

The Queue dons backpack and heads off the beaten track to the undiscovered Caribbean, where tourism is still an aspiration. Redefining 'unspoiled', this tiny island gem rewards the adventurous. **Becky Wicks** unlocks...

BIG secrets of Little Corn

This Nicaraguan island paradise has stayed relatively untouched, but will it lose its charm to tourism...

If you can endure the bumpy ride from Managua, through occasionally stormy skies on a plane the size of your average car, and then an even bumpier speed boat (panga) from the island of Big Corn, you're half way to this semi-secret paradise. Big Corn's baby sister, Little Corn is a 3km long island in the Caribbean sea with less than a thousand residents, and the major players in guide book land have dedicated just a few less-than-detailed pages about its glory. Covered in sea spray, we were met at the dock by the host of our chosen place to stay – Casa Iguana. Big smiled Betsy gave our bags to a porter who carted them off before us on a wheelbarrow (there are no cars at all on Little Corn, and only marginally more dogs than people).

Winding our way through jungle paths towards a row of casitas overlooking the sea, Betsy chats about the week we've got in store. "I hope you brought your flashlight!" she laughs, and points out the only two places en route to Casa Iguana from "town" that offer light on the walk home at night. "Dinner is at 7 if you're eating with us. We all sit down together, and if you're not there and haven't told us before, you'll be billed for your food." She doesn't mean to

be harsh. The need for such discipline is necessary when you're cooking fresh each day and paying the local fisherman, who is basically catching to order.

Betsy herself, who moved from Chicago to help find local artists to sell crafts at a new store and now also works at the tourist "resort" sees plenty more potential on Little Corn. She's currently heading a local women's co-op, getting people excited about a more eco-friendly future. "We grow bananas and coconuts here, and have fresh eggs but that's it, and look at all this wonderful, fertile soil! It's such a waste." Later in the week she tells us fourteen locals showed up to her first meeting on the subject, a great result.

Days on Little Corn are spent lazing in the sun, catching up on literary classics (or chick lit if you're like me), and eating the abundant seafood (a lobster dinner will set you back on average \$8 USD). If you're PADI qualified, you can join the energetic team down at the dive shack in exploring one of many stunning coral reefs in the surrounding blue waters. Nurse and reef sharks, puffer fish and turtles are common sightings. Don't miss John's Garden – a beautiful field of purple and orange coral named after the man who discovered it and first set up the dive shack in 2000. We were lucky enough to meet him: "I first came in 1998 and immediately asked where the dive shack was – the sea was so beautiful and you could even see some of the reefs from the beach. I couldn't

believe it when they told me there wasn't one! I explained the benefits to the locals and they agreed, so I made it happen."

John himself is aware that he's contributed largely to the growth of tourism on the tiny island, something that, unless managed with scrutiny could well pose a threat to this idyllic lifestyle. Now he's back to help set up the new store that will house the art and crafts from Betsy's newly discovered artists, as well as a fishing shop and a bar and grill and he speaks with nothing but excitement about the venture: "Tourism won't spoil Little Corn – cruise ships could never stop here, and only the people who can stand flying, seasickness and creepy crawlies will find us." I shrug. It's true.

Blackberry and facebook addicts certainly don't belong here. There's one Internet shack on Little Corn: "The guy keeps saying he's coming to fix it," were the words accompanying the shrug when asked when it would be working. Phone reception is decent on one side of the island (the opposite side to Casa Iguana) but don't plan any important calls. In general, the people here don't make many plans, and neither do its sun-loving visitors.

Our casita is basic, with an outdoor shower running from a tank and a bed constructed from what looks like a giant table, with a mattress on top. It's levelled with the mesh-covered window, so lying there at

night you can hear the waves breaking almost beneath you, or watch fork lightning blaze a vertically striped firework display across the sky as rain hammers menacingly on the tin roof. And if you're ever in doubt that nature reigns supreme on Little Corn, just ask the plastic looking lizards, clinging to your ceiling.

Need a guide as you explore the island? The dogs on Little Corn are something special. Each automatically assigns itself to a new visitor, sleeps within barking distance of your casita and follows you around the island. Our K9 guide was a mongrel named Bushman who has, according to Betsy,

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saved a tourist from a vicious boa constrictor and miraculously shown up when she's needed a walk home in the dark, on many occasions. What makes the "homeless" dogs of Little Corn so special? The fact that everybody on the island accepts, loves and looks after them. Feed yours a leftover lobster tail or steak tip and he'll be yours forever; or at least until you hop back on that panga and it's time for him to follow someone else.

Unsurprisingly, the tiny island has been used as a gateway for drugs direct from Columbia and when asked, the locals will happily tell tales of giant packages washing up on shore, fresh from threatened boats being chased en route. "We heard the plane, and the next thing you know, every diver on the island was out there, hoping it'd be their

lucky day," says fisherman Chris, who moved from Hawaii and makes a healthy living pulling Mahi Mahi and Barracuda from the water for the local restaurants. He's seen a growth in tourism take its toll, however.

"Twenty years ago they say you could wade out just a few metres and pluck a lobster from the bottom! Several families got rich from it but now you have to go miles out to get anything. They've taken too much... but they're quick to blame other people," he says, in a darker tone, before explaining that being a separate entity from Managua, the island adopts its own government and rules. "I'm only allowed to bring back four fish when I take tourists out, but the locals can take as many as they like. I bring back five and give one away, [the others go to the tourist's place of accommodation], I try and keep the guys happy. There are a lot of poor people on this island."

Poor maybe, but the state of their bank accounts is perhaps not so much a concern for the people here, who bask in riches of a different sense. Betsy explains: "We employ people from the main land; the locals here don't want to work. And why would you, when you can fish from the sea, sleep in a house you've built yourself?" I think it's a fair point. Personally, I've never been somewhere so unspoilt, so friendly, with a population so hopeful for the future, in spite of and including what tourism might bring. There's a big lesson to be learned by everyone who dares to make their way to Little Corn.

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