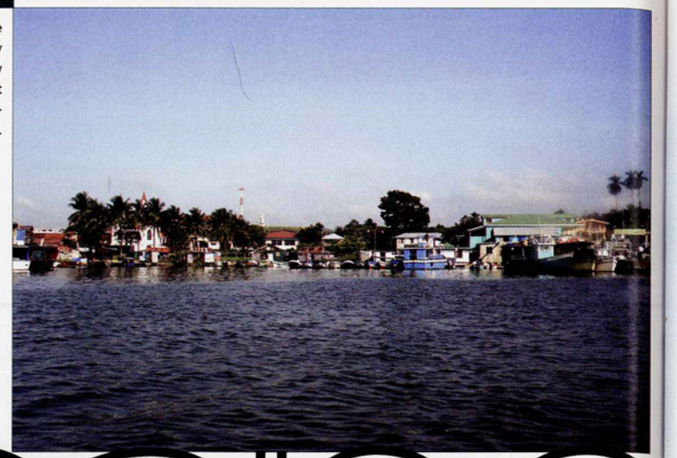


Right: The calm before the coke. Opposite: One lucky Bluefields resident now has an offshore account that includes a bale of blow—retail value $122,500.

Cocaine Harbor

When thousands of kilos of pure Colombian cocaine wash up on a remote Caribbean beach, a sleepy village stirs. Jonathan Franklin and Samuel Logan sniff out the inside story of Bluefields, Nicaragua, where the local economy is addicted to coke.

Photographs by Morten Andersen

"Everything is cool," says the man at the wheel of our speedboat, high on rum and a killer joint. "Unless the police find out—they will try to steal it."

Alfonso Bolzano (not his real name) wears a silver bandanna and the widening, shit-eating grin of a freshly minted player. Three years ago, he was a semi-employed 16-year-old. On days when the spirit moved him, he'd haul lobster traps off the coast of Nicaragua, earning $20 for his trouble. But the spirit rarely moved him. He had little money and even less ambition.

And yet today he is a busy entrepreneur, renting his 30-foot boat to fishermen or the occasional tourist looking to explore the wild Caribbean coastline.

What Bolzano would like to keep from the cops is the treasure he and three friends recently stumbled upon: 35 kilos of pure Colombian cocaine, perfectly sealed in a thick plastic bag and washed up on a local beach. "We sold it for $5,000 a kilo," Bolzano says, his vessel drifting off course. "If you find cocaine, everyone in the boat shares." Bolzano draws his long black fingers across his mouth. "And you keep it quiet."

This might sound like a bizarre, one-in-a-million break, but

for the 50,000 residents of Bluefields, Nicaragua, Bolzano's discovery was just another day at the beach. The shoreline is, in fact, regularly sprinkled with windblown stashes of what locals call *la langosta blanca*—the white lobster.

Located halfway between the coke labs of Colombia and the 600 million noses of U.S. consumers, Nicaraguan waterways—packed with hundreds of islands and minimal law enforcement—are extremely popular with smugglers and their very small, very fast fishing boats. The U.S. military calls them "go-fast boats," which is both a bureaucratic euphemism and an understatement: These 40-foot water rockets harness 800-horsepower outboard motors bolted to their stern (a Porsche 911, by comparison, offers about half that much power), and can hit 60 miles per hour. But while the speedboats are certainly quick, they are also highly visible to the sophisticated radar systems set up by roaming spy planes, Coast Guard cutters, and helicopters monitoring the blow traffickers. "With night-vision equipment, I have seen a lit cigarette from two miles," a U.S. Navy pilot told me. "The backlight from their GPS screen? It looks like a billboard."

When the Americans close in, the coke gets tossed overboard to eliminate evidence and also to lighten the load for a speedier escape. "I have been on four interdictions, and we have confiscated about 6,000 pounds of cocaine," says a U.S. Coast Guard lieutenant who requested anonymity. "I'd say just as much was dumped into the ocean."

From there, the bales of cocaine—typically worth $122,500 a pop—bob along the sea currents and head west, driven by strong winds. "The current comes from north to south, so the drugs float in from the high seas," says Sergio Leon, a reporter for the Nicaraguan newspaper *La Prensa*. "The narco [drug smuggler] calculates where the packets end up." Where many of those packets end up is smack-dab in the chain of islands, beaches, and lagoons surrounding Bluefields, on Nicaragua's Atlantic coast. "The locals sell it back to the traffickers and then live off that," Leon says.

And so, for a region that has seen sugarcane, bananas, timber, and shrimp harvested until either the market or resources collapsed, white lobster is reshaping the local economy, so much so that palm-tree-shaded Tasbapauni Beach has been nicknamed Little Miami—a nod to both the surprising amount of cocaine splashing up on its 15-mile-long shoreline and the construction boom it has helped fuel. Luxurious oceanfront condos protected by security guards now sit alongside crumbling wooden fishing shacks. "If shit washes up on your shore, it belongs to that family," says a local fisherman, explaining the rules of the cocaine lottery. "Every family owns their turf."

Hujo Sugo, a Bluefields historian, says the plentiful floating coke has brought about a new local hobby: "People go beachcombing for miles. They walk until they find packets. Even the lobster fishermen now go out with the pretense of fishing, but really they are looking for *la langosta blanca*."

"We are talking about people without a profession, no home, no job," says local judge Yorlene Orozco. "One day later, they have a new car and are building a home that costs I don't know how many thousands of dollars."

Moises Arana, mayor of Bluefields from 2001 to 2005, knows his share of cocaine-enabled, rags-to-riches islanders. There's the small peasant woman who strolled unassumingly into town one day, her dress stuffed with fresh bills. She walked into an electronics store like a *Price Is Right* Showcase Showdown winner, indiscriminately plucking televisions, stereos, and toys off the shelves. Another peasant once waltzed into a local bank with $80,000 in cash—crammed into an old milk bucket.

The sudden influx of capital has awoken what was previously a sleepy, if well-populated town. Here, electricity is an occasional luxury—the main generator has been under repair for nine months—and the residents remain so isolated from Central America that they speak English and feel closer to Kingston, Jamaica, than the Nicaraguan capital of Managua. To get to Bluefields, one must fly aboard a creaky, 25-year-old plane that looks like a bloated pigeon and doesn't fly much faster. The exterior of the fuselage is tagged with confidence-sucking instructions on how to rescue victims after a crash: CUT HERE FOR EASY ENTRY.

The Nicaraguan government classifies Bluefields—named for a seventeenth-century pirate, Abraham Blauvelt—as an "autonomous area," which apparently means the authorities can pretty much ignore it. "We only see politicians when there is an election or a hurricane," says Eugenio, a local fisherman who'd only give his first name. "We don't even use the Nicaraguan currency here. To the south we use the *colon* [from Costa Rica], in the north we use the Honduran *lempira,* and everywhere else it is the dollar."

As for Bluefields' local law enforcement, it's so scarce as to be practically invisible. "I just had a Swiss tourist tell me that at the supermarket, they tried to sell her cocaine," Orozco marvels.

The Nicaraguan police and Navy have few resources and fewer scruples. "When the police come, everyone hides the drugs," says a local fisherman. The cops, they fear, will steal the blow for their own entrepreneurial endeavors.

Shrimping and trapping lobster are perhaps the only legitimate industries in Bluefields—but during the seven days we spent there, work itself rarely seemed pressing. And really, who could be blamed? With so much fresh lobster, coconuts, bananas, and mangoes, the idea of sweating under the sun seems ridiculous at best. The only work tool one really needs is a Yamaha outboard motor. Just about everyone who wants to search for white lobster has a Yamaha V-6, 200-horsepower engine. The machines are often lined up side by side on the back of a 25-foot fishing canoe, until the lightweight wooden or fiberglass crafts practically fly.

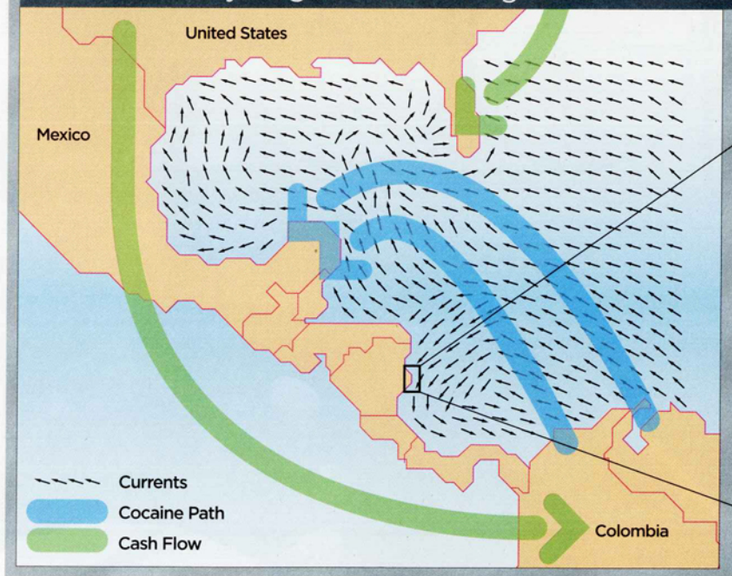
By noon most days, the streets are filled with men playing cards and sitting on spent outboard motors. The men fan themselves with wads of cash, waiting to change the dollars that come in from the sea. "Traffickers throw out everything: drugs, water, cash," a local dealer says. "They can always get new money, more drugs." One day we watch as a man snakes through the card tables with a bag of white powder the size of a golf ball. He dips his fingers into the bag, as if snacking on the most delicious popcorn in the world. Then he casually strolls up to his friends, who also dip in.

Bluefields is effectively an anarchist nation—no government, no organized institutions, a land where rules are made by the village. This makes the general lack of violence surprising. Gunfights are infrequent, and most citizens appear content to lounge or play baseball all day and then erupt into a frenzy of energy by late afternoon, fueled by Flor de Caña—an intensely good Nicaraguan rum—fresh fish, an endless supply of native oysters, and, of course, white lobster.

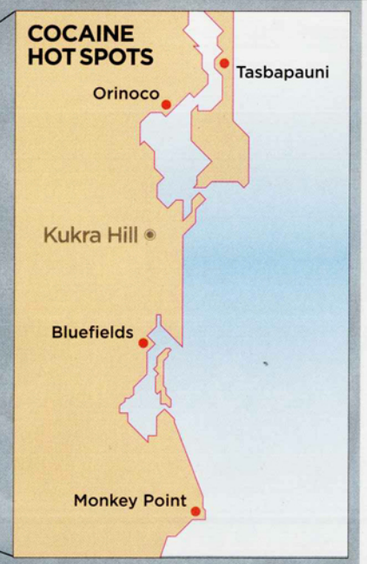
"Down by Monkey Point, a family found an entire fucking boatload," says Bluefields resident Jah Boon, a Rastafarian. "They stashed it and bought up houses all over town. It was 57 sacks"—approximately 1,995 kilos. "Those people have money and still

The Caribbean dream is attainable to some, while others are just happy to have a tin roof over their head.

Current Events
Location is everything for coke-hunting locals.



Because of where they are situated—along an enormously popular drug-smuggling route between Colombia and the U.S.—the beaches of Bluefields, Nicaragua, are where jettisoned bales of cocaine routinely wash ashore. The Caribbean Sea currents drive from north to south and then west, pushing the wayward blow straight into Bluefields' welcoming harbor and onto the 15-mile-long palm paradise that is Tasbapauni Beach. "People here go beachcombing for miles," says local historian Hujo Sugo. "Even the lobster fishermen are really looking for *la langosta blanca*." And when they find their prized white lobster, the rewards are considerable: The stuff can be sold for $7,700 per pound. That buys a lot of the more common variety of lobster, plenty of rum, and the thing residents oddly seem to crave above all else: bottle after bottle of Toña beer. Every hour is happy hour in this geographical wonder.



"Down by Monkey Point, a family found an entire fucking boatload [of coke]. They bought up houses all over town."

have coke buried in them hills. It is another way of having money in the bank." At a local price of $3,500 per kilo, the typical 35-kilo sack nets $122,500 cash (globally, the price of a single kilo can range upwards of $30,000). In many cases, however, the flush times don't last long. This seemed strange. What, after all, would residents of a remote town have to spend their money on? The simple answer, according to several locals: beer.

"When the drugs come in, everyone is happy," Arana, the former mayor, told me. "The banks, the stores—everyone has cash. One month the village bought 28,000 cases of beer."

But with hundreds of pounds of cocaine, *their cocaine,* buried in the hills, stashed in yards, and piled up around town, shouldn't the Colombian Mafia just storm into these remote communities and repossess their coke bales by brute force? "Hell no!" declares Peter, a local dealer. "The Miskito [Indians] are guerrillas. They have been through war. They have AK-47s."

Or, put another way: In a recent report to Congress, the DEA noted that "a unique historical situation and civil conflicts have left [the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua] with a tradition of armed rural groups ... that greatly complicates counter-drug enforcement."

For hundreds of years, the Miskito Indians have formed military alliances with foreigners. In the eighteenth century, the Miskito fought the Spanish as mercenaries for the British—who traded them guns and metal tools for turtle meat and fish. Later they worked as slave hunters for the Jamaican governor, tracking down escapees in exchange for more munitions. In the eighties, when the Reagan government needed a local force to attack the revolutionary Sandinistas, the Miskito signed on—adding automatic weaponry to their growing legend as guerrilla fighters and high-seas navigators.

In and around Bluefields, the Miskito maintain their own rules and traditions, among them the belief that whatever treasures arrive from the sea are gifts, blessed by God, to be enjoyed and shared. This includes Caribbean lobster, which sells for $15 a pound, and the Colombian variety, at $7,700 a pound.

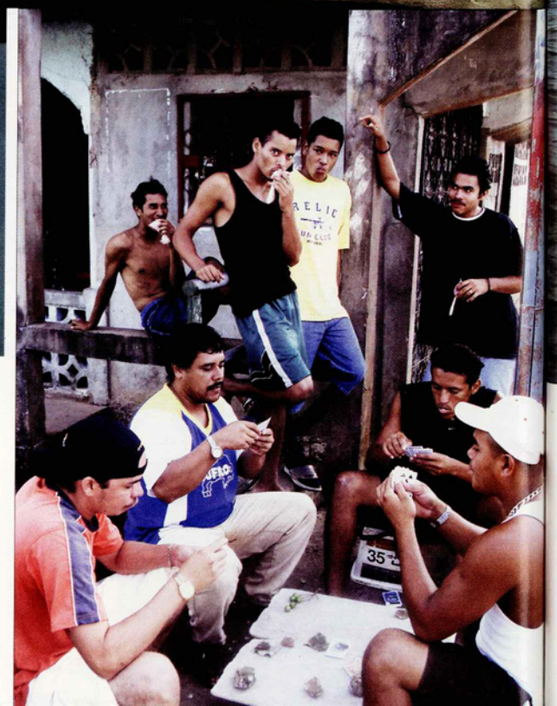
When a Miskito fisherman finds *la langosta blanca,* the entire village shares the treasure. A percentage goes to a community fund, a smaller percentage to the church, and the majority is split among the crew that found the loot. "It is like a municipal tax," says Leon. "The schools and churches are not built by the government; that money comes from the fishermen's finds."

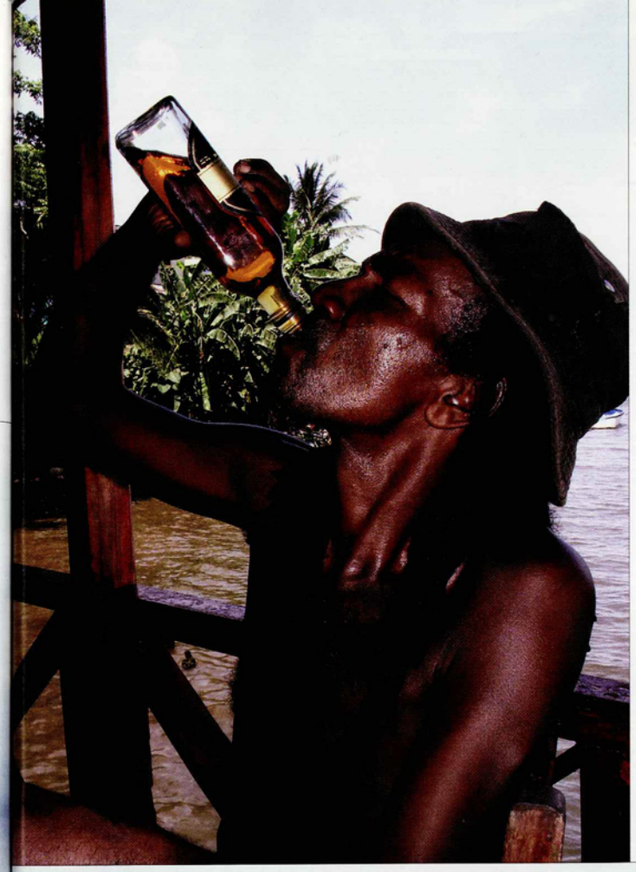
Tasbapauni Beach is nicknamed Little Miami—a nod to both the frequency with which cocaine splashes up on its 15-mile-long shoreline and the construction boom it has helped fuel.

How to Rescue Wet Cocaine

Bluefields residents have a recipe for nearly any kind of cocaine situation—if the watertight packages sealed in Colombia spring a leak, the coke gets sticky "like glue." But there's even a solution for that, explains a local expert.

- Put cocaine in a large pot over fire. Cook at low heat, stirring constantly until water evaporates, but before it burns
- Spread cocaine over a large flat board
- Cut coke with a large knife or machete
- Use the back of a spoon to smooth out the chunks
- Repack into plastic bag
- Find Colombian dealer
- Sell cocaine back to him





Money from the Cocaine Community Fund has been used to erect a school, replace the church roof, and maintain the languid Caribbean lifestyle that pervades the island. "Church officials here get mad when they don't get their cut from the find," says Francisco, a court official who only told us his first name. "If a member of the congregation has found 15 kilos, the church calculates its ten percent, saying, 'Where's the $5,250?' "

Bluefields wakes up at night. The locals wander down a short dirt path to Midnight Dream—a reggae bar nicknamed Baghdad Ranch because of its surreal, eternal party scene. Dozens of young black men in baseball hats, gold chains, NBA jerseys, and Nike Airs file into the bar. Outside, a long wooden bench wraps around a creaking porch. Inside, it's so dark it takes us a minute to realize what we're looking at: stack after mountainous stack of Toña beer bottles. A price chart conveniently tallies the cost of multiple beers, topping out at 24 for 360 cordobas—or $18. Given the amount of cocaine, booze, and cash being flaunted in here, it's easy to feel a tad unsafe. A new drinking buddy, however, says not to worry. "I got protection," he says, lifting his Houston Rockets jersey to reveal the butt of a pistol. "You won't get thieved here."

Baghdad Ranch sits on the water, just next to the Bluefields pier—the view makes it a great place to chat and drink. And drink. And drink some more. Tribal music echoes from across the bay, while shadowy skiffs navigate the shallow waters. Half-sunk boats dot the horizon. Blown ashore by Hurricane Joan in 1988, these rusty wrecks are now used as guide buoys for captains entering the pier, and also as tiny apartments by industrious natives. The waiter offers me *carne de tortuga,* a grilled slice of endangered hawksbill sea turtle. Locals insist that they only slaughter the older specimens, but this is one more example of how in Bluefields, pleasure trumps virtue.

Lyrics scream out from the deejay booth: *I feel so high, I can touch the sky.* As if on cue, three girls at the next table pile coke on the back of their ebony hands and snort. They tilt their heads back, laughing, the drug burning into their bloodstream. Soon they begin a maypole dance in celebration of May's traditional fertility festival, which quickly evolves into a grindingly sexy dirty-dancing routine. As if in a dream, or maybe an hallucination, a line of stunning, six-foot-tall black women swirl and sweat on the dance floor. A Rastafarian stumbles past, clumps of coke stuck in his beard like pearls.

White lobster is paying for this party. "Those guys at that table, they are Miskito. They found seven bags," explains our waiter with the tinge of jealousy one might normally reserve for lottery winners. Gesturing toward a man at the table, the waiter continues, "He will buy a couple of ranches, two boats, and have someone else fish for him."

The night goes on and on. The coke flows freely, the dancers tirelessly twirl past, and the Miskito men slowly disappear behind a wall of empty beer bottles.

Editor's note: Certain names and locations have been changed to conceal the identity of people interviewed for this story.

Opposite, top: A local shows off the catch of the day: *la langosta blanca*. Bottom: During scorching afternoons, there's not much to do but play poker—and wait for the next fortune to wash ashore. This page, top: The unofficial national pastime—booze.

While the drink of choice is usually Toña beer, locals are partial to strong rum as well. Bottom: It's not snapper these local fishermen are after.

The authors have written for the *New York Times* and the *Guardian,* among others. They are currently working on a nonfiction book about cocaine, to be published in 2008.