

Corn star

KAREN KRAMER escapes it all (literally) in Nicaragua

AFTER years of hopping my way through the islands of the Caribbean, I had given up on finding one that was truly unspoiled. It was when my mind wandered further south to Central America's coastline that I learned of the island I was sure would fit the bill: Little Corn, just 45 miles off Nicaragua's coast. This one-square-mile stretch of land, population 750, was said to be devoid of roads, cars, TVs, telephones and ATMs. Paradise.

Turns out, paradise isn't easy to get to.

Two planes (one to Managua, then another plane to Big Corn Island) and one rough-hewn boat later (a bouncy 45-minute ride not for the faint-hearted), I arrived at the wooden steps that stood in for a pier on Little Corn. Soaked and shaken, I was greeted by the welcome wagon: a friendly young man with a wheelbarrow, who would take my luggage to Casa Iguana, the cliff-side guest house where I was staying.

The Corn Islands had for centuries been a British protectorate. In 1894, Nicaragua declared the area's sovereignty. The quirky islands, the population of which includes the descendants of African slaves, feel more Jamaican than they do Nicaraguan — minus the all-inclusives. But what Little Corn lacks in comforts, it more than makes up for in empty beaches and some of the best fishing and diving in the Caribbean.

Upon arrival at Casa Iguana, I found comfortable, if rustic, rooms (complete with porch hammocks) that look out onto the sea, wind-powered generators and food fresh from the garden. It was all I needed.

The next few days consisted of little more than wandering around an island that was only populated only some 50 years ago. One day as I walked on the beach, a woman called out, "Would you like some fresh



Peter Zuremba

Good morning starfish — the earth waves hello!

fish? I've got good conch and fresh lobster." The woman turned out to be Miss Elsa, the cook and owner of an informal ocean-front establishment — calling it a restaurant would be overstating things.

Although I had planned to try several other restaurants in "town" — which consists of a dive shop, a couple of informal businesses and a hotel — once I ate at Miss Elsa's, I never went anywhere else. After all, not only could I get a great \$6 plate of lobster and rice, I had excellent company while eating.

During my visit, I met more locals. This time, Betsy Brock and her husband, Gilbert, who were one of the six original families who came to Little Corn. I wound up chatting on their porch for the afternoon.

I didn't want to leave. But in the end, I wasn't sure if it was down to the fact that I'd finally found paradise, or simply because I couldn't bear the thought of getting on that boat again.

THE LOWDOWN

GO: Fly JFK to Managua on Delta (delta.com) or American (aa.com), transfer to Big Corn Island via Atlantic Airlines (atlanticair.com). From here, catch the \$7 boat to Little Corn.
SLEEP: Casa Iguana from \$25/night; casaiguana.net.