

A fisherman plies the flats of Providencia's offshore keys.

PROVIDENCIA AN HEIRLOOM JEWEL

OUR ISLAND IS NEXT TO THE KINGDOM of heaven," Josephine Huffington told me in a dreamy tone. Her home, the remote Colombian island of Providencia (aka Old Providence), though unknown to most, has

for centuries inspired such sentiments in those who find their way here. One description by a British geographer in 1762 called the island "perhaps the best in the West Indies," in part because of its "healthful air," "richness of soil" and "plenty of turtle and fish." I had come for the diving, hoping the description still fit.

Josephine manages Miss Elma's, which like most hotels on the island would look at home on a scratched postcard from your grandfather's young and adventurous days. Named after Josephine's mother, Miss Elma's is a sampling of a simpler Caribbean that most of us missed and many of us long for. There is no pool, no blender at the bar, and if you stop in for a crab sandwich, you'll dine in an open-air pavilion or not at all.

Providencia's main tourism draw is the chance to dive on some of the Caribbean's most stellar reefs. Along with abundant, healthy corals and sponges, they still boast "plenty of turtle and fish." Above the waterline, visitors can hike trails through lush jungle; even from a distance you know this is a

land well-fed by its "richness of soil."

For more sedentary pursuits, Roland Roots Bar is legendary among locals and visitors. It is completely isolated from the nearest small village by a long, rough road and situated on an almost impossibly perfect beach. On a daytime visit, I swung

in the "healthful air" from a hammock and then from a tire swing hanging from coconut palms that stretched over white sand and crystal water. At night, I listened to roots reggae while sipping a Coco Loco from a just-cut coconut.

The island has a remarkable history, including settlement at one time or another by famous pirates like Captain Morgan and a band of Puritans who arrived in a sister ship to the *Mayflower*. But there are few signs of this past other than the people themselves. Many can trace their families back centuries, and they still buy and sell land in plots that run from the sea to the mountaintop.

Development of those plots is tightly controlled, so there's a good chance this place — which I came to believe was aptly described by Miss Josephine — will feel

the same when I return. It's a subjective question, of course, and one that would surely be answered differently by those who favor luxury resorts. But for me, Providencia remains the West Indies' best. — Mark Schroye

For the Inside Guide to Providencia, turn to page 112.



A simpler Caribbean: a house adorned with conch shells in Rocky Point