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FINDING HOME

FIRST IN A THREE-PART SERIES



Alvaro Beltran holds the tiny bracelet his young sister gave him when he headed for the Canadian border. "When you look at it, you will know that I miss you."

They've fled guns, gangs and torture in their homelands. Now, frightened refugees are fleeing uncertain politics in the United States and turning to Canada as a destination of hope. As The Spectator's Steve Buist explains, Niagara and Hamilton are seen as last stops for new lives.

THE NEW UNDERGROUND RAILWAY

STEVE BUIST
The Hamilton Spectator

Alvaro Beltran is on the run.

AT FIRST, HE WAS FLEEING El Salvador's ruthless gangs, which have made the Central American country one of the world's most dangerous places.

Now Beltran is on the run from U.S. President Donald Trump. At 6 a.m. on March 21, cold and tired, Beltran made it to the front door of the Vive centre on Buffalo's East Side, the final American stop on what has become a 21st century version of the Underground Railroad.

If all goes according to plan, Beltran will soon be living in Hamilton with an aunt and her daughter, who have also fled El Salvador.

From across the U.S. and around the world, hundreds of nervous refugees have found their way to Buffalo, fearful of the American president's policies and what they see as a wave of anti-immigrant sentiment sweeping the U.S.

They're massing at the U.S. border hoping for a chance to make it into Canada.

"I would say 90 per cent of the people who walk through our doors are looking to go to Canada," said Mariah Walker, Canadian services manager for Vive (pronounced Vee-veg).

Vive's bursting at the seams, however. Before last November's election, the refugee shelter normally housed 80 to 120 people. Now it's pushing 200 and the overflow is spilling into Buffalo's nooks and crannies.

Vive's clients are now staying in church basements and private homes as they await their crack at Canada. One generous Buffalo couple has taken in 18 asylum seekers. Another 30 are living in a church rectory.

Vive typically used to receive about 100 calls daily. Now, the centre is getting 2,000 a day, just dealing with the phone calls is stretching the centre's resources.

"The number of times this past week I've heard a desperate person call me their last hope is heart-breaking," said Anna Ireland, Vive's chief program officer.

"There's really been an increase in desperate people who are searching for help."

Refugees continues // A6

PHOTOGRAPH BY BARRY GRAY, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

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OUT IN THE WILDS For a trek that's off the beaten path

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If you thought its photo galleries sell the tours, have a look at the video trailer on its Facebook page. I became a fan once I saw the pictures of Salt to Hornstrandir in the West Fjords. The prices are reasonable, and there are easy-to-use share buttons for Facebook, Twitter and email. Los Angeles Times

TRAVEL



PHOTOS BY STEVE HAGGERTY, TNS



Calm and as clear as glass, Aitutaki Lagoon is the stuff of dreams.

Tropical showers wind up an exhilarating half-day ride with Storytellers Eco Cycle Tours.

Strolling before breakfast on popular Muri Beach, with motu (dinet) Taakoka and the outer reef at rear.

Back to the future on the Cook Islands

Shimmering blue lagoons, gentle breezes, hometown smiles and fewer tourist visits than Florida's Disneyworld gets in two days

ANNE Z. COOKE

AVARUA, RAROTONGA, COOK ISLANDS — It was a quiet afternoon on Rarotonga, in the Cook Islands, when Lydia Nga got the news.

Overnight her homeland, 15 Polynesian islands west of Tahiti, a paradise smaller than Detroit, had grown exponentially, reborn as a 690,000 square-mile nation.

But it wasn't the islands that grew. In 1982, the Third United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea ruled that coastal nations had jurisdiction over an "exclusive economic zone," defined as a 200-mile stretch of ocean measured from the shoreline. Most countries wel-

comed the idea. But for a tiny nation like the Cooks, population 15,000, it was a Cinderella promise.

Fast forward 35 years to last August and our first visit to Rarotonga, the main island, lured by the thought of shimmering blue lagoons, gentle breezes, hometown smiles and fewer tourist visits than Florida's Disneyworld gets

in two days. "And how about that economic zone, the one the guidebook described?" asked my husband. Had success spoiled Rarotonga's Polynesian charms?

Not really, according to my friend Kathy, who stays up on these things. "The last time we looked it, the Cooks were like Hawaii in the 1960s, 50 years behind everybody else," she said. (I knew what she was thinking: If it doesn't have a spa, it isn't luxury.) "Ask around, see what people say and let me know," she added.

As our overnight flight from Los Angeles descended over a clutch of green volcanic peaks, my first view of the la-

goon, its sandy shoreline, scattered roofs and rows of palms was reassuring. I figured we'd greet the dawn with a stroll along the beach, cool off in the lagoon, maybe even snorkel near the outer reef, where the coral clumps into mounds.

But Nga, my email contact in the tourist office, now known affectionately as Auntie Lydia, had a request. So before bolting for the lagoon, we paid a visit to Ocean Specialist Kevin Iro to hear about the Marae Moana Marine Park conservation project, and to learn why an in-depth survey of every fold and ripple within the Cook's 690,000 square miles is long overdue.

"Marae Moana means ocean do-

islands continues // G12

Yes, we're worried, but we're doing our part.
HENRY PUNA

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TRAVEL

ISLANDS

CONTINUED FROM G10

maine," said Iro, an athletic figure in shorts, ushering us and a half-dozen high school kids into a cramped lecture room with rows of desks, its only decor a large TV screen for presentations and a half-dozen backlit photos of tropical fish and coral.

"The ocean domain is a mindset, an idea," he said, putting a chart up on the screen. "It's a shift in the way we see ourselves." Not as separate islands, he explained, but as a single marine nation. And as the owner of vast, still untapped resources,

the government needed to appoint a task force to head the project.

It was also time for a just-caught, grilled fish sandwich at one of Rarotonga's many ocean-side cafés, where picnic-table seating guarantees conversation. And so began our education.

If our table mates happened to be islanders on a lunch break, they described the Cooks' historic connection with New Zealand, where almost everyone has relatives and yearly visits are the norm. When it's time for college, ambitious students generally go to New Zealand or Australia.

At the Moorings Cafe we learned that New Zealand's Maoris originally came from Rarotonga. Facing a fight with a rival clan, they loaded



Brunch, lunch or a swim, life is easy at Aitutaki Lagoon Resort.

up their ocean-going canoes — vaka — and pushed off for parts unknown. And raw sea slugs? They are a favourite snack.

At Charlie's Cafe, I was thrilled to be sitting with people speaking Cook Island Maori, one of the few Polynesian languages still in common use. A required subject in school, it lives on despite colonial rule, a minor role in the Second World War, tourism and even cell-phones.

Curious about the rest of Rarotonga, we decided to rent mountain bikes to explore the 20-mile-long circle-island road, "a good way to get your bearings," according to my guidebook. We could have raced but it was much more fun to poke along, stop at vista points, look for craft shops and wave at friendly motorcycle riders.

It was so energizing, in fact, that we joined a second guided ride with Dore and Tami Farnell, owners of Storytellers Eco-Cycle Tours, a local outfitter. With rain threatening and 11 of us geared up and ready, we headed for the inland road.

We cycle the historic, 1000-year-old "ara matau," a grassy gravelly track built at the base of the volcanoes.

Following Tami among the farm fields, we discovered why restaurant food was so fresh. Away from the coast it was all produce, fero (the edible leaf variety), salad greens and tomatoes, pumpkins and red peppers, onions and bananas, and orchards growing limes, oranges, papaya, star fruit and none.

Stopping beside the nonis, prized as a health tonic and mosquito repellent, Tami pulled off a couple of soft-smelly fruits, broke them into pieces and to a chorus of "yuck, icky, sticky" and gales of laughter, dared us to rub them over our necks, arms and legs.

Since no visit would be complete without a couple days on neighbouring Aitutaki (eye-too-TOCK-kee), world-famous for its lagoon, we flew over, checked into an over-water cabin at the Aitutaki Lagoon Resort and booked a lagoon cruise with Tere (pronounced "Terry"),



Blue-lipped clams, members of the Giant Clam family, thrive in Aitutaki Lagoon, Cook Islands.

owner of Te King Lagoon Cruises.

Piling into Tere's 12-passenger boat we sped south across the lagoon, rounding the motor (to-letak) searching for coral gardens and stopping to snorkel. And after you've spent a morning in the heart of one of these turquoise aquariums — lakes within a coral reef — you can't help but marvel.

Protected from wind and waves but continuously refreshed by the ocean spillover, a lagoon's unique ecosystem nurtures birds, fish, crabs, clams, mollusks, coral and every other marine organism including people.

And while we traced around us, literally in awe, Tere peppered us with Maori legends, celebrity anecdotes and marine biology. After a stop at One Foot Island — where "been there, loved it" passport stamps are issued — and a grilled chicken picnic, we headed back.

On our last evening, we squeezed in one of the twice-a-month dinners served at the Plantation House, the colonial home of former restaurant owner Louis Enoka. Dinner here, prepared by Chef Minar Henderson for 20 to 26 guests and served twice a month only, offers not just a blend of island-grown ingredients but an evening with islanders for whom cultural traditions and 21st-century science go hand-in-hand.

Finding an empty chair, I was boggle-eyed to find I was sitting next to the prime minister, Henry Puna, who studied law in New Zealand and Australia before turning to politics. With dishes guaranteed to encourage conversation — every-

thing from prawns with lemon grass to coconut-flavoured rice and couscous with kaffir lime — we managed to cover pearl farming on Manihiki, the search for rare-earth minerals and the importance of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (which President Donald Trump has abandoned).

He reminisced about the evening he hosted Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, whom he found to be "delightful, intelligent and informed." But it was the pan-seared mahi mahi with ginger and garlic that added a sombre note.

"Your president doesn't believe in clean energy," he said. But, we agreed, global warming is creating rising seas, threatening atolls like Aitutaki. "Yes, we're worried," said Puna, "but we're doing our part."

Right now 50 per cent of the islands' electric power comes from solar installations. By 2020 the Cook Islands will be 100 per cent solar.

If only the rest of us could say that.

Tribune News Service

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