A Footloose American in a Smugglers' Den

In Puerto Estrella, Colombia, there is little to do but talk. It is difficult to say just what the villagers are talking about, however, because they speak their own language—a tongue called Guajiro, a bit like Arabic, which means 'real' or 'authentic' in a village man's ear.

Usually they are talking about smuggling, that village way of life that thrives on hidden routes and a large population of poor, but very smart, American Indians. There is a very important part of the economy. Not for pleasure, but for selling gold and silver jewelry, tobacco and jewelry. It is not possible for a man to get by by farming or fishing alone, so he must have other sources of income. And that's smuggling for the Indians, and that's what brings them to Puerto Estrella every year.

It's far out at the northern tip of a dry, rocky peninsula called La Guajira, on which there are no trains and no great deal of overland truck traffic. The Indians find the climate and the land very suitable for their needs, and they are welcomed by the people of the area. The Indians are brought over at night on fast trawlers and are allowed to unload and distribute down the peninsula on the trucks.

Hospitality is Seasoned

I arrived at dusk on a fishing trip from Aruba. And since there is no hotel I was just parked by the beach. Above us, on a sharp cliff, stood the entire population of the village, staring intently and without much obvious hospitality at Puerto Estrella's first tourist for the season.

In Aruba, the Guajiro Indians are described as a hot-blooded people, who eat all day and drink all day on account of wine. Also in Aruba you will hear that the men wear "nothing but underwear, knitted just like the navvy." That sort of information can be taken with a grain of salt, and as I climbed the steep path, staggering under the weight of my luggage, I noticed that the signs of enjoyment were not as pronounced as I had been led to believe. The dance class—three fine potoys to the most amusing of the batch, then start clipping up skirts.

As I came over the brink of the cliff, a few children laughed, an old bag began jumping, and the men just stared. There was a white man with 13 Yankee dollars in his pocket and not much else. And in his hand was a fishing line, a reel, some feathers, a bottle of spirits, and a couple of fish. He was carried along by the current, and the current was too fast to stop him.

There was a conference, and then a small man stepped forward and made a noise indicating that I should put my gear on an ancient truck, which started with a hiss and screech, rattled and groaned, and expired with a gurgle. The drinking was a problem, but in a different way. At the crack of dawn on the day after my arrival, the plan was awakened and taken down by a Jury of Village Builders, who proceeded to build a wall around my campsite. The ancient truck, which had been given to me by the men, was determined to be a fire hazard, and the ceremony began.

A Tactical Position

Since it was still early and all the fish from the night had gone, and the fish of the morning were gathered at the harbor, the men at first and then with good reason decided that they would not take them if they were forced to sell them as a heavy hook, which caused them much trouble. And as the end of the battle came near, the fish were weighted and the ceremony began.

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