

Just Imagine...

## Taboga Island: Pirate Tales and Truths From the South Seas

**Avast Ye!  
Shiver me  
timbers, this  
wench a tall  
tale she tells!**

Barely past midnight, on a brilliant moonlit night, Taboga Bay lay still and sparkling with reflections of the southern stars, only a few candle-lights remained flickering in the village. Just offshore pirate rogues laid secretly in wait, still filthy and stinking from their voyage. Black clouds came looming in, covering the town in darkness. They had hidden for hours on the deck of their sailing ship for this perfect moment. The townspeople sleeping, Taboga Island was ripe for raiding. Full of anticipation and tension for what was about to ensue, they silently climbed into their dinghies intending to come ashore a wreak havoc.



Just as they were about to reach the shore the pirate crew spied a mist coming towards them from the beach. Out of the fog a magnificent woman appeared, so breathtaking she could not be from this world. She marched along Playa Honda straight for the tiny pirate dinghies, flanked by her fierce army with swords in hand ready for battle. Shaking in their boots and afraid for their very lives, the pirates hastily retreated for their ship and set sail into the Bay of Panama, never to return, the spirit army following closely at their tail.

### **Virgin del Carmen Festival**

So goes the legend of how Virgin del Carmen became a patron saint of Taboga Island. Islanders have long believed it was she who headed the spirit army and thwarted the midnight pirate raid. Every year on July 16, a colorful festival is held. On this day they ask her to once again bless the fishing fleet in Taboga Bay. Local fishermen proudly decorate their boats in her honor and parade around the island.

### **Hundreds of Pirates**

Taboga was in years past a lively town, as a trading post, ship repair port, and for mainlanders traveling out of the city for a few days to seek the refreshing seaside. It boasted a great quantity of some of the clearest drinking water in the area so pirate, conquistadors, and merchant ships alike came from afar to stock up for their long voyages on the South Seas. In years past Taboga was rich in tropical fruits, vegetables, corn, iguanas (a favorite food) and seafood. It was home to a number of hotels and watering holes. Just imagine the secrets the island holds...

In 1513, Vasco Nunez de Balboa was the first Spaniard to set foot on Taboga and described in his log: pearls, sandy beaches, fish, fertile land on which plantains, coconuts, root vegetables, and sugar cane grew (used for manufacture of molasses).

Soon after in 1524, the town of San Pedro, Taboga was officially founded in 1524 by Father Hernando de Luque. It was he who provided funding for Pizarro's expedition into the Inca territory.

**Controversy...**  
Depending on whose definition you choose to believe, pirates and conquistadors can sometimes have been one and the same. Take Francisco Pizarro for example.

In the early 1500's, before the arrival of the Spaniards, Taboga was an indigenous community speaking Cueva, led by a chief who came to office by a hereditary elective system. They often met at the Congreso Arriba where there was a fresh water spring, to wash clothing, bathe and socialize. They are said to have been prosperous as Gonzalo de Badujoz took a substantial amount of gold from them before returning to Antigua. Several gold specimens unearthed in Panama are believed to have come from Taboga. Today this is where Cerito Tropical is located. The peaceful life of the Indians was broken in 1515, when Spanish Conquistadors reached the island and plundered what little valuables they had. They enslaved the people and took them back to Panama City. Later in 1549, following a decree from the Spanish King Charles V, the Indian slaves were freed and many of them were resettled on Taboga.

In 1529, Taboga was explored by Pedro Cieza de Leon and Pascal de Angaoya, who wrote that the island was the initial site the governor of Panama and his followers used before the foundation of Panama City. Some of the partners of the governor, Pedro Arias de Avila, were Francisco Pizarro (built a house on Taboga), Diego de Almagro, Gonzalo de Badajoz, Hernando de Sota, Andres Garabito, Bartolome Hurtado, priest Hernando de Luque (had a home on Taboga).

The fact that pirates and conquistadors often frequented Taboga is documented in a number of Spanish historical documents. The island was the site where Pizarro and Almagro met to plan their invasion of Peru. For several years the Taboga islands' administration was managed by Francisco Pizarro, as well as the benefits obtained from the trade or sale of the fruits and fish. In fact, Pizarro and his men felled most of the largest trees on the island in order to build the ships they used to sail to Peru.

### **Pizarro in Taboga 1513 – 1530 (when he left Panama for Peru)**

Francisco Pizarro (1471-1541) was a Spanish conquistador, conqueror of the Inca Empire and founder of Lima, Peru. In 1513, Pizarro accompanied Vasco Núñez de Balboa in his crossing of the Isthmus of Panama and became one of the first Europeans to view the Pacific Ocean. (To this day, Balboa is a hero of the Panamanian people). Following Balboa, in the following year 1514, Pedro Arias de Avila became the new governor of Panama.

Over the next five years Pizarro became a close confidant of Avila. When Avila became jealous of Balboa's popularity with the people, he began to distrust him. Despite the fact that Balboa had married Avila's daughter, he told Pizarro to kill him. Pizarro was to arrest him and bring him immediately to trial. Balboa was convicted and beheaded in January of 1519. For his loyalty to Avila, Pizarro was granted the office of mayor of Panama City from 1519 to 1523.

The first attempt to explore western South America in 1522 was by Pascal Andagoya but he only made it to the present border of Colombia and Ecuador. Returning to Panama, he spread the news about a land rich with gold. This, along with tales from his cousin Hernán Cortés in Mexico years before, encouraged Pizarro and his cohorts to plan expeditions in search of Inca gold.

Pizarro developed partnerships with Father Hernando de Luque, (of Taboga) and Diego de Almagro. On Taboga Island they planned to explore and conquer the south, and divide the wealth between themselves. They decided that Pizarro would command the expedition; Almagro would provide the military and food supplies, while Luque would be in charge of financing.

Beginning in 1524, and after a number of lengthy and perilous expeditions out of Panama, often encountering battles with the Incas, Pizarro conquered Peru in 1532. He never returned to Taboga. Pizarro lived out his days in Peru as governor until he died in a sword fight at the hands of Almagro's son who wanted to overthrow him.

### **Pillage, Torture and Burn**

In the mid 1500`s, the island was becoming such a popular spot to sack and hide that the Spaniards built a fort with three cannons to defend Taboga on tiny Isla Morro, which is connected to the main island by a sandbar at low tide.

### **Captain Morgan**

In 1671, the infamous Captain Morgan attacked and won the wealthy city of Panama, having used Taboga as one of his bases. During the period thereafter, Captain Morgan's pirates stocked their ships with provisions on Taboga and carried them to the city. They also waited on the island to rob treasure-laden ships passing through the strait. During the attack in Panama City, on hearing that city residents had fled to Taboga Island for refuge, Morgan sent his pirates to the island in search of more treasure.

Captain Morgan held and tortured many of his prisoners on Taboga, one of which was a beautiful married woman Maria del Pilar Lopez de Ayala. He was enthralled with her and held his bewitching captive separately on Taboga. In the beginning he treated her very well, with the intentions of later convincing her to sleep with him. She soon understood his game, and refused, saying she would rather die. He stripped her and put her in a solitary cell, and left her to eat scraps from the floor. When Morgan and his crew left Panama on their way to Jamaica, he succumbed to her charm once again and released her in a final act of mercy.

### **Pirates a Permanent Fixture**

In 1686, Taboga was the center for a group of buccaneers who began to fortify their quarters and store their booty with the intention of another attack on Panama City. Pirates were a permanent fixture in the Bay of Panama and Taboga in the 17th century. It is written that among others, pirates Peter Harris (died 1680), Bartholomew Sharpe (died 1690), Richard Sawkins (died 1680), William Dampier (died 1715), and Peter Townley (died 1686, approx.), all left their footprints on Taboga. Many of these pirates were also in wait for Spanish vessels to come up the coast with gold and treasure bound for Spain.

### **Hero or Villain?**

Although Pizarro is known in Peru for the Spanish conquest of the Inca Empire, there are a large number of Peruvians who regard him as a villain. Taking advantage of the indigenous people, Pizarro ruled Peru and began the decline of Inca culture. The Inca religion was replaced by Christianity and main languages were almost eradicated. Spanish became the official language. The cities of the Inca Empire were transformed into Spanish, Catholic cities. Pizarro is also to blame for the execution of last Inca chief, despite the chief having paid the demanded ransom of gold.

## **The Gorey Tale of Captain Peter Townley**

On August 22, 1686, while Captain Townley with his English and French buccaneer crew, were anchored in Taboga Bay, they were attacked by Spanish ships. Townley blew up one ship and his men were able to take three vessels captive. Although there was only one casualty for the pirates, Townley was injured. They sent a message to the governor of Panama demanding supplies and release of five prisoners; if they didn't comply Townley said heads would roll. The governor ignored the request and sent only medicine. Townley was infuriated and promptly sent a canoe with the heads of 22 Spanish prisoners he had held. The governor immediately released the five prisoners, sent the requested supplies as well as a ransom. Townley had won another battle but died soon after from his battle wounds on Sept. 9, 1686.

## **The Tale of the Three Crosses**

Pirates continued to haunt the little island for many years. On September 18, 1819, pirate Captain John Illingworth and his Chilean crew aboard the frigate Rosa de Los Andes, landed on Taboga after successfully capturing the brigantine ship 'Canton' in the Galapagos. Upon arrival on Taboga a battle ensued. Captain Pepe and eleven soldiers manned three cannons on El Morro and they forced the pirates to retreat but Illingworth launched a second attack. This time the Spanish faltered and the pirates sacked and set fire to the town. Three men from Illingworth's crew were killed in the fight and their graves were marked with wooden crosses on a path between the watchtower and the jungle. Years passed and the crosses were replaced with iron embedded into a concrete base and the area took the name 'Las Tres Cruces'. See 'Hiking' at the end of the story for more details.

## **A Refuge for Heroes & Forty Niners**

In 1825, a hero and one of Simon Bolivar's closest naval commanders, Renato Beluche chose Taboga for his residence and lived there for a number of years. (Simon Bolivar is considered to be one of the greatest liberators of Spanish South America; he was an orphan of Spanish royal descent, born in Venezuela.)

During the 1850's men heading for the California Gold Rush often stopped in Taboga for provisions before heading north. One was an Irishman named Archibald Boardman Boyd. He fell in love with Panama and saw opportunity in provisioning. He purchased a small vessel began to supply ships from his Taboga base. His foresight paid off and the Boyd family operate a successful shipping business in Panama to this day.

## **Today, still Treasure to be Found**

The rich history of Taboga has left its trail and in 1998 pirate treasure was unearthed when the new health clinic was being built in the town; workers unearthed over 1000 Spanish silver pieces. In 2005, a sailor from a ship moored in the Bay of Taboga was beachcombing and came upon an antique gem set into gold, whether it was pirate treasure or lost from a lady's hand, we will never know.

## **Pirate Trails**

Just imagine yourself in pirate boots, trekking the hidden trails of Taboga Island, hunting for the ideal hiding spot for your stolen booty, or coming ashore with your share of the taking for a few days of merry-making and mischief. Though the rowdy pirates have departed, the trails still exist through the jungles and hills of Taboga; all that is required is your imagination. See 'Hike some of the Trails' at the end of the story for more details.

Taboga has a coastal perimeter area of only 8 miles, cliffs, boulders and caves making up much of the windward side, the coastlines rises steeply to the mountainous jungle. Taboga is small enough to hide treasure by hiking on foot, and large enough to make it difficult to find. Or as possibly was the case with the pirates of Taboga, take a dinghy around to the back side to hide it in one of the numerous caves at low tide. Legend has it buried treasure might be in those caves.

If you prefer to kick back, sit on Playa Honda, enjoy an ice-cold beer and just imagine . . . Do spirits still roam the island? How many pirate ghosts haunt the shores of Taboga? Where did they stash their treasure? How much treasure remains to be found?

Compiled by Cynthia Cudmore Mulder

**Contact Cerrito Tropical!**

[www.cerritotropicalpanama.com](http://www.cerritotropicalpanama.com), [info@cerritotropicalpanama.com](mailto:info@cerritotropicalpanama.com), 507-6489-0074, 507-390-8999

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