues among the chicken *asopaos* and indigenous *arroz con pollos*.

North Americans who have uncov-

ered a new, clean, comfortable, air-cooled, handy tropical playground in San Juan are now being coaxed to discover the rest of the island. A handsome new hotel is nearing completion in the mountains at Barranquitas, an hour and a half from town. It will open in January, if all goes well, with forty-two rooms, a swimming pool, a casino, and a golf course which has been laid along the banks of a river known as El Salto, The High One. From the glass corner of the dining room, guests can look over their soup to banana patches, to a 2,800-foot mountain named La Torrecilla, and to a vista that stretches for ten miles.

On the way to Barranquitas travelers will roll over a hard-surface road that winds between tobacco plantations covered with patches of white tenting. Houses crowd the highway and since the road falls away abruptly, the aft ends of the local homes stand on stilts. Family wash is laid to dry on the points of maguey cactus bushes, but washday is lightened somewhat by the fact that the sole piece of raiment of boys up to the age of six or seven is a shirt. The sun, according to my driver, is supposed to do wonders for the virility of the nation, a fact which no one with a passing knowledge of the Puerto Rican birth rate is in a position to deny.

At the crossroads that might be equipped in the States with a hot-dog stand one finds a shack with a whole pig roasting on a spit, protected from flies and filchers by a glass enclosure. The cook moves a charcoal brazier along the length of the pig until the whole carcass turns a rich, red brown. Then it is sold as *lechón asado*, and with a portion of boiled bananas, *una ración* costs fifty cents.

The pioneering blood of my ancestors having long ago thinned in my veins, I chose to forsake roadside *lechón asado* for the comparative sophistication of the Bamboo Inn, a local way station between Barranquitas and Aibonito. The Inn turned

out to be bereft of the merest splinter of bamboo, and was decorated instead with an outsized juke box and color pictures of the candidates for the title of Miss Rheingold of 1953. Under their pearly smiles I ate rice and beans and candied sour orange peel and cheese.

For those who like water that is hot and sulphurated—I am not among them—Puerto Rico offers Coamo Springs, but you should be advised that the spa was there when the Spaniards were in charge, and hardly a vase has been moved since. A pair of iron ladies painted white hold up pots of cactus at the entrance, great gilt-edged mirrors and mammoth murals look down on diners, and purple *campanillas* float in grand Victorian splendor in the finger bowls. For those who would dispel their aches and creaks with the waters, there is a pool set amid breadfruit trees. For mad, gay evenings there is an open patio equipped with a parrot who calls out "Waiter! Waiter!" as I suspect he has been doing since the day Sampson's forces first arrived. And through ancient habit, tiny sugar birds called "reinitas" answer the summons of the headwaiter when he calls them to lunch in the sugar-coated bird bath.

Blessed with water that is hot and sulphurous, Puerto Rico also has a whole bayful of water that is luminous, a fact which must have earned for its discoverer the reputation of liar. Phosphorescent Bay lies off La Parguera, a tiny fishing village on Puerto Rico's southwest coast. On nights when there is no moon fishing boats chug out to the strange bay. Nothing happens for long minutes till the boat gets into the harbor, then, churned by the propeller the wake becomes an illuminated tail. Frightened fish, sent scattering by the noise of the motor, shoot away in a dozen crazy directions, leaving a white stream behind them as if they were sky rockets fired under water. The captain brings up a pail of



Barbadian policeman.

Puerto Rican crabman.

Trinidadian Martiniquaise.

Virgin Island cha-cha.

—Horace Sutton.



## Budd Schulberg on Cuba

**B**Y ONE of those happy seasonal coincidences, the first day of frost on our Bucks County farm was nicely timed to the arrival of a letter from Sr. Tony Sanchez in Varadero, Cuba, asking us when we were coming down, and for how long we wished to rent the house we had looked at last winter, a house which is both on the beach and on the main street of the town.

This letter from our friend Senor Sanchez sidetracked the serious duties of the day. We broke out a bottle of Cuban Bacardi, played our favorite Afro-Cuban version of "In a Little Spanish Town," and got talking about our six sun-drenched weeks in Varadero last February and March.

Varadero is a narrow peninsula about a hundred miles down the coast from Havana. From the main street short sandy lanes dip gently to the ocean on the north, while two blocks south along dirt roads crisscrossing this tropical sand-bar brings you to the Bay of Cardenas.

The color of the water drives you to guide-book superlatives. Between the white beach and the horizon the sea forms exotic stripes in every imaginable shade of blue. And the water is marvelously clear. You can stand up to your neck in the softly rolling breakers and see your shadow on the bottom. Or drop a stone from two hundred feet and watch its descent all the way down.

Guide books are often deceptively grandiose about Varadero. They like to describe it as "a playground of the gay international set," and to emphasize its

glamour and social highlife. True enough, Varadero is bounded by the DuPont estate and the luxurious Hotel International on the north, and by the exclusive Kawama Club and an impressive row of palatial summer homes on the south.

But the essence of Varadero is its simplicity. Particularly in the winter time, when the Cuban tourists have not yet arrived and most American visitors to the island are on the town in Havana, it is a leisurely-paced beach-village where you can go barefoot, wear any old kind of shorts or slacks, drink good cheap rum from the friendly little street bars, and wander right off the beach into a "nightclub" of bamboo walls and thatched roof where a three- or four-piece local band beats out an Afro-Cuban rhythm that is seldom to be equaled in the flash hotels.

A popular pastime is to sit at the ample, unadorned bar of the Bolero-Criolla, a favorite hang-out of Cubans and Americans alike, look out at the changing colors of the sea, and wash down excellent *langosto frio* or giant-sized Moro crab with daiquiris that shame for size and zip our effete northern variety.

The Cuban Government has "big plans" for Varadero. More luxury hotels, more paved streets, more recreational facilities, more "improvements." I hope they are a long time coming. We'll take our Varadero winter as is, or as was, happily off-season, small-town, and slow-paced. Senor Sanchez, hold on to that *casa*, we're on our way.

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**Gems from the Guidebook:** Havana's only an hour from Miami, and it's been looking at tourists for a long, long time. Before airplanes, even. . . Lots of nightclubs in the near suburbs, mostly outdoors with lights in the trees and a marble dance floor under the Cuban moon. . . The Nacional is the big hotel, not new but large and airy, with outdoor pool. . . Sevilla-Biltmore is smack in town; the Presidente, with a dining-terrace, is on the fringe of things. . . Eating, sleeping, and clubbing it can run into money. . . Don't miss Sloppy Joe's, a well-soaked saloon that puts up bottles under its own bizarre label. . . Be prepared to eat late, hiss if you want the bus driver to stop, find a special tourist cop if you get in trouble. . . Everyone smokes what look like foot-long cigars, and the men affect guayaberra shirts which have two pleats in front, three down the back, are worn out of the pants, and with a tie can pass as a coat. . . Pan-Am, National, Braniff, KLM, and everybody but the RAF fly over from Miami; Chicago and Southern supplies the link from New Orleans.

—H.S.

phosphorescent water, and when you dip your hand in, thousands of tiny diamond chips run through your fingers. Toss the water back to the sea and it cascades over the side like liquid fire. When it rains Phosphorescent Bay is a lake of candles. The boatmen of Capri who make such a fuss about the Blue Grotto have less to display than the boatmen of La Parguera who thus far have merely organized a complicated rate structure that requires you to pay somewhere between seventy-five cents or five dollars depending upon how many people are on hand to make the excursion.

Visitors can stay overnight in La Parguera Guest House, a simple but new and comfortable inn meant for sports fishermen and those who can find pleasure in nothing more jazzy than collecting shells around the mangrove-covered islands that lie offshore.

La Parguera means the-place-where-there-are-lots-of-pargo, a pargo being a grouper. It is also the place where there are lots of white and blue marlin, sailfish, black-fin tuna, wahoo, tarpon, and barracuda. Local boats charge about \$35 a day, and the better-equipped fishing boats over from Miami get Miami prices, \$65 a day. Everyone has the piscatorial fever in quiet little La Pargo town including a hefty sow. She is down at the water's edge every morning sticking her snout in the water and coming up with something finny and tasty. Whether she is picking up dead bait cast from the boats or whether she is doing her own snaring isn't very clear but, whichever, she is known among an ever-widening circle as The Fishing Pig of La Parguera.

**LORD & TAYLOR BY-THE-SEA:** They tell you in San Juan that if you want to avoid the hurly-burly, take the thirty-minute flight over to St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands. Once on St. Thomas they tell you to find a quiet time you must take the twenty-minute flight over to St. Croix. There could hardly be a more peaceful atoll than St. Croix, yet there are those who insist you ain't never known seclusion till you've been over to St. John, only reachable by boat.

St. Thomas has retained faint traces of its Danish ownership which ended in 1917, and there are streets with names like Vimmelskaft Gade and Dronnings Gade. A new air-conditioned restaurant and bar with murals of old St. Thomas is called Seven Queen's Quarter, a dramatic name (especially for a lunchroom) which is merely a translation of its address in Danish.

Mixed in with the Danish undertone  
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