

Walking Away from Big City Stress

by Cynthia Cudmore-Mulder

Almost five years ago, we stepped off the Isla Taboga ferry on a bright sunny morning with the intention to explore.

I had read a lot about Isla Taboga, and being born and bred on an island, I was intrigued. I had heard pirate and explorer tales, stories of the painter Gauguin, legends of the native people. I have to admit, I had a bit of a fairy tale image but that dissipated when we arrived at the ferry terminal on the

Panama City side, pier 18 - (they have since improved it somewhat). The ferry ride was exciting, the canal, the Bridge of the Americas, the panoramic view of Panama City. And then, as if we had been in a time machine, our family stepped off the ferry into a different world. A quiet tropical island with a tiny fishing village and weekend homes, backed by a towering green hill, peppered with an abundance of blossoms. I felt I was on in tiny village on the Mediterranean 100 years earlier. This was looking better and better.



There wasn't much there then, and still isn't. No cars, no wide streets, no malls, no casinos, a few tourists and weekenders, but mainly families making their living from the sea. But for me that is the beauty. We had decided to wander around and explore. Like many people the three of us walked to the end of the village to check out the climb to the top, but after seeing the road and the distance, not to mention it was almost midday, we turned back and headed for Hotel Chu where we enjoyed a fried rice lunch. Newcomers to Panama, no one had told us about the mouthwatering Corvina and Pargo fish dishes they serve up here. Just to go off on a tangent for a moment, Hotel Chu was a spectacular location, built over the water, shaded and cool. Sadly the Chinese Chu sold it to another Chinese family who began renovation and were stopped by the authorities because of building regulations (now this is something you don't hear often in Panama, they must have upset the wrong person) it is now in a greatly dilapidated state, and the Chinese are still selling beer from under its' crumbling concrete columns. I was told this week they have started construction again. That will be another tale...

After our lunch we traipsed off again, the tide was out so our son and I did some beachcombing while my husband enjoyed the sunshine.

We found the most interesting array of shells, and took a quick dip in the water, but the tide was so far out the swimming wasn't great and we went off to see the rarely recommended Hotel Taboga. Also in a poor state, they had a pool for our son with a little restaurant serving snacks. (I have heard Hotel Taboga is for sale by the way in case someone out there is looking for a fixer-upper with a million dollar location). My husband who makes friends rather quickly began chatting (in Spanish) to the gardener about what might be available on the island. By chance, the gardener said he knew someone who would know and soon after they wandered off leaving us to wallow in the pool.

Within the hour, my husband arrived back at the pool very excited - he loves islands too, and is an expert, born in the Caribbean. He had seen a property, the property. Shortly thereafter, we all set off to see it. Perched up on a tree-covered hill with a commanding view and a constant soft breeze, the location was beautiful. I didn't know exactly what we had in mind, but this felt right. Well, almost right. Neither of us were naïve enough to think there wouldn't be a lot of work involved. Imaginations started to generate. By this time we had missed our ferry, and we sent our new best friend off to search for a fisherman to take us back to the reality of Panama City - 40 minutes away. We didn't sleep much that night.



Back in the city the next day our lawyer began the title search process and investigation into our new property, which after some haggling we bought, that was to evolve into something much more. Our relocation here from Japan.

Taboga is a quaint, old fashioned fishing island 40 minutes from Panama City. Although it is not utopia, it is a lovely place to stop, smell the flowers it is so famous for, to play soccer on the beach, to fish on the pier, and to swim when the tide is in. Life is relaxed and on island time.

BEACHES

From time to time people ask me about Taboga beach cleanliness and water safety; I know a lot about beaches and tides - the beaches are cleaned up on a regular basis but sometimes there is debris which washes in from the ocean. The beach by old Hotel Taboga - the nearest beach to the hotel entrance - is quite safe for kids but always keep a watchful eye when the tide is rising over the sandbar between Isla Morro and Taboga; the incoming tide can cause a strong and dangerous current between the two islands. The beach Playa Honda in front of Hotel Vereda Tropical has little to no current, sandy when the tide is up and great for beach-combing when the tide is low. As many of the Pacific Beaches up the mainland Panama coast can have strong riptides, Taboga is good for those of us who like swimming in the ocean.

SAFETY

On Taboga Island, kids can play on the streets, and everyone wander around without great fear. Their biggest problem will be how to survive without a game center, and how to treat a toe cut at the beach. This is special. I have never heard of any robberies except some petty theft from weekend houses; although I think if you leave your wallet on the beach, it may be gone.

FERRIES

Calypso Queen (507-314-1730; 507-226-1991), leaves from their pier at Amador Causeway near Mi Ranchito Restaurant; there is a new ferry schedule and it is much improved with departures and return trips several times daily. It is best to call to check the schedule and get there 30 minutes early as sometimes there can be quite a line for the tickets. If you don't want to take the ferry, you can always arrange for a fisherman to take you for a hefty price - count on a minimum of \$60 one way for the boat.

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www.cerritotropicalpanama.com, info@cerritotropicalpanama.com
507-6489-0074, 507-390-8999