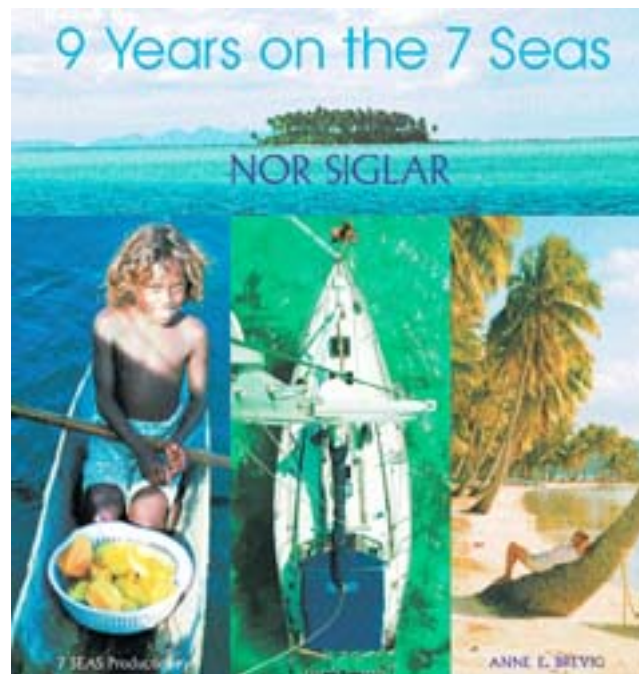


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9 Years on the 7 Seas

NOR SIGLAR

Sample Chapter: San Blas - Help! Dead man on deck!



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CARIBBEAN

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*Chichime.
An idyllic
settlement in
Kuna Yala.*

HELP! DEAD MAN ON DECK!

What? A dead body on *Nor Siglar's* deck? We must have heard wrong. The young Indian was gravely serious. "My uncle died this morning," he continued in perfect English, studying us with searching eyes. "We must get him to Carti before dark. Can you help us, please?" We couldn't believe our eyes. Was the little man trying to trick us? Sure enough, the natives of these isolated islands have a reputation for being aggressive. But wasn't this going a bit too far?

We had just anchored up in Cayos Chichime in beautiful San Blas, a group of 365 palm-clad little islands surrounded by coral reefs, located in the

Caribbean Sea not far from the Panama Canal. San Blas is the domain of the Kuna Indians, the second smallest race on earth after the Pygmies. So far, they have managed to maintain their culture and way of life relatively intact. Theirs is a matriarchal society where men marry into the bride's family. Women are in charge of the finances and day-to-day activities, allocating tasks to the men, whose main responsibilities are fishing and the coconut trade with Colombia. "So watch out for the women," we were forewarned, "they are tough negotiators and extremely persistent."

Soon three women onboard a *cayuko* came

paddling out to *Nor Siglar*. The dugout canoe was heavily laden with watertight buckets full of colourful crafts. In no time, they were alongside to peddle their treasures. But we had been told that we should hold off buying anything until we were ashore where the selection was better, and where we could be with these unique people in their natural surroundings.

"We'll come ashore later," we said firmly. "We are tired from our overnight passage and need a rest." The women looked puzzled. They only speak Kuna. "Please, my friends," begged our English-speaking friend, who was hovering in the back-



Sleek cayuko bringing provisions for Carti.

Kunas come alongside to trade. They need money for a funeral. Could Nor Siglar transport the body to Carti for them?

Braulio's mother creating a traditional mola.



ground, observing us from a distance. “We need money for the funeral. For coffee, sugar and rice. Could you buy some *molas* right away, please?” We looked at each other. They sure were persistent. But surely they wouldn’t go this far in order to clinch a deal? The fellow noticed that we were in doubt. “It’s true! 100% true!” he exclaimed, rattling off something to the women, who once again, showed us their crafts. “Not here,” we repeated. “We’ll come ashore to trade.”

By the time we had launched the dinghy and rowed ashore, the women had hung their colourful *molas* on a clothesline between two straw huts. It was a spectacular display. *Molas* are the front and back panels of the unique blouse worn by Kuna women, the most visible proof of their identity. Each panel is made from several layers of cloth in different colours. The material is cut out in imaginative patterns and hand sewn with tiny stitches, using a special “reverse appliqué” technique. The result is wonderful.

Originally, the *mola* was only used as clothing. Today, the blouse, which has survived the many negative influences from the western world, is not only an important component of a very special dress, but a popular souvenir of primitive art as well. So nowadays, women are making them for sale, sewing day and night. In the olden days, only traditional, geometric patterns were created. Today, these are disappearing in favour of new, more contemporary designs inspired by visitors from afar, foreign magazines, household gadgets and motifs from nature.

The beauty, variety, artistic imagination and bright colours of the *molas* mesmerized us. It was difficult to make a choice. But were they ever pushy! “Here! Take this one, this or this,” they insisted, pointing as they went along. We were flabbergasted. “Not now,” we refused. But, our modern Kuna, Braulio didn’t give up either. “We need forty dollars for the funeral,” he said. “If you buy two *molas* right now, we’ll let you into our home to see the deceased!” That did it. We chose two beautiful blouses.

Only two families lived on the little island. In two small huts with straw roof, dirt floor and cane walls lived an extended family of 14 people and three generations. One hut was for cooking, the other for sleeping. It was into this sanctuary that we were cordially invited. And there, right in the middle of the room, we found the dead man lying in a hammock, fully dressed with his head and chin neatly tied in a pure white kerchief, hands folded on his chest. The man was tiny, tiny - and very, very old, they said. He wore an old, rumpled suit, white shirt and tie. His family had laid him to rest; a kerosene lamp was burning on the floor by his head, incense smoldering and candles flickering throughout the one-room hut. Children were milling about, playing quietly. It was all so very natural. The presence of the dead man didn’t seem to bother them in the least.

There was no furniture in the hut. Nor windows. On the walls and beams hung a variety of clothing, hammocks, tools and gadgets. It was dark, cool and comfortable. The elders sat on low, carved



Typical thatched bamboo huts and narrow pathways of the San Blas islands.



A Kuna girl with her mother's handmade molas.

Kuna women in traditional dress exhibit their molas outside their home.

stools along the walls, whispering amongst themselves, visibly moved. It seemed strange to be so near people of such a different culture, especially under such extraordinary circumstances.

“We are waiting for a big cayuko to transport the body to Carti for our traditional “Liberation of Spirit” ceremony,” Braulio said. “But it is getting late and we are worried that they are not coming.” The man had been dead since early morning. It was hot and high time to get moving. Carti was 10 miles away. It was 4 in the afternoon. At 9°N, it gets dark around 6 p.m. “If they really need help, we ought to give them a hand, Anne,” Martin whispered. With the storm in Golfe de Papagallo fresh in our minds, where we had received help from locals, we didn’t hesitate. “Of course we’ll help you,” Martin offered spontaneously. Braulio’s face lit up. “But our charts are poor. And if we are going to make Carti before dark, we’d better get going right away.” “Go ahead and hoist anchor,” he replied. “We’ll be right there.”

It didn’t take long before Braulio was alongside in his cayuko, the deceased still in his hammock, now wrapped in an old sailcloth tied to a long piece of wood, normally used as a mast. In a flash, the body was hoisted up on deck and lashed down under the boom together with an old beaten-up suitcase containing all his worldly belongings. It was very light.

The man’s older sister also came along with his



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young, pretty niece and her five children, the youngest at her breast. The party clambered aboard in their native dress, bringing piles of stuff for their once-in-a-lifetime voyage, their first ever on a modern sailboat: plastic bags of clothing, bowls of smoked and dried fish, a burlap sack of coconuts, a large “hand” of green bananas, cans of milk powder, fresh water and an old, rusty propane bottle. The baggage appeared pretty dirty and smelly to us, and we couldn't help but think that if ever we were going to get cockroaches onboard, it would be now.

They are really unique, these neat, little Kuna Indians, especially the women with their classic features, elegant posture and colourful dress. They wear the wealth of the family on their bodies; gold rings on fingers, in the nose and ears, their necks loaded with strands of beads, shells and silver coins that clatter when they walk. Beaded bands in geometric patterns adorn their arms from elbow to wrist and their legs from ankle to just below the knee. Their very special dress consists of a red and yellow cotton shawl, a black or blue wraparound skirt with yellow paisley pattern, and finally, the traditional multi-coloured mola blouse. According to

ancient tradition, the women paint a decorative thin, black line on the bridge of the nose so that it will appear extra long, a sign of beauty within this tribe. They wear their hair short, use lots of rouge from natural sources and are normally barefoot. However, nail polish and plastic sandals are clear signs that modern civilization has begun to influence this isolated paradise.

In modern shorts, T-shirt and a baseball cap complete with pins, Braulio stood in strong contrast to his fellow passengers. Well underway, assured that he knew his way through the shallow waters strewn with treacherous rocks and reefs, we relaxed and struck up a conversation. Where had he learned such good English? “In California,” he replied. “I lived in San Francisco with a Mormon family for three years and went to high school there. This is how I know your western ways.”

It was odd to sit and talk to an indigenous local who was familiar with two such opposing life styles. Having experienced our western civilization, Braulio instinctively knew what we would find interesting and strange, funny or hard to understand about his culture. He was more than happy to

entertain us with tales of the many unique customs and ways of the Kunas. So not only did this crossing become our most unique passage ever, carrying the most unusual cargo we have ever had onboard, but it also turned out to be the most educational and fascinating two hours of our lives.

“Our society is steeped in traditions and rituals,” Braulio stated, “especially the many female life cycle rites. We celebrate everything from “Ear and Nose-piercing” ceremonies of newborn girls to “Puberty”, “Hair-cutting” and “Naming” ceremonies. “Tell us about the “Puberty Ceremony”,” I begged. “Sure,” Braulio agreed, with the broadest smile we have ever seen. “When a girl reaches puberty, she is isolated in a small enclosure, painted black with the juice of the *genipa* fruit to protect her from evil spirits, and washed with salt water several times a day. This is an ancient purifying ritual. After four days, the isolation rite culminates in a 3-day “Hair-cutting Ceremony”. Then the whole village celebrates her “Coming-of-Age” with song and dance, food and drink. When all is over, the girl is proclaimed an adult and ready to be married. In fact, this ritual is usually a prerequisite for marriage. You should try *Chica*,” Braulio chuckled. Barrels of this potent drink, which consists of sugar cane juice, corn and cocoa, are always bubbling and fermenting in Kuna villages, ready for use in their numerous celebrations.

“Marriage is a different story,” Braulio continued with a sheepish smile. It was obvious that he enjoyed sharing his local knowledge with us pale-faces. “Would you like me to go on?” We nodded. “Here in Kuna Yala, marriage is arranged by the parents,” he explained. “The young couple may not be informed of the wedding ahead of time. That happened to me,” he laughed, “so I know what I am talking about. Anyway, it goes like this: a group of young men appointed by the chiefs capture the unsuspecting bridegroom, carry him forcibly to the house of his equally unsuspecting bride, and throw him into her hammock. They then thrust the young woman on top of him, holding the prospective pair in place, while a burning brand is positioned under the hammock. When they are finally released, the man and woman flee the scene. This procedure is repeated three nights in a row. If the couple agrees to the match, they stay together the last night. At dawn, the bridegroom goes with his father-in-law to-be to gather two logs for his bride to place in a cross, creating a hearth. This done, the marriage is sealed.

“Pretty smart, don't you think?” Braulio chuckled while steering *Nor Siglar* with amazing ease. We were impressed and surprised at his sailing skills. Having grown up with the sea at his back door, he





The family of the dead Kuna underway on Nor Siglar to the neighbouring island for the Liberation of Spirit ceremony and burial.

Anne playing with children on the beach.

SAN BLAS – KUNA YALA

Coordinates:	09°00' N, 78°00' W
Location:	South America, on the Caribbean coast of Panama; borders Colombia and Panama
Government:	Autonomous territory (representation in the Republic of Panama)
Area:	365 small coral islands
Coastline:	370 km
Population:	32,446 (2000) Indigenous Kuna indians
Capital:	Porvenir
Languages:	Kuna
Religions:	Roman Catholic, indigenous beliefs
Currency:	Balboa (PAB)
Industries:	Fishing, subsistence agriculture, mola hand craft, tourism,
Agriculture:	Coconuts
Exports:	Molas (small-scale)

was obviously used to the water and an excellent sailor. But handling small, dugout canoes is quite different from a modern sailboat. The explanation was simple; he had been a deck hand on a schooner in California.

Braulio had always wanted to become a missionary. "But not possible," he admitted with great sadness. "I make big mistake!" He had left his wife and children after falling in love with another woman. So that was it. A missionary cannot be divorced. On the other hand, Braulio had a good chance to become a chief. So far he was too young. From what we could see, with the knowledge and experience he possessed, he would be a strong candidate. We thought he would make a magnificent chief some day.

The children were quiet and well-behaved, gazing at everything in sight with curiosity. So many strange things! We let them try the binoculars. Never ever had they experienced anything so amazing. Their straw hut, which was nothing but a spot on the horizon, was suddenly very near. How could that be? And when they discovered Nor Siglar's toilet, they couldn't believe their eyes. What on earth was that? Must be dangerous! What if water started flooding into the boat? It would fill in no time and sink! This was something they understood and had great respect for. Their own little dugout canoes leak like sieves and must be bailed constantly. The children were deathly afraid of

sinking. We demonstrated what the toilet was for. They stared at us in disbelief. How stupid! To prove his point, the bravest in the group climbed out into the cockpit and peed over the railing with a cheeky smile.

After two entertaining hours, Braulio, who also liked to call himself Frank, piloted us safely into Carti just before nightfall. As we approached the densely populated island of 2000, people came running down to the dock. It didn't take long before a cayuko was on its way with molas. Little did they know what kind of cargo we had onboard, until Braulio told them what had happened. The news spread quickly, and soon canoes came at us from all directions. Suddenly, there was great activity onboard Nor Siglar. The women changed into their Sunday best and started wailing, the very first sign of emotion. It seemed like a bit of a show for the villagers. Before we knew it, four guys jumped onboard, hoisted the corpse into their cayuko, sat down on top of it and paddled ashore, where women were crying and crossing themselves. Then, the funeral procession disappeared into the village. The wake could begin.

The following day, *el cacique* sent for us. The ancient Chief welcomed us warmly to San Blas and thanked us profusely for our help. We were treated like VIPs and taken directly to *casa de congreso*, the very heart of Kuna community. The village gathering house, a straw hut similar to the others, but

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much larger, was full of benches. In the centre, strung from the beams, were several hammocks. Here, chiefs lay all day long, chanting and smoking their long pipes while debating and making important decisions on matters of the day. Every day at dusk, villagers met to deal with situations as they occurred. Village labour was organized, projects discussed and delegated, problems solved. If anybody needed help, assistance was granted immediately. In this way, neither problems, nor disputes became old before a solution was found. Maybe we have something to learn from this well organized, so-called primitive Kuna nation?

Braulio was the perfect host. We were invited to his home for dinner and met his mother who demonstrated mola stitching. He also gave us a guided tour of the local school and floating hospi-

tal, an old, derelict American merchant ship that served the larger islands. People nodded and smiled to us. We were the only white people there. So they knew who we were. Did we need anything? "No," we hesitated. "Although we would really love to attend the funeral." This time, however, it was we who were going too far. The funeral was definitely for Kunas only.

The old man from Chichime received his important "Liberation of Spirit" ceremony, before being escorted by a long cayuko flotilla to his burial. The procession left before dawn to get upriver before the women started their laundry for the day. There, deep in the jungle at dusk, he was buried according to ancient tradition, in his hammock together with all his worldly belongings – his little, old beaten-up suitcase.

