

LYN FOX

Pirates of the Caribbean

THIS AIN'T ABOUT SOME DISNEYFIED, mascara-laden Johnny Dep flick. Nor is it a crusty, ol' sea tale with Russell Crowe in ponytail. We're talking *real* buccaneers. I mean rum-guzzlin', gun-totin', swashbucklin' scoundrels, holed-up in the remote port of Punta Gorda, Belize. That's Spanish for "fat bitch point." On most maps, it's an empty spot above Honduras—not a completely inaccurate description. Yet, that's where the scurvy little mates can be found. I four-wheeled through mangrove swamps to get there, spent two violent months there, and barely made it out of there. So, if you've got the time, I've got the nonfictional narrative.

I should've known Belize was different from day one. Make that day zero. Before entering the country, I visited the consulate in Chetumal, Mexico. I rang the office bell ... rang the bell ... rang the damn bell. The diplomat eventually appeared. His face was Latin; his hair was African; his accent was British. No surprise there: that's Belize. He wore black wool trousers, a puka shell necklace, and no shirt. That was different.

Crossing the Rio Hondo into Belize, I parked at customs. A motley crew, sporting filthy Bob Marley shirts and bogus ministry-of-tourism badges, gang-swarmed me—a con artists' convention. I declined all offers to carry and/or pilfer my bag. Most of my attending entourage then revealed their *true* identities as Reverend so-and-so of the Lord's such-and-such, thinking perhaps I preferred donating to tipping.

"No, leave me alone!" I screamed in my mind. "Aargh, avast ye scalawags, afore I run ye through!" Actually, I offered them "go-away" coins. They scowled at the mere pittance, threw it on the ground, and stomped off.

I got in line at immigration. Apparently, Belize's no-extradition policy is quite good for tourism. I can't say the inbound crowd looked like pirates; they wore no peg legs or eye patches. However, scarf-bound stubs and scar-tissued sockets were everywhere. I can't say tattoos were everywhere; no floral

etchings nestled in the butt-cracks ahead of me. Yet, countless biceps recalled one of the world's military or penal institutions. Coincidentally, everyone had just come from visiting their aunt in New York, Miami or Bogotá.

Suffice it to say, I didn't push or cut in line. If others did, well, I let them. Sometimes, I apologized or thanked them. My writer's motto: "Dead men tell no tales."

I finally reached the window. A delirious official stamped passports like a carny taking tickets. Ka-chunk, ka-chunk, ka-chunk: admit one to the wild Belize ride; hang on to your valuables.

Returning to the truck, I sped off. Rust-orange dirt road cut through drab-green bush country, where prehistoric frigate birds navigated the seaward sky. Sweat dripped constantly into my eyes, except when I arm-wiped or shook it off.

I lunched in breezy Corozal. An oceanside market offered the standard Belizean fare: red beans and rice with coconut. I poured on the standard Belizean condiment: Marie Sharp's orange-habanero-pepper sauce. The bottle says "medium hot." That means "halfway between Creole and Hell." Once you try it, other peppers are only suitable as baby binkies.

Strolling the turquoise water's edge, I watched West Indian manatees bobbing shyly. Nicknamed "sea cows," their appearance suggests a mermaid and a walrus committed unspeakable acts then birthed children. Bloated and wrinkled, they hover between lovable and laughable, cute and homely.

Back on the Northern Highway, I turned on the radio. Three choices: static, reggae or no-holds-barred legislative proceedings. For a while, I enjoyed steel drums with voices extolling love, God and marijuana. Then, I dabbled in politicians questioning their colleagues' sanity, sobriety and paternity.

Orange Walk gradually rose over the horizon. Rolling into the busy farming town, I fell behind a horse-drawn wagon, loaded with sugar cane. Two men drove. Their hair and eye colors matched their straw hats and blue denim. They were Mennonites, part of a pacifist clan that fled Canada, shunning military service.

That's understandable. What conscientious person wouldn't rather raise a family surrounded by poachers, pirates, marauders and mayhem than serve a stint with the bloodthirsty killers of the Canadian armed forces, defending a country so brutal as to amass a current weapons arsenal approximately that of the average LA rap artist? On second thought, maybe they were a tad hasty.

Whinnying and snorting, the horses clomped to a stop. No hint of pirates in this pastoral scene, I thought. Suddenly, the brethren left-turned their sweet cargo into a rum distillery. Yo, ho, ho!

The drive to Belize City was hypnotic. Monarch butterflies flitted in the sun-drenched air; boa constrictors slithered across the well-paved road. I reached the ramshackle, pirate-founded sprawl by dinnertime. Took the swing bridge across Haulover Creek to Albert Street. Parked and walked to Macy's Restaurant.

The special of the day was gibnut. Locals swear visiting Queen Elizabeth II loved this delicacy, until learning it was the huge rodent, paca. My thoughts transitioned inexplicably from visiting queens sucking on gibnuts to the male tourists cuddling at the opposite table. We conversed. One was a greying executive at a San Francisco utility company. The other was his young intern.

The elder handed over his camera, asking me to photograph them. His partner recoiled from such hard documentation of their romantic escapade. Getting hot-and-bothered by this coyness, the exec tickled the intern out the door into a car. Though the couple didn't strike me as swarthy sea-rogues, I had a strange premonition some booty was about to be plundered.

At dawn, I put my key to the ignition, but something made me pause. In the rear-view mirror, sunrise over the sea looked like a juicy orange on a glass table. Belizean oranges *are* the juiciest. Nearly inedible, their thick, fibrous segmentations burst with liquid sunshine. A fresh-squeezed jug-for-the-road had just cost me pennies.

In front of me, the Western Highway stretched out like an anteater's tongue, sucking me into the unknown—a tropical broadleaf forest teeming with life. Down on the muddy ground, a smelly, boar-like peccary rooted in a log as a hairy tarantula crawled out. Up in the towering ceiba canopy, a black howler monkey screeched in the grip of some predator, then gurgled; then ominous silence. Everywhere in-between, ferns, vines and orchids melded into a live hanging tapestry, continually reweaving itself.

What response to this array of natural wonders could be appropriate? I performed an anticlimactic human-trick; I turned a switch and surged forward.

Before my o.j. ran dry, the capital city unfolded. While the rest of Belize is a hub for tourism and commerce, Belmopan is the hub of government worker activity. You guessed it: still as a tumbleweed ghost town. No greedy pirates here—several lawyers though. If you listen close, you can hear long departed bureaucrats, shuffling papers back and forth for eternity. (Some

folks think death is a termination. Others expect promotion or demotion. I'm thinking more lateral transfer.)

Jumping on the Hummingbird Highway, I rumbled across stone bridges and wound through banana plantations. One ripe, handy bunch caught my eye—a rare kind that tastes like buttered apples. Those small golden arches were the only fast food I'd pass that day. (On long, lonely drives, bananas also make great karaoke mikes, but I wouldn't know about that.)

A slap-board trading post marked the intersection of an even-less-used road. I rolled to a stop. My truck's exhausted engine belched, sighed and collapsed into a coma. The store stocked only two essential fuels: gas and beer. They had one type of petrol, two types of cerveza: Belikin Lager and Belikin Stout. Belize's national brew tastes great ice-cold in the jungle. Of course, so does parrot piss. I mean it probably would.

The *other* high-octane liquid was the concern. My truck tank bore a sticker clearly reading "unleaded fuel only." I'm pretty good with tools. So, I decided to attempt the necessary vehicle modifications. Climbing into the truck bed, I un-bungee-corded a bin containing screwdrivers, wrenches, saws and duct tape. Thirty minutes later, I was covered with mud, but the problem was solved: the sticker was completely scraped off.

Fully loaded and leaded, I chugged into Dangriga, sounding like a constipated locomotive. Residents stared blankly as if to say, "I've seen stranger than you." The sleepy village straddles North Stann Creek, with Commerce Street crossing to become Saint Vincent, the isle from which the town founders migrated. The Garifuna inhabitants are a fun, chaotic people, who excel in the arts but couldn't organize a cluster-fuck. Scotiabank was on the non-commerce side of the river—a bad omen.

I needed cash soon. Back in Canada, a Scotia manager swore my card would work at all branches. Yet, in my heart, I knew her freshly inked "Global Policies & Procedures Manual" didn't really envision some yahoo wandering around Southern Belize. I approached the ATM with unusual reverence and ceremony. I waited ... no buckaroos. I cursed the faceless, heartless machine; I cursed the happy-faced, kind-hearted manager.

The bank was closed. Perhaps, the malfunction was temporary; maybe, everything would work another day. I crossed my fingers and pulled out onto the Southern Highway.

Civilization abruptly ended. The road line on my map was apparently someone's promise: "If you come, we will build it." Frequent signs proclaimed the route a United Nations/British Commonwealth/US Development Fund work-in-progress. I would've guessed more the joint efforts

of me and a couple other passing trucks. Never say politicians do nothing but spend your money and take credit; they actually make some really nice signs.

Bedding down in the rainforest was an act of sheer brav—er—stupidity. Spider monkeys and fruit bats dangled above. Creepy-crawlies established supply lines over and under me. Passing cats left me to wonder: margay, ocelot, or jaguar? Don't even ask about the mosquitoes. By morning, I was as refreshed and relaxed as a heroin addict in detox. Just when I thought my hell was over, I made a discovery that may still send me into therapy: a crunchy, striped beetle in my navel. Save the rainforest? Save me *from* the rainforest! Try it yourself before you judge.

The final stretch to Punta Gorda was a journey into a lost world. Hordes of Mayan children peopled the landscape. Rivers served as highways, laundries and public baths. Machetes worked as tools, weapons and eating utensils. Huts tripled as stores, kitchens and chicken coops. Hammocks hosted naps, meals and family reunions. Belize had transformed a Toyota Tundra into a time machine.

Rounding a bend, I came upon my destination. Punta Gorda's isolation stems from being at the end of the road—the not-yet-built road. Jungle-carpeted mountains and rugged, crashing coastline impede access to nearby Guatemala.

For centuries, this dead-end kept the spot off the beaten track. While Native feet and Spanish boots traversed the Americas, this mist-shrouded, swampy nook was left to the chatter of birds and the smell of moss. Today, the continent's least-sought-after real estate sparkles as a scarce remnant of pristine biosphere, and seaside Punta Gorda attracts some who prefer life off of law enforcement's beaten track. One lazy afternoon, as the ocean clocked the centuries with its endless white-noise metronome, I showed up.

During my stay, most days ended at the Mangrove Restaurant. Jon, the Canadian owner who "moved South to avoid legal hassles," brings three assets to the fine-dining industry: he is handy with a baseball bat, he can/does outdrink the customers, and his wife makes steak, veggies and garlic mashed potatoes more exciting than sex.

One night, the place was packed. Missionary Larry and spouse sat at a corner table, under wall-mounted oars and fish netting. His income allowed for preaching the word, acquiring the primo Sea Front Inn, and building the area's only air-conditioned, high-rise condos with cable TV. Punta Gorda is a drug transshipment point; word-on-the-street puts the cleric at the epicenter. On a recent "fishing cruise," he was the sole survivor of a shipboard shootout.

Canoe and spears adorned the opposite wall, above Environmental Willy and family. Belizean born and Idaho educated, he returned home rich with endangered-species research grants. Alas, opening both a gym and a nightclub left him little time in the bush—except for the clear-cut section where he built his hurricane-proof mahogany-palace-on-stilts. He offered me work as his bartender. I can't mix drinks, but he figured I'd skim less profits than the local boys.

The room-center table held the mayor and his buxom fourth wife. They weren't drinking, because he was meeting-and-greeting, and she was thirteen.

Unexpectedly, a sinewy Rastafarian-type, wearing tattered burlap and a yellow, crocheted cap, bounced in the door, then plopped at my table. His voice sang out: "Hullo mon. Mi name iz Calico Jack. Haffa mi people wuz pirates, unna de Union Jack; de udda half sails below deck, cuz dem wuz black. Dats a fact!"

Of those with their line polished to a rhyme, I usually stand clear, but I had the time, so I bought him a beer. "What do you do Jack?"

"I wuz in de US Marine Corp, but dem kip tellinz mi wut ta do. So, I has ta get out. Now, I makes drums."

"What kind of drums?"

"De magic spirit drums!"

"Oh."

"Maybe ya cud loans me dat truck fer jus a little while."

When I declined, he produced a lab report with HIV POSITIVE circled. Leaning toward me, he threatened, "Sum udda folks iz fraid I might bite dem or sumptin, but you and meez good friends, right?"

Before I could respond, Jon came whipping round the bar with bat in furious motion. The rapscaillon blew out like a gust of wind.

"I've told him not to pull that shit in here. Why don't you join us for a drink at the bar?"

I sat by a fiftyish American with military haircut and police manner. FBI Frank said he was buying drinks; actually, he was distributing truth serum. Drank most of it himself though; gave out more info than he gleaned. By the time he'd tried to buy my passport twice, I'd connected enough dots to know the grinning goof sitting next to him in Hawaiian shirt and flip-flops was a mafia snitch he was babysitting.

Lowering my voice, I suggested there was a fine line between prosecuting crime and manufacturing it, that I didn't appreciate being set up. Silence. His bloodshot, watery eyes smouldered with the knowledge his guise was transparent.

Regaining composure, he spoke: "Look kid, if I am what you say I am, and I'm not saying I am, you got no worries; you didn't take the bait. Let me give you some advice. Central America is not a touchy-feely place; everyone here has an angle. If you stay long enough, you'll be corrupted. I like you. Toughen up or go home!"

He was right. Long ago, the Spanish conquistadors imposed their ethic of power and gold on the indigenous cult of blood and fertility, until today the region is a macho, Darwinist stew, dominated by cash, guns and push-up bras. Rich men buy power; poor men take power; women seduce power. Greed, pride and lust, the basic instincts, the deadly sins, prevail. Perhaps, it is the same everywhere. Maybe, North American anti-monopoly, discrimination and harassment laws simply coat our primal urges with a sophisticated veneer of political correctness, while the fire still burns down below.

Whatever the case, my return from Belize was hindered more by gringo foibles than foreign rascals. At home, spilling boiled water on my foot would be no big deal. However, in the tropics, it festered into a green-pus-oozing infection. (Rum *is* healthier than oatmeal for breakfast.) A sadistic, tweezers-wielding nurse saved my foot, mercilessly swabbing alcohol-drenched gauze, while I cried for my mommy.

Phoning the Scotiabank president saved my gluteus maximus as well. I explained that without immediate funds I'd have neither transportation nor food. In short, I'd be in the situation most brown people face every day. Naturally, he was terrified and arranged the transfer.

My last Belizean memory comes from the white beaches of Placencia Peninsula. Anglers reeled in fighting bonefish and big barracuda, as swimmers touched velvety stingrays and sandpaper sharks. Burying my toes in warm sand, I watched a diving group bound for Glover's Reef, named after a buccaneer. Their guide explained that pirates *once* inhabited Belize. Bullshit! They still do.

I don't expect any kudos from luxury tour operators or retirement villa brokers for saying that. Yet, for every boy who dreams of being a pirate, and every man who dreams of being a boy, for every girl who prefers SUVs to minivans, and every woman who doesn't relish the government data basing her shopping purchases with bank records, DNA, and retina scan, it's good to know there are still places where you make your own rules, where no one tells you to take your feet off the furniture.

Belize is such a place. Even the swaying coconut palms betray a pirate's heart, whispering that the blue Caribe offers all you could ever want or need—except a job.

