

## *San Andres Island, Columbia* Fantastic, but Buyer Beware!

By Lois Craft

On June 7<sup>th</sup>, Jim and I and our friends, Patty and Brian Roarty, flew to the island of San Andres to celebrate our joint 35<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. The archipelago San Andres y Providencia, is located to the east of Nicaragua and belongs to Columbia. It has a population of roughly 100,000, many of whom are of Caribbean heritage and speak English/Creole, although Columbians are said to be immigrating in numbers. We saw grinding poverty, as the island was hard-hit by Hurricane Joanne and another in recent years, thus eroding the economy. The people, however, are very friendly and seem happy.

We stayed at the Aquarium, which is a beautiful resort, consisting of 250 rooms in 13 round 3-story buildings, all of which are in the clear, aquamarine water. The rooms are clean and nice, with a mini refrigerator and balcony overlooking the water. Not all buildings are desirable, however: some sit back on the property, with limited ocean views and some rooms face away from the ocean altogether, so request specific buildings (1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 12 and 13) *with oceanfront views*. Hearing the ocean lapping against the building and quietly sitting on the balcony was a real treat.

The hotel has 5 restaurants: Thai, Italian, Seafood, International and a steak house. We tried the first three and found them all fine, if not inspired. The Decameron has infrequent transportation between its properties, so we opted to rent golf carts and visit both the Islano and the Marazul. Reservations are required (24-hours in advance) if you want to have a meal at one of the other hotels. We didn't know this, but the Islano graciously welcomed us to lunch when we explained that we had been slated to stay there (more on that later under *Buyer Beware*.) The manager, Arturo, knew exactly who we were! They have a truly beautiful beach, but it was generally agreed that the Aquarium was the better bet, unless a real beach is your most important criterion. The Aquarium has a very small beach right on the main road. At Islano, the beach umbrellas/awnings are first-come, first-served, so we got chairs under a tree.

The Islano has only 2 restaurants, one of which is cafeteria-style for breakfast and lunch. The food we had at lunch was very good. We all rated the resort as very nice, but preferred Marazul and Aquarium..

Our next visit to Decameron properties was the Marazul. Brian and Patty described it as "Old Hawaiian." which was a huge compliment. The beach was gorgeous, broad white sand and the indescribable water! Snorkeling goes out from this hotel. It has 3 restaurants and, judging from the menu at the one we check out, looked very good. The bar is manned with friendlier staff than the Aquarium, and the drinks are better.

The room that we saw looked nice, although few were oceanfront. Many were around the pool area, which could be noisy, but there are many garden rooms that would be quieter. This was Brian and Patty's top choice for a return visit, and we, too, were intrigued with it.

There are tons of activities available on the island, if time allows. Three days is definitely not enough! At Aquarium, one can take out a sunfish for a sail, which Jim and I did on our last day

there; go snorkeling on a small catamaran with a guide for a small fee; rent a jet ski; windsurf, with lessons for free; paddleboat; play crochet or ring-toss; rent scooters or golf carts and explore the island, which we did; and, of course, swim in the Caribbean or pool, dance to the bands at poolside, exercise, eat and drink your fill of tasty, but weak umbrella drinks. I would suggest the CocoLoco if you're not dieting! For value, go for beer or wine.

As to *Buyer Beware*:

For the months of May and June, package deals are available for any of the Decameron (all-inclusive) Hotels on the island. The price quoted to us was \$431 per person for 5 days and 4 nights, which included airfare. Quite a deal! We tried to get into the Royal Decameron Aquarium, but they were full, so we settled on the Decameron Islano. After we had paid cash in full, we were informed that we could not get the fourth night free, as advertised, because we were booking for Thursday-Monday, and there are no flights back to Costa Rica on Monday, only Thursdays and Sundays, so we had to return on our anniversary, June 10<sup>th</sup>.

After the 40-minute flight, we waded through a 1-hour Customs and Immigration line, then went to the Decameron Hotel desk in the airport to check on transportation to our hotel. Mistake #1! We were told that the Islano was overbooked and we were being transferred to their "newest and nicest" hotel, the Delfines. We were not happy.

We arrived after a 4-minute ride to find that "Delfines" means Motel 6! 36-gold-fish- bowl rooms around a small pool, 1 restaurant and 1 bar, with no place to socialize, except around the pool, which had only a few umbrellas. Not what we had in mind for our anniversary! We spoke with the assistant manager and told her that this was totally unacceptable and that we would not be staying there. She offered us lunch while she checked availability at other Decameron Hotels. She later informed us that we were out of luck until the next day. We politely dug in our heels, and after 2 ½ hours of lobby pacing, got beautiful rooms at the Aquarium. The assistant manager at the Islano, Liliana, really saved the day, and the assistant manager at the Aquarium, Swany, couldn't have been more gracious. Keep these names handy if you are planning a trip to San Andres!

I don't think the "bait and switch" is uncommon. Like airlines, they overbook, with the assumption some will cancel or not make it. One no-show made it possible for us to stay at the Aquarium!

All in all, we had a wonderful time and would definitely go back. Just remember to call your hotel of choice directly and ask for promotions. Also, try to speak with someone who can *guarantee* a room with a view. Let them know that you know of our experience and ask for assurances that this will not happen to you!

The names to remember are:

*Aquarium*: Swany, Assistant manager; *Islano*: Liliana or Auturo (manager); *Marazul*: try calling Swany for a name. Phone numbers can be found on the web under [www.decameron.com/destinations](http://www.decameron.com/destinations).